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**Political Posts on Facebook:
An Examination of Voting, Perceived Intelligence, and Motivations**

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Assigned in COM 300: Introduction to Communication Research (Dr. Lauren Amaro)

Abstract

This study investigates the use of Facebook in the realm of politics. More specifically, this study focuses on the role political posts play on whether or not users voted in the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election, users' perceived intelligence, and the motivations behind politically posting on Facebook. Convenience sampling was used to obtain participants (n=134) to volunteer to contribute to the study. The participants of the study were undergraduate students at Pepperdine University. Analyses of the survey responses suggested: there was a higher rate of voting among respondents who politically posted in comparison to respondents who did not politically post. The findings also revealed: there was not a higher rate of political posts on Facebook among respondents who perceived themselves as intelligent. The study also found that the primary motivations that users report for writing political posts on Facebook were to inform the online community and self-expression.

Introduction

Politics play a significant role within any society. Engaging in civic duties and the discussion of politics as a whole contributes to the fiber of a nation's identity. In modern times, the political arena presents itself among numerous types of platforms. Society gains much of its information in regards to politics from social media outlets.

Specifically, Facebook greatly impacts the way society interacts within the realm of politics. A study by Pew Research Center found that Facebook was the top source for political news among millennials. In fact, 61% of millennials obtained their news about politics and government from Facebook (Mitchell, Gottfried, & Matsa, 2015). Through political posts, trending political news stories, political advertisements, events, social networking groups and online political groups, Facebook users are constantly inundated with politics.

Facebook fosters an online community of advocates, activists, politicians, potential voters, and users searching to gain insight to the current political state of the country. The platform enables users to interact freely with important political figures, topics, groups, and ultimately, other users. Facebook is an online community that offers a plethora of engaging political avenues.

In terms of motivation, there are varying reasons why users feel the need to engage in politics via Facebook. As the Pew Research Center study indicates, the majority of millennials used Facebook to gain general political information. However, deeper motivations for taking the time to create a political post or react to a political post are present.

It is critical to investigate the role of Facebook on political engagement because the millennial generation relies heavily on this particular social media outlet. Political consumption is primarily gained through Facebook; therefore, it is important to understand how and why users are interacting with this online interface.

The present study uses quantitative survey methodology to examine the presence of political Facebook posts and their influence on offline political participation. More than that, the study investigates the motivations behind why millennials contribute political posts on Facebook. Specifically, the study focuses on the level of perceived intelligence as a factor contributing to political posts. In general, the study strives to provide insight to the impact of political Facebook posts on voting, perceived intelligence, and motivations.

Review of Literature

Facebook is a social network that serves multiple purposes. The online Facebook community can share personal information, update statuses to inform others about what is on a user's mind, connect with friends and family, and contribute photos and videos. The general attitude toward Facebook is that it is a platform where users can showcase aspects of their lives while simultaneously observe the lives of others. The online Facebook community enables various forms of expression in a generally positive environment.

Offline Political Engagement

Facebook is a platform that also fosters political engagement among its users beyond the online interface. During the 2008 presidential election, the effects on group membership, political engagement, and political knowledge were examined (Feezell, Conroy, & Guerrero, 2009). The study conducted content analysis of political group pages and also surveyed university undergraduates. The study found involvement in online political groups predicted offline political participation (Feezell et al., 2009). The research followed the 2008 election cycle, which is applicable to this study's examination of the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election.

Politics play a prominent role among users in the form of Facebook groups and group memberships. A study of online political group membership and offline political engagement observed the use of political group membership online and how it translated to political engagement offline among citizens (Conroy, Feezell, & Guerrero, 2012). The study concluded that online groups serve similar purposes of group civic function in real life. Political participation occurs both online and offline. Facebook cultivates a group dynamic surrounding politics that goes beyond online interaction (Conroy et al., 2012).

Instead of observing the dynamics of political Facebook groups, the researchers of the current study applied information surrounding offline political engagement to the amount of individual political Facebook posts. This led the researchers of the current study to the hypothesis regarding a potential relationship of people who post and offline political engagement.

H1: There will be a higher rate of voting among those who politically post compared to those who do not politically post.

Perceived Intelligence

There are a multitude of personal motivations behind why users engage in politics on Facebook. Macafee (2013) examined the motivations and political predispositions among political Facebook activity. The research observed the motivations behind political activity on Facebook whether it is for social purposes, informing friends or a form of self-expression. The results showed there are no relationships between the consumption of news from outside sources and Facebook activity (Macafee, 2013).

