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The Delocalization of the Local Election

Caleb T. Carr
Illinois State University

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Abstract

Local elections are no longer just influenced by, marketed toward, or relevant to only a small, geographically constrained electorate. Social media increasingly connect politics to publics that may extend beyond politicians' or issues' local constituencies. Every election—from Senator to alderperson—has been rendered accessible and relevant to broad individuals, organizations, and interests. Now, campaigns—particularly in close races or battleground areas—can canvas beyond the local level to seek donations, campaign volunteers, or to encourage local residents to vote. Social media have become venues to demonstrate a candidate's likability with users, which are parlayed into local goodwill and electability. And foreign nationals and governments increasingly are using social media to spread disinformation or to otherwise sway local issues. Ultimately, what was once a city, county, state, provincial, or national election can now play out on a global stage through social media, with all of the subsequent influence and impacts. This article uses several geographically dispersed and representative examples to exemplify the delocalization of the local election, including Beto O'Rourke's 2018 Senate Campaign (the US), the effect of nationwide social media popularity and interactivity on local election results (Taiwan and The Netherlands), and Russian influence in the 2016 Brexit Referendum (the UK). It concludes by calling for new understanding of what political involvement and political action may mean in a socially mediated society.

Keywords

globalization, politics, glocal, political activity, social media

The story is all too familiar: A foreign government, fearing the potential for American voters to elect a president not favorable to their interest, distributes propaganda and misinformation to an unsuspecting electorate in an attempt to sway public sentiment and affect the outcome of the election toward their preferred candidate. I refer, naturally, to France's failed attempt to influence the United States' 1796 election toward electing Thomas Jefferson as its second president (Pruitt, 2017). Attempts of outside forces to affect local politics continue to ring familiar in contemporary elections, but can do so on even smaller scales. Local elections—those of smaller, geographically constrained areas—can have a more direct and substantive impact on voters than broader national issues by selecting mayors, establishing city or school funding, and guiding local public policies. However, local elections are no longer primarily local matters: Local elections can be influenced nationally, and national elections can be influenced globally. Part of the delocalization of the local election can be attributed to economic, political, and social factors, including the growth of nationally funded interest groups, expanding media markets, and consolidated media and news holdings. But the ability of social media to connect and communicate is also increasingly delocalizing the local

election, enabling communication with, about, and around local elections at delocalized scale.

Social media have helped connect our society, and in doing so have made the local broadly accessible. Beyond connecting geographically distributed individuals, social media afford users new opportunities for interactivity and involvement. Whether deliberately or tacitly, social media have begun to delocalize local politics and elections in the following three key ways: financially, interactionally, and geopolitically.

Nonlocal Financial Contributions to Local Elections

Political campaigns are increasingly looking outside of their districts for financial contributions. This is not entirely new, as political parties have long sought to infuse the

Illinois State University, USA

Corresponding Author:
Caleb T. Carr, School of Communication, Illinois State University, 53 Fell Hall, Campus Box 4480, Normal, IL, 61761-4480, USA.
Emails: ctcarr@ilstu.edu; @CalebTCarrPhD

campaigns of their party in particularly contentious and/or swayable districts. But social media are enabling campaigns to reach out and speak to—and therefore, seek donations from—audiences outside of their own districts. For example, the 2018 elections for US Representatives and Senators saw heavy uses of social media advertising to target out-of-district contributions, especially in districts likely to flip (i.e., vote for a candidate from a party different than the incumbent). North Dakota Senator Heidi Heitkamp (D) saw 96% of her contributions come from out-of-state, Wisconsin Representative Paul Ryan (R) received 95% of his campaign funding from out-of-state, and ~US$11M (42.7%) of Texas Representative Beto O'Rourke's (D) state-record US$23.7M campaign came from out-of-district contributions (Center for Responsive Politics, 2019). O'Rourke's campaign was specifically noted for its use of digital messaging—particularly through social media—to communicate with potential constituents, but also to seek and engage donors beyond the Texan voters he sought to represent (Guynn et al., 2018). Though only residents within a district may vote in the local election, the financing to influence the voters in local campaigns (e.g., campaign staffing, local media advertising buys, campaign events) seems to increasingly come from out-of-district. Consequently, social media can go beyond typical mass media advertising and persuasive technique, targeting donors from relatively stable voting blocs (e.g., a district always voting for the Labour party candidate) to convince them to contribute to other election campaigns perceived to be close and likely to be swayed by spending money there.

Social Media Interactivity's Influence on Electability

A politician's persona is critical to elections, and candidates often seek to be perceived as likable to their electorate, which can increase their perceived *electability*—voters' perceptions of the candidate's chances of winning—to influence elections. The "beer test," or the perception a candidate is socially attractive and personable enough to sit and chat with over a beverage, has been an odd Litmus test of candidates' electability, often determined from what voters see of the candidate through the media or while stumping. Social media give constituents the chance to interact directly and vicariously with candidates, and the vicarious interaction presents a unique opportunity for social media in elections. Observing a politician interact on social media with others—whether they are constituents or not—can serve as a parasocial proxy for direct interaction. Should the interactant be perceived as similar to the voter and the interaction be perceived favorably, these parasocial interactions through social media can result in increased perceptions of the politician's social attractiveness, electability, and subsequent intention to vote for that politician (Lee & Jang, 2013). Because social

media allow global interactions and observations thereof, politicians can now readily interact with individuals outside of their constituency in a way that is observable by—and can influence—the local voter bloc.

