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Social Networking Sites and Gaining Political Support

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Abstract

Since the turn of the Century, Social Networking Sites (SNSs) have become a normal part of most modern American lives. As this has happened, we have seen a spillover of the entertainment and informational nature of these sites into the American political system. Specifically, these sites are used to build support, gain votes and seats, and mobilize political movements by gaining attention and recognition on these sites. Much study has gone into how effective these online campaigns are in doing their job of gaining different kinds of support, but few, if any, have studied how these sites could be used as a tool to gain support and votes for a single candidate. In the current study, a review of recent literature is given, and we then study the campaign of a politician seeking a city council seat of a large mid-east American city. Specifically, we use a SNS campaign on Facebook in the months preceding the primary election, sending promotional messages about the candidate to likely voters in the candidate's district. We then measure if this campaign leads to an increase of "likes" to the candidate's Facebook page, if this indication had any relation to the likelihood that these voters would actually go vote, and finally if Sex or age plays a part in certain aspects of the data.

Keywords: Social Networking Sites (SNSs), Facebook, Political Movements, Candidates, Voting

Introduction

Social Media has become a new and definitive form of communication and information in our modern times. Prior research suggests that people who use social media use it for a number of reasons including political knowledge, artistic expression, entertainment, information seeking, and relaxation. (Lin, M., Haridakis, P. M., & Hanson, G. 2016 pg. 430) Sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Myspace, and others have moved from humble beginnings at the start of the century to a point where nearly everyone has some form of internet profile, used for a number of different reasons, but all relating to our social interactions with information and other users. Sixty-Five percent of American adults used some form of SNS in 2015, which is a drastic increase in users since 2005 when only 7 percent of users visited such sites. We note this large increase among several types of communities, where in 2005 rural, suburban and urban residents use SNSs at 5 percent, 7 percent and 9 percent, respectively, to 2015 where these same communities have 58 percent, 68 percent and 64 percent of their residents using some form of social media. (Perrin, 2015) As the majority of American citizens have begun to use these sites, it has become apparent that other spheres of society have bought in to this wave of communication and used the boil-over to their advantage.

As the age of information has begun to shape several aspects of modern society since the beginning of the twenty-first century, we have seen the use and manipulation of social networking sites (SNSs) become a massive part of how our contemporary political sphere is shaped. In their book, *Tweeting to Power: The Social Media Revolution in American Politics*, Jason Gainous and Kevin M. Wagner describe SNS usage among the American voting population:

[T]here are approximately 166 million internet users and 103 million SNS users. Of those SNS users 52% claimed to have voted in the 2010 election, making a total of 54 million voting SNS users. Given that approximately 91 million Americans voted in the 2010 election, these calculations suggest that of that 91 million, around 59% of them were SNS users (pg. 27)

From these findings, we know a large percentage of voting Americans use SNSs, begging the question: does the use of SNSs affect both voting behavior and political views? How these sites act as source of political information is quite clear: 36 percent of SNS users report that their site(s) are “very important” or “somewhat important” to them in keeping up with political news, and 26% of SNS users reported that these sites were “very important” or “somewhat important” to them for debating or discussing political issues with others. (Rainie, L., & Smith, A. 2012, pg. 49). Gainous and Wagner (2014) have also found that people who use SNSs to follow their candidate or group pay attention to information or media posted by said profile, showing us that if one is following political news or people on a SNS, one is staying aware of their activity. (pg. 31) Similarly, they found that those who use SNSs for these political reasons are also more likely to participate politically online. (pg. 102) As SNSs usage has increased over more than a decade, so too has the amount of political information and communication among these sites’ users. It becomes clear that SNS use has become at least somewhat political in nature for certain people, and what we now question is if this has made SNSs into a viable option for candidates and campaigns to use as a tool for political support and action, which we begin to discuss in the following section.

