The internet: An important tool to strengthening electoral integrity

Daniel Stockemer

School of Political Studies, University of Ottawa, Canada

A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

Elections are only meaningful if they are free, fair and transparent. What triggers fairness in elections? In this article, I aim at emphasizing the Internet's potential in improving the fairness and objectivity of elections. Through a multiple regression analysis with data from > 120 countries across the globe, I establish that there is a rather strong link between higher internet penetration and fairer and more transparent elections in both countries that allow a free press and in countries that do not allow a free press. I can derive both practical and theoretical implications from this finding. More practically, this result highlights that the internet improves access to political news, accommodates pluralistic sources of information, and produces platforms for political discourse; all of which should make the electoral process more transparent. More theoretically the article introduces an additional variable aimed at explaining variation in the fairness of the electoral process; a factor, which should be included in future analyses.

1. Introduction

Electoral integrity matters; citizens can only choose their representatives, control their governments and make their preferences heard, if elections are fair, open and transparent (Huntington, 1997). In a long lasting democracy, integer elections keep up citizens' trust in the procedures and institutions of democracy (Kostadinova, 2009; Stockemer, Lamontagne, & Scruggs, 2013). In a fledging or new democracy, free and fair elections give legitimacy to the new institutions and the government in power. Open and transparent elections are a prerequisite that the major political, economic and social actors accept the new regime type and support it. In contrast, electoral malpractices are one of the main sources for violence, uproar, political instability and even autocratic setback (Norris, 2014; Norris, Frank, & Martinez, 2014a, 2014b). Electoral integrity is not only important in fostering democratic legitimacy and high regime trust, but also triggers high citizens' participation in elections and other forms of political participation. Regardless of whether research is conducted in the developing or developed world, there is widespread support in the literature that corruption in elections and the bureaucracy render citizens politically apathetic (Bauhr & Grimes, 2014; Dahlberg & Solevid, 2013). This political apathy manifests itself in declining rates of political engagement and citizens' demobilization at the polls.

Because of its importance for trust, legitimacy and political engagement, it is important to study the factors, which might influence electoral integrity. Internet usage rates (a technical term that refers to the number of Internet users per country) may be one important

structural factor. The internet renders the political process more transparent, allows individuals to access a multitude of information, and makes it more difficult for political actors to conceal political transgressions including electoral fraud (Ferguson & Griffiths, 2006). To test the influence of internet usage on the integrity of elections, I engage in a rigorous quantitative analysis with data of 125 countries. Controlling for press freedoms, development, federalism and the electoral system type, I find support for my initial hypothesis; that is the regression analyses confirm that high internet usage renders the electoral process more transparent, regardless of whether press freedoms are granted in a country or not. This article continues as follows: in the next section, I will theoretically establish the link between internet usage and electoral integrity. In the third part, I will operationalize the main variables of interest – electoral integrity and internet usage – as well as present the control variables. Then, I will shortly explain the data and methods. Second to last, I will present and illustrate the results of this quantitative study. Finally, I will summarize the main findings of this research and provide some avenues for future research.

2. Internet usage, politics and electoral integrity

Since its introduction in the 1990s, the internet has made it achievable for individuals and groups to communicate information faster than ever before, to reach wider audiences, and to be connected worldwide. In the private realm, individuals use the internet to communicate with friends and family, to retrieve information of all sorts, and to organize their daily activities. Businesses use the internet as their

main internal and external communication device, as an outlet to advertise and sell their products and as a means to do their financial transactions (Wellman & Haythornthwaite, 2002).

In the political realm, the internet has had a vast influence, as well by changing how politics is conducted. Most importantly, it has changed communication between political actors and the public. Through e-mail, instant messaging, or with the help of social networking sites such as Facebook political actors such as governments, parties, politicians, non-governmental organizations or social movements can communicate with their constituents, members or followers (Williams & Tedesco, 2006). For instance, via the intermediary of the internet governments can pass on vital information quickly. Agencies such as a countries' health care departments can rely on Twitter in order to communicate information about product recalls to citizens, while human resource agencies could use the internet to advertise training opportunities to new immigrants or the unemployed. More personally, politicians' Facebook fan pages, for example, permit 'followers' (an internet term) to leave comments and criticisms for elected officials. More indirectly, the internet can be helpful for any type of political organization (e.g. interest groups or social movements) to pass on information, to connect to likeminded individuals and to inform and convince the general public (Boyle & Schmierbach, 2009).

Second, the internet is not only a medium, which allows individuals to receive and pass on information, it also allows citizens and groups to diffuse information, both inside and outside of their country. Thanks to the internet, government news outlets are no longer able to control information and citizens in all countries, including states that severely circumscribe press freedoms, face relatively low-risks to share their plight with individuals inside and outside of their country. Tweets, in particular, have been a very efficient communication device for individuals and non-governmental organizations to make their points heard. Not only have governments had problems to censor, suppress, or edit the content of these tweets, the instantaneous nature of web messaging also makes it difficult for state apparatuses to control the flow of these messages and to respond to these tweets (Coeckelbergh, 2011).

