Computers in Human Behavior 28 (2012) 1535–1546

Contents lists available at SciVerse ScienceDirect

Computers in Human Behavior

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/comphumbeh

Facebook and political engagement: A study of online political group membership and offline political engagement

Meredith Conroy [a], Jessica T. Feezell [b], Mario Guerrero [c,*]

[a] Occidental College, Department of Politics, 1600 Campus Road, Los Angeles, CA 90041, USA
[b] University of California, Santa Barbara, Department of Political Science, Mailcode 9420, Santa Barbara, CA 93106-9420, USA
[c] California State Polytechnic University, Pomona, Department of Political Science, 3801 West Temple Avenue, Building 94, Room 303, Pomona, CA 91768, USA

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Available online 24 April 2012

Keywords:
Political communication
Social media
Political participation
Facebook
Surveys

ABSTRACT

In what ways do online groups help to foster political engagement among citizens? We employ a multi-method design incorporating content analysis of online political group pages and original survey research of university undergraduates ($n = 455$) to assess the relationship between online political group membership and political engagement—measured through political knowledge and political participation surrounding the 2008 election. We find that participation in online political groups is strongly correlated with offline political participation, as a potential function of engaging members online. However, we fail to confirm that there is a corresponding positive relationship between participation in online political groups and political knowledge, likely due to low quality online group discussion.

1. Introduction

New media is a growing force in the study of civic engagement. There are many levels of analysis within the discussion of new media effects ranging from the global economy to personal use of the Internet. Our research exists on the level of the democratic divide (Norris, 2001), where researchers study individual-level usage of the Internet and analyze its effect in terms of civic engagement. We join an active discussion of whether political Internet use will be helpful, harmful, or irrelevant in its effects on civic society and political engagement.

There is some controversy concerning the effects of the Internet on political engagement. While the impact of general Internet use on political efficacy and trust is still contested,[1] many are optimistic about the ability of political Internet use to increase offline and conventional forms of political participation (Cho et al., 2009; Mossberger, Tolbert, & McNeal, 2008; Rojas & Puig-i-Abril, 2009; Shah, Cho, Eveland, & Kwak, 2005; Xenos & Moy, 2007), knowledge (Xenos & Moy, 2007) and civic engagement through social capital (Jennings & Zeitner, 2003; Norris, 2001; Shah, Kwak, & Holbert, 2001; Valenzuela, Park, & Kee, 2009).

Understanding the influence of political Internet use, and especially new venues and capacities for social interaction, on offline conventional forms of political participation and political knowledge is especially pertinent to understanding younger citizens, who are more active online than previous generations. In 2007, Pew reported that 93% of teens use the Internet. Additionally, as Internet use goes up, participation on social networking sites (SNS) increases as well: "more [teens] than ever are treating [the Internet] as a venue for social interaction—a place where they can share creations, tell stories, and interact with others" (Lenhart, Madden, Macgill, & Smith, 2007). To better understand whether heightened Internet use has a positive or negative impact on political engagement of youth, it is important for our analysis to incorporate measures of different types of social interactions online. As time goes on, we are developing more robust measures for online activities and effects through increased research efforts related to the effects of new media. This paper is an early attempt to accurately capture measurements of these online social interactions.

The proliferation of online venues for all purposes, from social interaction to consumerism, suggests that Internet use alone is too blunt a measure. Recently, researchers have begun to examine specific forms of "political use" of the Internet and SNS, an approach we find to be more indicative of the mechanisms through which new media impacts political engagement. This project contributes to this line of more specified research by further exploring how online political group membership affects offline conventional forms of political participation and political knowledge among youth. Political groups are defined as any social connection shared by individuals, which can enable political discussion and interaction. Political groups have long existed offline through formal group organizations and even informal interaction amongst friends. However, new media is providing opportunities for

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 805 893 3432; fax: +1 805 893 3309.
E-mail addresses: mconroy@oxy.edu (M. Conroy), jtfeezell@polsci.ucsb.edu (J.T. Feezell), mguerrero@polsci.ucsb.edu (M. Guerrero).

[1] For an extended discussion of how the Internet erodes engagement and demobilizes citizens, see Ansolabehere and Iyengar, 1995; Nie, 2001; Pasek, More, & Romer, 2009; Putnam, 2000. Also, more recent literature on Internet use and slacktivism, see Vitak et al., 2011.

0747-5632/$ - see front matter © 2012 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.
http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2012.03.012

citizens in political groups to engage politically in ways that we have not yet seen.

Focusing on the social networking website Facebook, we use a multi-method design to learn more about the content of online political groups and potential influence they have on political engagement. Political engagement is defined here as offline conventional forms of political participation and political knowledge. We begin with analysis of original survey data ($n = 455$) to measure membership in online political groups and levels of offline conventional forms of political activity and political knowledge. We find that increased online political group membership is correlated with increased levels of offline conventional forms of political participation but not necessarily increased levels of political knowledge. To elaborate on these findings, we conduct a content analysis of political group pages and group wall commentary (walls are a shared social space where group members post messages), where we find information quality to be quite low and relatively opinionated rather than information rich. Through survey design, we confidently establish correlation between online political groups and political engagement, while the content analysis corroborates this relationship. We conclude with a discussion of our findings and suggest direction for future research in this area.