Literature Review

Traditional media has long been the primary mode of political mobilization in the United States. Ads in newspapers, magazines and, more recently, on television have dominated how people receive political information since the birth of the country. As SNSs have become increasingly popular, though, we have seen a shift in how both large political battles, such as those between candidates running for US Representative or Senator, and small political battles, such as those between candidates running for state or city positions, are waged and how they mobilize. SNSs break from traditional media in two specific ways in terms of how information is provided to the voting public: First, traditional media has held a gatekeeping function between politics and the public since its formation, with direct contact between the groups, movements, candidates, and politicians being filtered by the traditional media outlets. SNSs allow these entities to communicate information directly to the public. Second, these entities not only control how much or how little direct information they give to the public, but also shapes and directs it themselves. (Gainous, J., & Wagner, K. M. 2014, pg. 49)

With SNSs allowing for the complete independence of political entities from traditional media outlets, their usage has become an easy and affordable way to build support for a desired movement or candidate. SNSs create an alternative to traditional media outlets that are most of the time free and readily available for contact by interested parties. This, along with the fact that the majority of Americans are now using SNSs and that a large portion of these users are using these sites for political information, creates a digital competition that no country has seen in previous decades. For both the campaign--the supply side of information--and the voters--the demand side that uses information to form their preferences— this has large implications. Not only is cost minimized by using these SNSs, but the political exchange becomes far more

legitimized. the internet can hold an infinite amount of information and is highly interactive in nature, with the demand side being able to communicate with the smaller supply side directly (Gainous, J., & Wagner, K. M. 2014, pg. 139) At question is whether this cheaper, seemingly more transparent way of campaigning is actually more effective in gaining mobilization, and for candidates, votes.

Studies conducted by Bekafigo, Cohen, Gainous and Wagner (2013) found very interesting findings regarding internet campaigns and how SNSs can equalize competition among Democratic and Republican candidates campaigning for state congressional seats. Measuring Facebook fan growth and net growth in state house and senate seats amongst the two parties, “There is a modest relationship between Facebook fan growth and the net gain in seats for Democrats, but not for Republicans... for every 200 fans grown in the period from T1 to T2, Democrats gained a seat” (p. 105). In this area, the Republicans held the most congressional seats and a much stronger support base in terms of voter preferences and monetary gains. This put Democrats at a distinct disadvantage. The authors argue that because the Democrats were at a disadvantage and needed every vote they could get, “the power and reach of the Internet and SNSs became significant in producing results... the Internet can help level the electoral playing field by providing a low-cost campaign avenue for persons or groups who lack the ability to harness traditional methods successfully.” (Bekafigo, M. A., Cohen, D. T., Gainous, J., & Wagner, K. M. 2013, p. 106-107) In terms of effectiveness, SNSs can act as a powerful tool to gain support and votes when other methods either fail or are unable to be utilized because of a lack of monetary support. Here we see that one particularly disadvantaged party could level the playing field between it and its opposition: having lacked proper funding and having been

limited in its ability to use traditional methods of vote building, one side was able to gain momentum by using SNSs to its advantage.

The study above shows that SNSs offer a strong tool for getting voters to vote for a certain candidate, but it does not answer the question of whether the gain in seats was from voters mobilizing to go vote, or if the campaign simply made people who would normally vote switch their candidate preferences, presumably from SNS campaign exposure.

Researchers in Russia and Finland tested the effectiveness of SNSs in gaining both support for a non-electoral movement via the particular sites users used (Facebook), and if this internet participation actually led to civic discussions and political participation (action). In Finland, Facebook was utilized as a tool for organizing protests against urban building projects. They used a similar website, Vkontakte, which is very popular in Russia, for evaluating similar movements in that country. The basis of their theoretical approach relied upon how movements depend on the public sphere to gain support and mobilization from an increasing number of participants, but conversely how they also act as the central actors in bringing new discussion to the group. (Gladarev, B., & Lonkila, M. 2012, p. 1378) The researchers examined how effective these campaigns were at getting people involved, building consensus among the group, and organizing events on a qualitative level. The authors found that “reliance on social networking sites was positively related to civic participation but not to political participation.” (pg. 1378) The SNS users in these areas who were engaging in the organization of the group movement did actively participate more on SNSs, but did not become any more mobilized and participatory when action took place. Relating to the argument in the previous paragraphs, this may show us that those who normally use SNSs for political information do end up becoming more engaged or switching their preferences. However, this heightened SNS usage does not guarantee that

people will act on those preferences. This movement was not fighting for every vote or individual, thus making its SNS presence less effective than what we saw in the previous discussion.

