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Wired to mobilize: The effect of social networking messages on voter turnout[☆]



Holly Teresi, Melissa R. Michelson*

Menlo College, 1000 El Camino Real, Atherton, CA 94027, USA

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ABSTRACT

Recent scholarship has documented the effect of online social networking on political participation, a relationship hypothesized to be due to the generation of social capital. This paper tests the hypothesis that impersonal get-out-the-vote messages delivered via an online social network can increase voter turnout. Specifically, this study uses a field experiment of randomly assigned students from a large southern public university to test the effect of exposure to political messages via Facebook on the likelihood of them voting in the November 2010 election. The results indicate that encouragements to vote delivered through a social networking site can have substantively large effects on political behavior.

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1. Introduction

Inspired by Putnam's groundbreaking *Bowling Alone* (2000), a number of social scientists have since sought to explore how to build social capital and encourage civic engagement and political participation. Much of the social capital literature builds on Putnam's argument that face-to-face interaction is what builds community and trust, which in turn stimulates political participation. Yet, an increasing amount of interpersonal interaction is conducted via social networking sites (SNS) such as Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn. Research with student samples and broader survey data find a statistically significant relationship between intensity of SNS use and political participation, both online and offline, suggesting that the

increased use of online social networking sites should not be interpreted as a danger to social capital but rather as an alternative means of generating it.

2. Literature review

2.1. Social networking

Recent scholarship finds that social networking generates social capital and political participation. In a survey of 286 undergraduates at Michigan State University, Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe (2007) find that intensity of Facebook use is strongly related to social capital. In a web survey of 2600 Texas college students, Valenzuela, Park, and Kee (2009) find small but statistically significant relationships between Facebook use and social capital, civic engagement, and political participation. Bode (2012) finds that particular Facebook activities generate various types of political participation. Pasek, More, and Romer (2009) find that use of social networking sites such as Facebook and MySpace can generate a culture that encourages social capital. Using the Pew Internet and American Life Project's Spring Tracking Survey from 2008, Gainous, Marlowe, and Wagner (2013) find a strong positive relationship between online social

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* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 650 543 3844.

E-mail addresses: holly.teresi@gmail.com (H. Teresi), melissa.michelson@menlo.edu (M.R. Michelson).

networking and online political participation, which they attribute to the building of social capital. Looking at the Pew data and a sample of students from the University of Louisville and Florida Atlantic University, [Gainous and Wagner \(2011\)](#) find in both datasets that heightened Internet social networking predicts participation. In sum, there is a growing body of evidence, based on survey data, that social networking sites such as Facebook and MySpace generate social capital and political participation.

[Gainous et al. \(2013\)](#) further hypothesize that social networking will increase political participation when that networking includes political exchanges. They find that “for every 1 unit increase in political SNS use, there is a 0.33 unit increase in online political participation” (p. 154). [Bond et al. \(2012\)](#) also find evidence of the effect of political messages on participation. Using a randomized field experiment with 61 million Facebook users, they find that exposure to a banner advertisement encouraging voting in the November 2010 election and noting participation by one’s Facebook friends increased turnout by 0.39 percentage-points, but the effect was limited to those whose messages were from close friends.

The [Bond et al. \(2012\)](#) effort is an example of a large and growing political science subfield that seeks to use the science of randomized field experiments to test how best to encourage individuals to vote and to engage in other forms of political participation. [Gerber and Green \(2012\)](#) note that one cannot draw reliable inferences from nonexperimental data because of the lack of information about why some individuals are assigned to receive treatment and others are not. In other words, evidence that individuals who engage in more online social networking are more likely to be civically engaged and to participate in politics cannot assign causality to SNS use because it is unknown precisely why some individuals are more intense SNS users. Recalling the findings by [Gainous et al. \(2013\)](#), scholars have yet to determine what is causing some individuals to be exposed to more political SNS use and thus truly driving the observed increases in participation. Only by randomly assigning some individuals to the treatment that one believes causes the dependent variable of interest can scholars make robust conclusions about causality. The current study focuses on how information transmitted via Facebook, the most popular social networking site in the United States, affects voter turnout. Students are randomly assigned to particular sorts of messages (status updates) in order to estimate the effect of exposure to messages that encourage civic engagement and political participation.

American Internet users spend 53.5 minutes a month on Facebook—more than any other website ([Hampton, Goulet, Rainie, & Purcell, 2011](#); [Nielsen, 2012](#)). Facebook members use the site for a variety of reasons, but among the most common is to keep up with friends. Individuals are more likely to comment on or like posts from their friends than to post their own news, and Facebook use leads to increased awareness of others’ actions ([Joinson, 2008](#)). Thus, individuals who use such sites are more likely to know if others in their network are politically interested and active. This study tests the effect of that knowledge on subsequent behavior. Specifically, it tests the hypothesis that randomly assigned exposure to political SNS messages that

encourage voting, operationalized as Facebook status messages, will increase the likelihood of an individual voting.

Previous findings from relevant get-out-the-vote (GOTV) field experiments are detailed below, followed by the hypotheses and a description of the randomized field experiment used to test them, through assignment of students at a large southern public university to Facebook friend lists. The results follow, which provide robust support for the hypotheses. The study concludes with a discussion of the significance of these findings and recommendations for further research.

2.2. Get-out-the-vote experiments

The legitimacy of a democracy depends on active participation by the governed—the voters. Yet, despite widespread acceptance of the idea that voting is a civic duty and normatively desirable, most eligible Americans are not regular voters. Low voter turnout, particularly when active voters are not representative of the broader population, calls into question the degree to which elected officials and public policy represent public needs and preferences. Thus, voter turnout is of interest for both the maintenance of American democracy and also to ensure political equality. These concerns underlie the longstanding interest in participation and turnout by political scientists, including a large proportion of the recent surge of interest in conducting randomized field experiments ([Druckman, Green, Kuklinski, & Lupia, 2011](#)).

The growing mobilization field experiments literature generally concludes that face-to-face and live telephone interpersonal communication increase participation, while electronic, mass media, and mailed communications, including messages delivered via robocalls, mailers, leaflets, email, text message, television, or radio, often referred to as indirect methods, tend to have weak to negligible effects ([García Bedolla & Michelson, 2012](#); [Green & Gerber, 2008](#)). Both direct and indirect methods deliver the same information: that an election is approaching, and that the targeted individual should vote. Yet, simple exposure to the information is often insufficient to trigger compliance.

A recent meta-analysis by [Green, Aronow, and McGrath \(2013\)](#) of both published and unpublished work concludes that generating larger effects requires either personal methods or the inclusion of strong social pressure messages. They note: (2013: 36): “When social norms are asserted forcefully, the effects tend to be quite large, and even pre-recorded phone calls conveying social pressure messages significantly increase turnout.” Such large social-pressure GOTV effects have been found by a variety of researchers, including [Gerber, Green, and Larimer \(2008\)](#), [Abrajano and Panagopoulos \(2011\)](#), [Mann \(2010\)](#), [Sinclair, McConnell, and Green \(2012\)](#), and [Gerber et al. \(2010\)](#).

Another set of experiments using impersonal methods suggests that the source of the GOTV message can have important consequences. [Nickerson \(2007\)](#) found that nonpartisan emails from a variety of nonpartisan organizations did not increase turnout, but in a series of experiments [Malhotra, Michelson, and Valenzuela \(2012\)](#) found that email messages from the local registrar of voters did increase turnout, and unpublished work suggests

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