Through social media, the internet enables groups and individuals to expose countries. For example, in 2010, Wikileaks – a project and organization that supports and provides services to whistleblowers and groups concerned with transparency – rendered classified or sensitive information from the US government public (Cammaerts, 2013). In particular, in the fall 2010, Wikileaks made the front pages of major newspapers worldwide, when the organization released secret exchanges between US state officials and diplomatic cable communications between US embassies. The number of legal and financial measures the US and other governments has taken against Wikileaks since 2010 testify the seriousness of the (perceived) threat posed by the organization (Sifry, 2011). However, despite these various punitive measures aimed at weakening Wikileaks, the organization has succeeded in winning the support of populations, including journalists and academics. It has also inspired a number of similar organizations, such as OpenLeaks (Brevin, Hintz, & Mccurdy, 2013).

Third, the internet, again via the intermediary of social media, can be a "soft weapon" in protest and political conflicts. In particularly, social media's potential influence on political protest has been exemplified by the Arab Spring. The internet was instrumental before and during the revolutionary period. Before the protests erupted in Northern Africa, the internet was used as a communication platform. Many youths throughout the Arab world took to Twitter and Facebook to make clear their desire for democracy, transparency, and free and fair elections. Even more importantly, during the protests, the internet, specifically websites such as Facebook, Twitter, and Youtube became a weapon in the protesters' combat against the regime (Howard & Hussain, 2013). While events unfolded in Egypt and elsewhere in Northern Africa, Twitter users became journalists reporting on events and transmitting on the ground details of the clashes between protesters and the government's security apparatuses (Ghannam, 2011). This live

"broadcasting" not only provided vital information to fellow protesters, but also allowed citizens to send a message to the whole world, while exposing their own government's cruel acts. This in turn, may have incited the Egypt government, to respond less strongly to protests because of the direct exposure of the police and armed forces' misdeeds to the world (Wolfsfeld, Sevev, & Sheafer, 2013).

However, the internet's role in shaping politics goes beyond communication, exposing governments, and its role as a soft weapon in political conflict. Rather, internet usage can help individuals become more educated (Dahlgren, 2007). For example, Bailard (2012) claims that the options provided by the internet are tremendous; the multitude of different information allows citizens to research a subject, topic or law and make up their minds. This explains why higher internet usage is found to be correlated with increased political interest and participation (e.g. Kruikemeier, van Noort, Vliegenthart, & de Vreese, 2014). Yet, there is one caveat with the internet as an "education tool". Using the internet by no means signifies that individuals, who spend a lot of time searching information on the web, will become educated and critical citizens. Rather, there is the danger that individuals cannot navigate through the multitude of information (Bakardjieva, Svensson, & Skoric, 2012). Citizens could also get the wrong information, which, in turn, could dilute popular perceptions and render it difficult for individuals to make up their minds in political matters. Yet, the internet provides individuals a tremendous possibility, in that it allows citizens to get a multitude of information at relatively little costs.

Finally, the internet can shape political attitudes. For example, Bailard (2012) finds that internet usage creates a demand for democracy. According to her, high internet usage is correlated with high democratic satisfaction in well-functioning democracies, and low democratic satisfaction in weak or fledgling democracies. Even more pronounced Stoycheff and Nisbet (2014) argue that internet diffusion makes citizens learn and adopt democratic attitudes. In this article, I argue that these more democratic attitudes could have an influence on the conduct of elections in a country.

Elections to fulfill the highest standards of integrity must allow voters to (1) collect information about the parties, their programs, and their performances and (2) to blame or reward parties and representatives based on their performances. In short, elections are a means to hold politicians accountable for their actions. Yet, this accountability can only be achieved if the election itself and the electoral process, are free, fair and transparent. I argue that the internet can be one mechanism to guarantee this transparency. In other words, the internet, as the only unbiased or pluralistic source of information can help individuals detect electoral misdeeds such as vote rigging, campaign violence or restrictions to freedoms of assembly.

Once caught, the internet further allows individuals, observers and societal groups to instantly communicate these misdeeds inside the state and to the outside world. In this sense, higher internet usage rates imply that (1) there are potentially more individuals that can report misdeeds via the internet, (2) the government and political actors can less and less control, who posts or reports about politics and elections and (3) there are more citizens, who will immediately hear about these malpractices. Hence, there should be a higher risk for governments and political actors to being caught with electoral fraud, if there are higher rates of internet usage in societies. If they know that there is a medium that might diffuse information about fraud and electoral irregularities, they might become risk averse by either not cheating or by hiding their wrongdoings. This should apply even more so considering that governments and political actors are likely to be risk minimizers. Based on these considerations, I hypothesize that the more people have access to the internet in one country, the more likely it will be for individuals, groups and the media to expose electoral wrongdoers and the less likely it will be for governments and political actors to resort to electoral corruption.

Is the influence of internet usage on electoral integrity the same in countries that allow a free press and free access to an unrestricted