These findings lead us to believe that using SNSs as a tool to gain political support, whether for votes or participation in a movement, may not be as effective as originally thought. Although we have seen gains in votes by using social media as a tool, we have also seen that this SNS campaign may be more effective in gaining digital support and changing the preferences of those who would regularly vote/participate rather than mobilizing new people to vote or join a movement. This is not to say that SNSs are generally ineffective as a political tool, but it may be they simply feed off the support of those who already use social media.

Several studies have shown how it may be possible that SNS campaigns actually reduce the amount of people who would regularly engage in political participation. (Cantijoch, M., Cutts, D., & Gibson, R. 2016, p. 39). Signing up for party newsfeeds and using online tools to help promote one's views and beliefs and/or the party eventually leads to those users engaging in fewer of the formal and informal modes of political participation after the election, exceeding the expectation that SNS campaigns may not be effective, but that they may even reduce political participation. This could be explained by more traditional modes of participation being imitated and repeated online where a physically expressive mode, like ones we have seen in traditional modes, has not yet been developed, leading to more time participating online, and less offline. (Cantijoch, M., Cutts, D., & Gibson, R. 2016, p. 40-41). This idea is furthered by work that shows that when controlling for variables such as demographics, political beliefs, traditional media usage, and online media usage, SNS use has no effect on political involvement, specifically voting and movement participation, and that in some cases, such as in weblog usage,

there is a negative association between usage and political involvement. (Groshek, J., & Dimitrova, D. 2013, p. 116) This evidence stands as a further example of how SNSs may be effective in gaining the support of a party from those who would normally vote and/or use SNSs, but not effective in generating new support, and in some cases detrimental to those who normally do participate politically or who had the potential to begin to do so.

No studies have yet attempted to understand how these dynamics might shape an individual campaign of a political candidate. Evidence has shown that in terms of parties, SNSs can act as an equalizing factor to gain seats in certain electoral circumstances. Other evidence, however, has shown that SNSs do not actually do a good job in gaining political mobilization and involvement from those participating online. By using Facebook messages as a campaign tool that directly connects likely voters with a political candidate's Facebook page, and then measuring how effective this method is at getting users to like the page and go vote, we can determine if SNS campaigns that use methods as such actually do gain support for a candidate and mobilize people to go vote.

Study

Research Questions and Hypotheses

- **RQ1:** Do SNS political campaigns for particular candidates, such as those on Facebook, have a relationship with SNS users showing online preference for said candidate?
- **RQ2:** Do SNS political campaigns for particular candidates, such as those on Facebook, have a relationship with SNS users participating politically by voting in that candidate's election?

- **RQ3:** Does expressed online preference for a SNS political campaign for particular candidates, such as those on Facebook, have a relationship with those SNS users being more likely to participate politically by voting in the candidate's election?
- **H1:** I predict a relationship will exist between SNS political campaign contact and SNS users showing online preference for a particular candidate. If an SNS user is contacted by an SNS political campaign, he/she will be more likely to show preference for that candidate online.
- **H2:** I predict that a relationship will exist between SNS political campaign contact and SNS users participating politically by voting in the candidate's election. If an SNS user is contacted by and SNS political campaign, he/she will be more likely to participate politically by voting in the candidate's election
- **H3:** I predict that a relationship will exist between expressed online preference for a particular candidate and SNS users participating politically by voting in the particular candidate's election. If an SNS user shows online preference for a political candidate, he/she will be more likely to participate politically by voting in the candidate's election.

City Election, Candidates, and Campaign

In the current study, we will be looking at a single voting district of a large, mid-east metropolitan city. The city elects its 26 district legislatures to four-year terms, with the terms being staggered by two years between the even and odd number districts. Party primaries are held in May of the election year, with the general election occurring the following November. (klc.org, 2016) The candidate on whose campaign this research operates was a new politician seeking to beat an opponent who also had not ever run for this position (but did have more

connections and political networking on account of his occupation) by organizing local neighborhood support. The primary election race included only two candidates, the one we focus on and the opponent, both in the same party seeking support from the national committee. Support from the party is determined by total vote counts in the primary election, with the majority winner gaining support from the national party. The data includes only information on and before the primary that was held in May of the election year.