Going beyond politics, scholars investigated personality characteristics and the general motivations associated with Facebook use. Previous studies suggested that certain attributes of personality such as extraversion and openness contribute to posting and sharing on Facebook. However, the results of Ross, Orr, S., Sisic, Arseneault, Simmering, & Orr, R. (2009) showed that different personality characteristics were not as influential as previously thought. Instead, the overall motivation to communicate with others, share personal information, and seek acceptance via Facebook was more significant. A different study also supported this claim by suggesting that people use Facebook to fulfill a sense of belonging by presenting oneself through posting photos and personal information that is found on one's Facebook wall (Seidman, 2013).

Beyond the desire to feel accepted and connected, research indicated that the expression of one's "true self" could be a large motivator. The "true self...are characteristics that a person possesses but does not regularly exhibit" (Seidman, 2014). One particular study examined Facebook profiles as an extension to one's desire to express the "true self." The results suggested that people displaying their "true self" on Facebook tended to be more active and post more personal information (Seidman, 2014). These results could suggest the motivation behind why people post about politics. By aiming to showcase their "true self", political posts could be used to demonstrate an advocacy for politics.

However, there was a gap in the research due to an absence of perceived intelligence as a motivator for posting on Facebook. This idea ties in the "true self" identity because many users strive to put their best self forward on social media and political posts are no exception. This led researchers of the current study to examine the role perceived intelligence plays in terms of the motivations behind posting about politics.

H2: There will be a higher rate of political posts on Facebook among those who perceive themselves as intelligent.

Motivations

In terms of political discussion, oftentimes the quality of conversation falls under the categories of positive or negative. Users either support other users' political discourse and content or users comment on a disagreement between political stances. Kushin & Kitchener (2009) explored how Facebook serves as a platform for general political discussion. The study observed the quality of political discussion whether comments were negative or even uncivil. The results of the study showcased a deeper look into political Facebook posts. Rather than observing group discussion or frequency of posts, the study observed the overall discourse used when politics were involved on Facebook. For the most part, political discourse had great potential to turn negative but rarely did conversation turn uncivil among users (Kushin, & Kitchener, 2009). This study was conducted in 2009 and since then the political environment has shifted, along with the way users share and interact with opinions online.

Thorson (2014) supported Kushin and Kitchener's findings by further studying how users react to political Facebook posts. In particular, Thorson (2014) explored the political engagement of young Facebook users and audience receptions to political posts. Both studies found that audiences interact with political posts on Facebook in either a negative or positive way. The findings of both studies provided insight as to why users might feel compelled to politically post on Facebook. Through positive feedback from the online community, users may feel they are informing their social network. More than that, users could use political posts as a form of self-expression to generate online discussion. However, if discussion and reaction become negative, the findings shed light on why users may feel uncomfortable politically posting on Facebook. In

order to avoid conflict, unwanted attention or controversy, certain users may not post about politics.

Roverston, Vatrappu, & Medina (2010) took a different approach in their research by examining why Facebook was used in the 2008 U.S. Presidential Election. Patterns and interpretations of online political engagement showed that users and candidates both benefitted from the use of Facebook (Roverston et al., 2010). This particular source observed how candidates and voters used Internet tools to gain or spread information about politics. Candidates used social networking to promote ideas and gain votes and donations. The study also indicated that voters used the Internet to learn about candidates, get involved with causes, and share general information (Roverston et al., 2010).

Finally, it was important to understand the encompassing impact of Facebook on political communication. Facebook is an instrumental outlet that supports politics and important causes. Westling (2007) looked at the overall significance of Facebook for its ability to connect people, especially in terms of forming “groups” on Facebook. The information showed that Facebook is a popular platform for politics due to the ability to easily communicate with others, share information and ideas, and connect with politicians and causes that interest users. This helped solidify why people are politically involved on Facebook. Due to this, the researchers of the current study were prompted to ask the research question.

RQ1: What are the primary motivations that people report for writing political posts on Facebook?