The influence of a constituency viewing social media interactions, which influence perceptions of a candidate and subsequent voting patterns, has been recently observed *in situ*. In Taiwan and the Netherlands, local politicians' engagement with publics (who may not be their constituents) have been influential to increase their visibility, perceived attractiveness, and ultimately make them more electable. For example, the 2012 Taiwanese presidential election saw candidates use Facebook to communicate, particularly about policy issues; however, other users—including those not able to vote in Taiwan—were more intent on discussing the character of each candidate (Wen, 2014), which may have influenced Taiwanese voters' choices. Similarly, during the 2014 municipal elections in The Netherland's Overijssel province, candidates with greater engagement through social media interaction were more likely to be elected, even when interactions were not necessarily with Overijssel residents (Effing et al., 2016). Simply being seen as more interactive or approachable—characteristics discussed by others and made directly observable through social media—may help candidates win elections.

Nonlocal Influence in Local Elections

A final, more nefarious way local elections and issues are becoming nationalized or globalized due to social media is the geopolitical influence occurring through manipulation of social media streams and feeds, most evident in national elections. The 2016 referendum in the United Kingdom for Brittan to exit (i.e., "Brexit") the European Union was a contentious issue, as British citizens voted whether to remain part of Europe's political and economic federation or to withdraw in favor of greater autonomy. Though the outcome of Brexit had political and socioeconomic implications for the European region broadly, voting was limited to the British electorate, who ultimately voted to "leave" (51.89%) rather than "stay" (48.44%) only by a small margin. It was only discovered after the referendum vote that, amid the cacophony of public discussion and debate around Brexit leading up to the vote, Russian operatives engaged in an expansive disinformation campaign through social media, posting millions of statements on Twitter and Facebook to sway public opinion and influence Brits' Brexit vote (Wintour, 2018). Similar uses of social media for disinformation campaigns and attempts to influence local issues from external governments also occurred in 2019, when profiles linked to the Chinese government began attempting to discredit Hong Kong protests of an extradition bill proposed by the Hong Kong Government (Wood et al., 2019). On Twitter, Facebook, Reddit, and other social media, Chinese operatives were identified as seeking to influence—on a global

scale—public global sentiment and support for Hong Kong's localized political upheaval.

The security of local elections may have once been limited to the ballot box and results: either the submission of false votes or manipulation of tabulation. These fears of falsifying voting records may be giving way to concern for the more subtle manipulation of elections themselves. External governments' and agencies' use of social media to communicate to present (mis)information or otherwise disseminate claims to influence an electorate either directly or indirectly can ultimately influence how that constituency perceives—and therefore, votes on—a local matter. Such concerns could just as readily play out on smaller scales. For example, fearing the City of Pawnee's upcoming ballot initiative to make coffee the city's official beverage, another city could use social media to broadcast (false) claims about health or dietary concerns of Pawnee residents or economic impacts, which may subsequently affect how Pawnee voters feel about and vote on the coffee initiative. In this example, the influencing city could be nearby (e.g., neighboring Eagleton, fearing Pawnee would draw business away from it) or international (e.g., Pakse, Laos, whose coffee manufacturing sector would benefit should Pawnee's coffee consumption increase). Because external influence on local issues through social media can be easy to execute but difficult to detect, surreptitious global influence of local elections will be increasingly difficult to identify and manage.

What Does This Mean for Elections?

In a socially mediated society, the "local" is decreasingly governed by physical geography, and even local elections can increasingly play out beyond the confines of a constituency. Rather than France distributing leaflets to persuade Americans, social media now allow individuals and governments alike to target and access specific voter blocs efficiently, seeking to affect local elections by swaying public sentiment or even intention to vote. Moving forward, scholars and pundits will need to reconsider how we think about elections. For example, when we first surveyed college students about how "politically active" they were on Facebook (Vitak et al., 2011), scales addressed political activity in general terms (e.g., "Discussed political information in a Facebook message"), without consideration of *where* (geographically) that political activity was directed. A resident of East Lansing, Michigan may just as well be commenting on or donating to the campaign of an East Lansing mayoral candidate or a redevelopment initiative of Lansing's Old Town district as she/he may be commenting on or donating to a campaign addressing women's rights in Georgia. Though not a geographically local issue, the East Lansing resident may perceive the Georgia campaign to be a bellwether issue for women's rights nationally, and seek to be active in the other state's campaign as a means of proactive issue management.

Conclusion

Certainly not all elections will garner widespread election: I am dubious the upcoming county coroner election is an international (or even local) spectacle. But whether used or not, social media are allowing—and sometimes encouraging—users to engage with politics beyond the geographic confines of a particular election. As such, local elections will increasingly become nonlocal processes, complicating elections, electorates, and social processes. Just ask President John Adams.

ORCID iD

Caleb T. Carr (iD) https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5700-6636

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Author Biography

Caleb T. Carr (PhD, Michigan State University) is an associate professor of Communication in the School of Communication at Illinois State University. He researches how computer-mediated communication affects communicative processes, including how social media are used for organizational uncertainty reduction and to create and maintain identity online.