The methods of this study provided both campaign help to the new politician and a set of data that we use to analyze how social-media campaigns affect voter turnout and how people use social media as an expression of their political preferences to candidates. The reason that this study focuses on a lower-level position such as city council is to test the effectiveness of social media in building campaign support, and this would be very hard to measure with any larger election.

Methods

Participants

The participants used in this study were gathered using the filter function on the Vote Builder website. First, I selected the city voting district 4 as the primary voting region from which all participants would be pulled, as it is where the campaign being studied took place. The district 4 city council primary would decide which democratic candidate would receive support from the national committee, and only those voting-eligible citizens living in district 4 could vote in this primary election. Next, I compiled a list of likely voters, with “likely voters” being operationalized as any voting-eligible persons in district 4 who had voted in at least one of the last five elections, either general or primary. I again compiled a list of participants using

functions on the Vote Builder website that allowed us to define the terms of our search. The total number of participants was $n=2,748$, with 60.74 percent being female ($n=1,669$) and 39.26 percent being male ($n=1,079$). The age of all participants ranged from 19 years to 102 years of age, with the mean age being 55.89, and the standard deviation being 16.42.

Data and Materials

I recorded all primary data using Microsoft Excel and Google Documents. I used Microsoft Word to compile lists of names and other variables not needed to be put into the primary Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. First, I added the full names of all participants into a column on the Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. The means of communication with participants was student profiles on Facebook, specifically the messenger app provided on the site. Students were asked to volunteer to help contact likely voters via Facebook.com, with no reward other than campaign experience. The compiled list of whether or not each participant had been contacted, labeled “FacebookContact” in the data, was the only list compiled by anyone other than the primary researcher. To contact likely voters, students searched each listed name from the compiled list of “likely voters” on Facebook. If the student found a profile that matched the name of the listed participant, a specific informational message, with a link to the candidate’s Facebook profile page, was sent to the participant via the Facebook messenger app. Each message stated:

Hi, I’m a volunteer for [candidate name]’s campaign for City Council in your district, and I’m reaching out to let you know about him. He is all about community involvement and wants to set a new tone for city government, placing it back into the hands of those it was meant to serve. This means he wants to hear your ideas. If you haven’t already done so, he would appreciate if you

would like his campaign page and make your voice heard. You can post up ideas on his page, or private message him, and he will respond [link to candidate's political campaign Facebook page].

Once the message had been sent, the student inserted a "y" (for "yes") into the appropriate cell of the "FacebookContact" column on the Microsoft Excel spreadsheet, indicating that that participant had a Facebook profile and that they had been sent the informational message asking for them to "like" the candidate's page. If the participant could not be found on Facebook, or if the student could not ensure that the profile they found was the participant from the likely voter list, an "n" (for "no") was inserted into the appropriate cell of the "FacebookContact" column, indicating that the informational message had not been sent to that participant

After the May 2016 primary election, I compiled a list of all people who had liked the page using functions on the Candidate's own Facebook profile page. Using the Microsoft Excel Spreadsheet, I created a new column containing the list of anyone who had liked the page, including those who were not likely voters and/or not a resident of city district 4. Using functions in Microsoft Excel, I highlighted the names of likely voters who were on the compiled list of anyone who liked the page, allowing for a new column to be created in which each participant could be labeled as either having liked the page (signified by a "y" in the appropriate cell) or not having liked the page (signified by a "n" in the appropriate cell). I then labeled this column "LikedPage", and deleted other not needed columns, such as the list of anyone (regardless of residence or likely voter status) who had liked the page.

I used the same method when attempting to indicate if each participant had voted in the city district 4 primary. I compiled a list of all people in city district 4 who had voted in the 2016 primary using the filter and functions provided on the Vote Builder website. I then inserted this list into a new column on the Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. Using the same function on Microsoft

Excel spreadsheet that determined which participants had liked the candidate's page, I highlighted each participant who was on the list of people who voted in the 2016 primary. I then created new column labeled "Voted", and for each highlighted participant, I inserted a "y" into the appropriate cell of the "Voted" column, indicating that that participant had voted in the 2016 city primary election. I inserted an "n" into the appropriate cell of the "Voted" column for those non-highlighted participant names, indicating that they had not voted in the 2016 city primary. Upon completing the "Voted" column for every participant, I deleted other, not needed columns such as the list of all city district 4 residences who had voted.