Method

Participants

Participants (n=134) found out about the study because the researchers posted the survey on multiple Pepperdine Facebook group pages. The participants volunteered to participate. Posting in Pepperdine Facebook group pages ensured that participants were only chosen from the population of Pepperdine University undergraduate students who use Facebook. Due to this, the study used a convenience sample. All genders and ethnicities were allowed to participate in the research study. The researchers distributed an online survey made through Google Forms. The survey was posted on the Pepperdine Class of [2018, 2019, 2020] Facebook pages, Pepperdine University Facebook page, Pepperdine International Programs Facebook groups, and Greek Life/Extracurricular Facebook groups. The survey was available online from November 18th to November 21st, at the end of which, the researchers gathered and analyzed the data.

Materials and Measures

Political Posts. To measure the variable of political posts, the researchers of this study constructed their own nominal statement. The participants were asked to answer yes or no. Rather than focus on the quantity or frequency of posts, the researchers measured how many people in general post political content on Facebook.

The nominal scale is as follows:

I post about politics on Facebook. (Yes/No)

Offline Political Participation. The researchers of this study measured offline political engagement by asking the nominal question, “Did you vote in the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election?” Rather than focus on a multitude of offline political engagement acts (such as involvement with political groups on/off campus, attending rallies/political events/protests,

signing a petition, etc.) the researchers focused solely on whether or not users voted in the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election.

Motivations. In order to measure Facebook users' motivations behind posting about politics, the researchers of this study posed a nominal question. Participants were asked, "Why do you write political posts on Facebook?" The researchers provided several options that aligned with the findings of the motivations behind posting on Facebook from previous research. The choices for writing political posts on Facebook included: To inform the online community, as a form of self-expression, to share personal views, to seek acceptance, and 'other'. The participants were given the opportunity to write in their own reason for posting through the 'other' option. The participants chose as many or as few options that applied to them.

Perceived Intelligence. Perceived Intelligence was measured using a series of four, five-point Likert Scales ranging from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree". The researchers of this study developed all of the scales used to measure perceived intelligence. The average responses for each scale were then averaged to create an overall score for perceived intelligence from 0-5.

Results

Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1 stated that there would be a higher rate of voting among those who politically posted in comparison to those who did not politically post. A mean difference analysis supported the hypothesis, demonstrating a relationship between the variables. The researchers found the more politically engaged users were, the more likely they were to vote in the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election. Of the respondents who politically posted, 84% voted in the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election. In comparison, of the respondents who did not politically post, 62.5% voted in the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election. Therefore, hypothesis 1 was supported.

Hypothesis 2 stated that there would be a higher rate of political posts on Facebook among those who perceived themselves as intelligent. A mean difference analysis did not support the hypothesis, demonstrating no relationship between the variables. Respondents who reported to politically posting had a slightly higher ($M=4.4$, $SD=0.56$) average than respondents who did not politically post ($M=4.15$, $SD=0.53$). Although the respondents who reported to posting politically had a higher perceived intelligence score than the respondents who reported they did not politically post, the differences and standard deviations were insignificant. Therefore, the hypothesis was not supported.

Research Question

Research question 1 asked, "What are the primary motivations that people report for writing political posts on Facebook?" The researchers found 14.9% of respondents reported both informing the online community and self-expression as the most important motivators behind writing political posts on Facebook. 9.7% of respondents reported sharing personal information/social/political views as a motivator behind politically posting. 7.5% of respondents reported comedy as motivator and no respondents reported seeking acceptance as a motivator behind politically posting.

Discussion

Significant Findings and Implications

Hypotheses. Hypothesis 1 was supported based on the research findings. There was a higher rate of voting among respondents who politically posted in comparison to respondents who did not politically post. This showed that in this particular study, respondents who were already engaged in politics online furthered their engagement offline and voted in the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election. This finding supported Conroy et al. (2012) in that Facebook cultivates a dynamic surrounding politics that goes beyond online interaction (Conroy et al., 2012).

Hypothesis 2 was not supported based on the research findings. There was not a higher rate of political posts on Facebook among respondents who perceived themselves as intelligent. The implications of the lack of support could be attributed to the ways the researchers decided to limit the variable of perceived intelligence to politics. Intelligence can be measured in countless ways and applied to countless topics. It is not limited solely to academics or politics. Many respondents felt intelligent but it is possible that they did not believe that politically posting on Facebook reaffirmed or even showcased their intelligence in any way.

As for the research question, this provided valuable insight to the motivations behind politically posting on Facebook. The primary motivations that users report for writing political posts on Facebook were to inform the online community and for self-expression. These responses ran parallel to the overarching purposes of Facebook, which is for users to share information with each other and express themselves. Based on the findings, the reasons for using Facebook are not limited to generalities but play into politics as well.