2. Online political activity effects

Certain uses of the Internet and new media yield civically redeeming effects in users. Mossberger et al. (2008) find that chat rooms, political email correspondence, and online news exposure predict higher voting rates. Shah, Kwak et al. (2001) demonstrate that information exchange over the Internet fosters civic engagement, trust, and life contentment in younger generations, while social recreation on the Internet is negatively correlated with trust and life contentment. Both of these studies highlight the more deliberative uses of Internet, and more specifically, political discussion. McLeod, Scheufele and Moy (1999), Hardy and Scheufele (2005), Shah et al. (2007), and Cho et al. (2009) find interpersonal processes, such as discussion, are central to learning and action, perhaps licensing the positive effects on civic engagement and participation.

SNS often propagate deliberative activity through their use of discussion walls, online chat, information sharing, and networking. One function of SNS that has received little attention so far is the ability to easily create and join groups. Social scientists have celebrated the advantages of group membership and associations for decades and some have prescribed participation in groups as an "all-purposive elixir for the ills of society" (Dekker & Uslaner, 2001). Existing research demonstrates that group membership encourages trust (Brehm & Rahn, 1997; Jennings & Stoker, 2004), democratic values, and the development of important political skills (Fowler, 1991; McFarland & Thomas, 2006). Furthermore, membership in a group provides necessary motivation and incentive to be politically informed (Coleman, 1988; Fishkin, 1991). Indeed, described as a "nation of joiners" in the 18th century by foreign visitor Alexis de Tocqueville (1990 [1840], p. 118), political engagement in the US has historically been spurred by group membership.

In one of the more crucial calls for attention to groups, Putnam (2000) details an alarming trend amid group membership and civic engagement in the United States; as membership in civic groups decreases so too does civic engagement. Putnam believes the stock of social capital underpinning civic engagement is built up though participation in voluntary organizations, largely offline. Yet the Internet is changing the ways in which we communicate, organize, and socialize (Bimber, Flanagin, & Stohl, 2005; Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Gil de Zuniga & Valenzuela, 2011; Hampton & Wellman, 2001; Klein, 1999; Rich, 1999; Shah et al., 2005). Technological development has spurred what is known as "networked individualism" where individuals are more likely to share information and work in collaborative networked groups (Wellman, 2001). More specifically, the Internet revolution has brought about the inception of online groups that appear to resemble offline groups in function, if not in form. Even as some disagree that offline groups have decreased in prominence, most agree that the Internet has brought significant changes in how offline groups function.

The perceived decline in offline groups paired with growth among online groups raises an important question for civic engagement and new media: In what ways does online political group participation benefit offline political participation? In this paper, we anticipate advancing scholarship on the effects of online political group membership specifically in terms of *political engagement*. Heeding advice from Berger (2009), we avoid measuring effects on civic engagement broadly. We focus more directly on political engagement in the form of offline conventional forms of political participation during the 2008 election and political knowledge, generally, measured using a standard set of civics questions (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1997). We argue that online political group membership is likely to encourage offline political participation, but is unlikely to contribute to substantial increases in political knowledge among joiners.

2.1. Group membership as a mechanism for political engagement

Group membership is thought to encourage political engagement though a number of mechanisms. First, group membership can provide an opportunity for members to discuss politics. Discussion is thought to be integral to feelings of efficacy among citizens, leading to higher rates of political activity (Andersen & Hansen, 2007; Cho et al., 2009; Delli Carpini, Cook, & Jacobs, 2004; Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1997; Fishkin, 1991; Gastil & Dillard, 1999; Robinson & Levy, 1986). Discussion in a group setting can also promote learning by necessitating the expression of views (Taber & Lodge, 2006) and forcing more thoughtful consideration of viewpoints (Eveland, 2004; Huckfeldt, 2007). Benhabib (1994, p. 30–31) notes that, "when presenting their point of view and position to others, individuals must support them by *articulating good reasons* in a public context to their co-deliberators. This process of articulating good reasons in public forces the individual to think of what would count as a good reason for all others involved." Eveland (2004) finds that anticipation of discussion that is counter to one's own viewpoint motivates individuals to become more informed and elaborate on their own opinions. Reasoning, in this general sense, promotes learning (Cho et al., 2009).

However, deliberation effects are precarious. Studies have found the diversity of discussion to be imperative to knowledge gains, whereas homogenous discussion or one-sided arguments are detrimental to knowledge gains. This is especially evident in the framing literature, which finds that the availability of counter-arguments limits framing effects (Druckman & Chong, 2007; Druckman & Nelson, 2003; Sniderman & Theriault, 2003). Diverse discussion is important in helping people to develop skills that encourage deeper understanding, yet message exposure is only as varied as a person's network (Gastil, Deess, & Weisler, 2002; Nisbet & Scheufele, 2004; Scheufele, 2002).

When most people discuss politics, "their conversations usually take place within primary groups of family and close friends – that is, among like-minded people who largely resemble each other socially and politically" (Price & Capella, 2002, p. 304; see also Wyatt, Katz, & Kim, 2000). Mutz and Martin (2001, p. 99) find cause for concern as they show a trend toward ever-homogenizing discussant networks, however, they go onto note that our media environments, such as the news we read and watch, are more diverse than our social environments and that when compared to personal