Results

I completed the statistical analysis of the data using R Console version 3.3.1 and R Commander. For all statistical tests, I used an alpha level of 0.05 to determine significance. I contacted 39.74 percent of all participants via the messenger app on Facebook.com, leaving 60.26% not contacted, totaling 1,092 total participants receiving the informational message asking them to "like" the candidate's page. Of all the participants, 2.37 percent ended up "liking" the page, or a count of 65, and 97.63 percent, or a count of 2,683, did not.

When testing for significance between "Facebook Contact" and "Liked Page", a Pearson's chi-squared test found that a strong relationship exists between these two variables ($p < 0.001$). Participants who received the informational message asking them to "like" the candidate's page were much more likely to do so than those who did not receive a message. This led us to believe that Facebook is a good tool for gaining support for political campaigns. We see a very different level of significance, however, when testing significance between "Facebook Contact" and "Voted". When testing for this, I found that no relationship exists between

Table 1: Cross-tabulations for variables studied:
**Parenthesis indicate count totals*

Liked Page	Facebook Contact	
	No	Yes
No	98.9% (1638)	95.7% (1045)
Yes	1.1% (18)	4.3% (47)
Totals	100% (1656)	100% (1092)
Pearson's Chi-squared test: $X^2 = 29.491$, $df = 1$, $p\text{-value} = 5.618e-08$		

Voted	Facebook Contact	
	No	Yes
No	81.2% (1344)	81.9% (894)
Yes	18.8% (312)	18.1% (198)
Totals	100% (1656)	100% (1092)
Pearson's Chi-squared test: $X^2 = 0.21868$, $df = 1$, $p\text{-value} = 0.64$		

Voted	Liked Page	
	No	Yes
No	81.4% (2185)	81.5% (53)
Yes	18.6% (498)	18.5% (12)
Totals	100% (2683)	100% (65)
Pearson's Chi-squared test: $X^2 = 0.00041798$, $df = 1$, $p\text{-value} = 0.9837$		

Liked Page	Sex	
	Male	Female
No	97.8% (1632)	97.4% (1051)
Yes	2.2% (37)	2.6% (26)
Totals	100% (1669)	100% (1079)
Pearson's Chi-squared test: $X^2 = 0.40567$, $df = 1$, $p\text{-value} = 0.5242$		

receiving the informational message and actually voting in the primary ($p > 0.05$). Although those participants who received the message were more likely to “like” the candidate’s page, the message had no effect on voter turnout, signaling that Facebook may be a good tool to build popularity, but not for getting people engaged in the actual voting process. This point was reinforced when testing for significance between “Liked Page” and “Voted”. I found no significant relationship between liking the candidate’s page and going out to vote. ($p > 0.1$) Even if participants received the informational message asking them to like the page and they ended

up doing so, this had no effect on their likelihood to vote in the city district 4 primary. Facebook as a means of gaining votes, or even getting people out to vote at all, it seems, is inefficient, even though it has been shown that using such messages does increase the likelihood that people will like an individual page or profile.

I utilized two final tests to assess the relationship between sex and “Liked Page”, and age and “Facebook Contact”. The purpose of these two tests is to see if sex had any effect on whether or not a participant would like a page, and whether or not age is a restrictive factor when trying to use Facebook as a tool for political-campaign support. As stated before, a Pearson’s Chi-squared test was used for testing the relationship between Sex and “Facebook Contact”, which yielded no significance ($p=0.52$). This shows that whether one is male or female has no effect on whether or not one will “like” a candidate’s page if one receives a Facebook message asking he/she to do so. To test the relationship between age and Facebook contact, I utilized a Kendall’s rank correlation tau. I discovered significance between these two variables ($p < .001$) in the direction that the older a participant is, the less likely they were to be found on Facebook and sent a message ($\tau = -0.11$). This shows that the older a participant is, the less likely he/she are to be active on Facebook. In the former case, we can expect that sex will not have an effect on an individual’s likelihood to show online preference for a particular candidate, having been contacted by that campaign online. In the latter case, we should note that an individual’s age could very likely relate to his/her availability on SNSs, suggesting that using online campaigns is an inefficient method of reaching older individuals.