Strengths and Weaknesses

The key strength of this study was the topic of political consumption on Facebook. Since this study was conducted in the month of the 2016 presidential election, it proved to be a topical matter in society's current political arena. Using college students as participants was also a strength of this study. Millennials tend to be the demographic that uses social media as a means for gaining information. In general, this study contributed information about the use of Facebook for political consumption and engagement among college students.

Another strength of the study was the variables that were under consideration. Although hypothesis 2 surrounding perceived intelligence and the rate of political posts on Facebook were not supported, it has the potential to play a prominent role in political posts. The other variables of voting and motivations were supported and both are fundamental contributors to the political arena.

As for weaknesses, there were numerous limitations of this study. The convenient sampling method that the researchers used caused the sample to be unrepresentative of the overall population of Pepperdine University. Researchers only posted on Pepperdine Facebook groups of which they were members. Due to this, there were numerous other Pepperdine Facebook groups that were not used in the study and the members' input could have greatly contributed to the study. Specifically, looking at Student Government groups on campus would have been an interesting demographic to receive input from in terms of how politically geared students interact with Facebook.

Another weakness was the measurement of variables. There were limited statements on the survey so the variables did not have multiple opportunities to be measured in various ways. No correlational measurements could be made. Due to this, the researchers had to rely on mean analyses. Although hypothesis 1 was supported, the results of hypothesis 2 were so close together that no distinct conclusions could be drawn.

A limitation to this study was the social media outlet for political posts was limited solely to Facebook. Twitter is another prominent platform for political consumption; however, the outlet was neither considered nor used.

The timing of the survey also played a role in the survey's results. The survey was available in the weeks that followed the results of the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election. The researchers think many political posts took place after the election and in the months leading up to the election. However, the researchers only asked respondents about the political posts they posted in the month prior to the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election. The wording left out respondents who posted up until the final month before the election because they already decided which candidate they would be voting for and did not feel compelled to politically post anymore.

Future Direction

The results of this study can be generalized to Pepperdine undergraduate students. Although the results are limited to a single university, they have the potential to guide future research at other colleges and universities.

Possible future studies could include a replication of the current study with more precision and accuracy for measuring the variables under study. A content analysis of users' Facebook profiles and political posts could provide valuable insight to the type of posts users contribute, the quantity of posts over an extended period of time, and the frequency of political posts. A qualitative approach could be to use focus groups of college-aged students to gain personal insight as to how users feel about posting about politics on Facebook. This could also generate further discussion about other social media outlets being used for political consumption.

Conclusions

The focus of this study is important because social media serves as an evolving platform for political consumption. This study found respondents who were already engaged in politics online furthered their engagement offline and voted in the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election. The findings also revealed that perceived intelligence did not play a significant role in the rate of political posts on Facebook. The responses showed that users report the primary reasons for writing political posts on Facebook were to inform the online community and for self-expression. The findings of this study provide a foundation for further research revolving around the topic of social media as a channel for politics.

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Appendix

Survey

1. Please answer the following on a scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree: I see myself as intelligent.
2. Please answer the following on a scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree: It is important to me that my peers perceive me as intelligent.
3. Please answer the following on a scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree: It is important to me that I perceive myself as intelligent.
4. Please answer the following on a scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree: I feel comfortable sharing my opinion of Facebook.
5. Please answer the following on a scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree: I feel comfortable sharing my political opinions with others.
6. Please answer the following on a scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree: I see myself as politically informed.
7. I post about politics on Facebook.
 Yes
 No
8. Please answer the following on a scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree: It is important to me that I inform others about politics on Facebook.
9. Please answer the following on a scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree: I consider my political standpoint to be a part of my identity.

10. In the month before the November 8th election, I posted _____ posts of political content (self-authored content and shared posts) on Facebook.

0

1-5

6-10

11-15

16+

11. Did you vote in the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election?

Yes

No

12. Gender

Female

Male

Other

13. Please specify your ethnicity.

White

Hispanic or Latino

Black or African American

Native American or American Indian

Asian/Pacific Islander

Other

14. Why do you write political posts on Facebook?

Informing online community (friends and family)

Form of self-expression

Share personal information/social/political views

Seek acceptance

Comedy

I do not post about politics on Facebook

Other

Motivations

