

Do social networking sites increase voter turnout among youths?

Introduction

Many see a possible cure for the decline in political participation among youths in social networking sites (SNS). The potential for interactivity inherent in SNS, like Facebook and Twitter, combined with their popularity among young people, makes this connection easy to make.

We contend, on the other hand, that the connection between SNS and political participation is unsubstantiated by hard research. While it is impossible to ignore the vast potential in SNS, we believe that the true value in these sites may lie in their ability to organize and motivate individuals who are already interested in a cause or candidate. We hope to show that **young individuals who do not display a previous affinity for political activity are not enticed by political messages on SNS.**

The primary method used in this project is a self-report survey distributed to 18-24 year old college students. An analysis of the survey results will attempt to show that American youths do not generally use SNS for political purposes. However, an improvement in survey design and sample selection may lead to more generalizable data. Our research hopes to bring attention to the unrealized potential in social networking sites and, lead to new ways to utilize them.

Literature Review

Gulati and Williams(2007) found that Senate and House candidates who utilized Facebook attracted an average number of 2,164 supporters and 125 supporters, respectively.

Gulati and Williams also found that incumbents added 1.1% to their vote share by doubling his or her number of supporters on Facebook, open seat candidates added 3%. However, **there is a diminishing return associated with adding more supporters**, making the net effect unsubstantial.

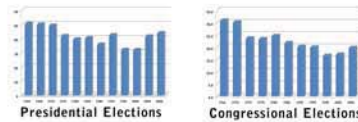
Xenos and Bennett(2007) found that candidates, and their websites, neither appealed to youths in particular nor did they sufficiently link youths to active political engagement. Increases in youth political involvement should be attributed to closely-contested elections and intensive canvassing campaigns.

A Pew 2009 study found that **young adults are the least likely age group to engage in political acts online**, even though that age group uses the Internet more than any other age group. Thus, young adults do not necessarily have any innate propensity to use the Internet politically once online.

The Pew study also found that among internet users, those aged 65 and older are roughly three times more likely to contact a government official via email as are those aged 18 to 24 (35% vs. 13%). In addition, only 18% of 18-to-24 year olds engage in two or more acts of political participation online.

Bimber and Davis(2003) found that **citizens' viewing of candidates' web sites had no impact on their decisions about whether to vote or their vote preference.**

Voting Trends Among Youth



Research Questions

RQ1: Do SNS increase the political participation of youths who are not politically active?

H1: SNS are ineffective in extending the participation of these people.

RQ2: Do SNS increase the political participation of youths who are politically active?

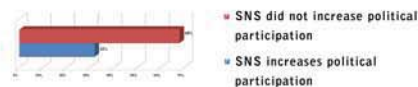
H2: SNS are effective in extending the participation of these people.

Method

Our preliminary research utilizes a simple survey of nine questions. The survey was administered to 100 young adults aged 18-24 via an Internet survey website. The participants were asked to self-report their personal interests and behaviors related to both social networking site use and political activity. Due to practical constraints, our initial sample of young adults was one of convenience. We distributed the survey electronically to friends and acquaintances, most of whom are college educated. This has the obvious potential for creating an unrepresentative sample, i.e. overly educated and technologically savvy. In our proposed formal research study, we would distribute a paper survey and seek a more representative sample of participants. Once we collected all of the responses from our preliminary sample of participants, we analyzed the results in order to evaluate our hypotheses. The findings can be seen in the Results section.

Survey Results

In the preliminary survey, a large number of participants responded that SNS does not increase their political participation.



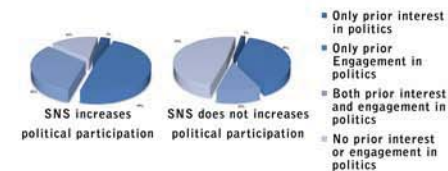
Findings

From the survey results, we found a correlation between having either prior interest in politics, having been engaged in politics or both and the effectiveness of SNS in increasing political participation. Of the participants who said that SNS increases their political participation:

- 84% had prior interest or involvement in politics
- 16% had no prior interest or involvement in politics

Of the participants who said that SNS does not increase their political participation:

- 51% had prior interest or involvement in politics
- 49% had no prior interest or involvement in politics



The results show that if a participant had prior interest or engagement in politics, they are more likely to increase their political participation with SNS. If a participant did not previously express interest or engage in politics, they will less likely find that SNS increase their political participation.

Conclusion

Based on our research and our preliminary survey results, we would expect to find that **SNS are only effective in extending the political participation of those who are politically active.** If our hypotheses are correct, then a politician, or any individual or group seeking more supporters for that matter, would benefit from rethinking his/her strategy.

Since we contend that SNS have the potential to gain supporters for an individual or cause, another study on how to use these sites effectively would be valuable. For example, it would be advantageous to study if SNS accounts should be used to gain the support of a small number of highly connected people in a network, rather than attempting to win over everyone in the network at once. SNS are immensely popular. Thus, studies that determine their utility and how to maximize their utility are of importance to those whose success depends on the support of others.

Emily Gibson

Michael Rudroff

Michelle Dumont

Research Mentors: Dr Mary Cassata

Amanda Damiano