Discussion

The campaign just studied utilized an SNS (online) political-campaign in an attempt to gain publicity, political support, and actual votes at the ballot box. Although this study focuses on a relatively low government position, it can shed light on how much larger SNS political campaigns may be less effective than originally thought. In regards to our research questions and hypotheses, these results reveal some interesting points.

The results confirm hypothesis one: a significant relationship exists between receiving a Facebook message and showing online political preferences for a candidate by liking the page. Even though nearly 40 percent of those likely voters had a Facebook profile and were contacted, and only 4.3 percent of those actually liked the page, we still see a very strong significance between these two variables, signaling that SNSs such as Facebook are quite good at gaining support when utilized in this fashion. These results would support the findings of Bekafigo et al (2013) that found when a political entity is struggling for every vote, social media can stand as a cheap, easily expandable, equalizing factor in gaining political support. These results also support a hypothesis proposed by Gladarev & Lonkila (2012) in that SNS are good tools in creating civic participation, such as online discussion and preferential support. By these findings, we can conclude that SNSs as a tool for a political campaigns are good at generating support for a candidate. We see very different results, however, for our other hypotheses.

Our second hypothesis proposed that a relationship exists between SNS users being contacted by a candidate's campaign and those SNS users participating politically by voting in the candidate's election. Interestingly this hypothesis was proven false. One could be led to believe that because a relationship exists between being contacted on a SNS by a political campaign and those SNS users showing preferences online for that campaign that a relationship

would exist between those who were contacted, regardless of if they liked the page, and their likelihood of voting in the election. This was not the case. Of those in the population not contacted via Facebook, 18.8 percent ended up voting, with the percentage of those who voted who were contacted actually being 0.7 percent less than that at 18.1 percent. There was no significant difference between the two rates. This creates a confusing dilemma between hypothesis one and hypothesis two. Even though there was significance between being contacted on Facebook and liking the candidate's Facebook page, those who were contacted are less likely to go vote than those who were not contacted. In other words, even though SNSs may be good for building online support for a political campaign, they are very limited in getting people mobilized and participating politically by voting. This would again support the conclusions of Gladarev & Lonkila (2012), in that these SNSs did help gain the support and recognition of those SNS users, but had no effect on those same users in terms of getting them politically motivated and mobilized. Contact by a SNS political campaign has no effect on a SNS user's likelihood of voting in the election of interest. Results of hypothesis three takes this finding a step further.

The most revealing of the results, hypothesis three was also disproven. This hypothesis expected that there would be a relationship between showing online political preference, by liking the candidate's Facebook page, and participating politically by voting. Of those who liked the page, 18.5% participated in the election by voting, 0.1% less than of those who did not like the page and voted! This generated a chi-squared statistic of nearly one, showing nearly no relationship whatsoever. I generated hypothesis three with the assumption that those who liked the political candidate's page would also be more prone to participate politically by voting. The candidate hoped that this show of support by those who liked the page would not only be the antecedent to the SNS users voting, but specifically voting for said candidate. Although we

cannot answer questions on who exactly each SNS user voted for, we can be sure that even if a large portion of people like a particular candidate's page does not mean that those same users are more likely to go vote. This result, as well as the last, shows definitive evidence that SNSs are not a good tool for building votes, even if they are good for building online support, and in fact may be detrimental to getting SNS users politically active. This revelation would support a conclusion similar to that made by Cantijoch, Cutts, & Gibson, (2016) in purporting that SNS political campaigns imitate the attempted mobilization made by traditional modes of campaigning, but actually limit the likelihood of those SNS users to vote. In these circumstances, those likely voters who did like the page were actually less likely to go vote than those who had not liked the page, signaling that SNSs may have replaced political participation by creating an online sphere that is not only more entertaining and popular, but also allows the user to express their preferences without restriction.

The final two tests were conducted in an attempt to gauge how sex and age affected the likelihood of liking the candidate's Facebook page and if they could be contacted (found) on Facebook, respectively. If any significance exists by these relationships, it would stand as a limitation to the study. When testing the relationship between sex and liked page, I found no significance, signaling that gender had no effect on how likely someone would be to show online preference for a candidate by liking their page. I found significance, however, between age and finding the user on Facebook, in the direction that the older a likely voter is, the less likely they are to be found and sent a message on the site. This may prove that older voters simply do not engage in online activity such as Facebook and other SNSs as much as younger voters do. This would again limit the effectiveness of SNS political campaigns, as they do not reach the most likely of voter in modern America. Although this is interesting, it is not considered a limitation,

as the researcher cannot control who is and who is not a user of Facebook. If the study had utilized random assignment rather than a naturalistic form, this may have been different.

Conclusions and Limitations

The primary conclusions drawn from this study both support and refute older works discussed above. SNSs can be used as an effective tool for building online support for a particular candidate, leading one to believe that they can also be a good tool for building support for other political entities. However, in terms of getting likely voters to participate politically by voting, this same tool can be ineffective to gaining votes by creating a new sphere of information discussion where SNS users do not have to participate politically, that is in a physical sense such as voting, having replaced this by civically participating online. SNSs encompass a large amount of information, and many people use this as a means to become politically involved. This has led politicians and groups to utilize SNSs as a tool for building both support and votes. These results show that these particular groups and politicians are taking for granted how useful SNSs are at gaining votes and support. This study is not without its limitations, however.

One limitation to this study is the scope of political engagement at hand. It may be the case that because we are dealing with a much smaller election for a much smaller government position, people are simply less inclined to get involved or comment on the race for this seat. This is furthered by the fact that both of the candidates were of the same party, thus creating little difference in ideologies, possibly lowering concern for who will win the election.

Another issue deals with demographics and the access to computerized forms of communication in the district being studied. Nam, T. (2011) found that “Traditionally disadvantaged groups who lag behind in Internet access and skills also remain bereft of

opportunities for political participation. Demographic disparities in access and skills amplify the voices of the affluent.” (p. 134) Due to the urban nature of the city being studied, it is a definite limitation that there may be less access to SNSs in this district, thus limiting how much we can gauge the effectiveness of SNS political campaigns. Completing this study on a much larger scale with a larger candidate running for a more affluent district, one may find different results in terms of how effectively SNSs help to gain support and votes.

The final limitation deals with problems in attempting to contact people through social media and, in our specific case, through Facebook. Most SNSs are backed and protected by sophisticated algorithms that detect when a user is using the platform to spread advertisements and spam through his/her respective messaging app. In a clever way to block further those profiles who are using Facebook to send mass messages like the ones involved in this study, the SNS has split user inboxes into two, one that receives messages from only friends/followers, and one that receives for those who are not. In other words, when a user attempts to send a message to a non-friend/follower, it may be placed in an inbox that does not send a notification to the receiver, or one that the receiver is not aware. It is unknown how many, if any, of the messages that were sent to users asking them to like the candidates page were handled in this manner. Judging by the results of RQ1 in this study, it was likely minimal.

In future research of this topic, especially if Facebook is used as a methodological base, we propose a simple remedy to this problem. Before messaging each likely voter, the campaign page, or whomever is doing the mass messaging, should friend request each individual user. Given a long enough time, those users who were friend-requested should accept the request, and any message that is sent would be filtered into the user’s regular inbox, likely supplying a notification to them. This would not only surpass the restricting nature of the Facebook

messenger app, but also create a more personal and approachable personality for the candidate, likely increasing responses.

By shedding light on how effective SNS political campaigns for candidates are at building support and getting to people to vote, we have opened up a new avenue to evaluate social media and networking in the political sphere. There is no doubt that the world is becoming increasingly technological. As technology continues to grow and spread into social spheres, we will undoubtedly see it morph into every day topics, such as politics, including the use of SNSs. Future studies should continue to evaluate how effective SNSs usage is for political reasons, perhaps on a larger scale than the study at hand. One of the purposes of this study was to, for the first time, attempt quantify the effectiveness of using SNSs as a political tool, and what the results of this study reveal is that more work needs to be done to fully answer these questions.

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