Impact of Social Media on Political Participation and Campaigns

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December 14, 2015

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Abstract

Internet and social media have drastically changed the political landscape. Social media has become the central form of communications with distinctly different properties than traditional mass media approaches. The 2008 and 2012 presidential elections in the U.S. and the recent 2014 India elections saw an exponential rise in social media engagement by candidates and their political campaigns. As voters massively shift towards Internet for social interaction and political participation, candidates can no longer afford to only create Facebook pages. The use of the various social media platforms has to be well planned and strategized to garner maximum participation. Social media platforms are the news tools of political voice. These tools are empowering younger demographic to connect with political candidates directly and engage in peer-to-peer discussions about the elections. Through the constant sharing of knowledge and distribution of ideas, social media users in turn are encouraging other voters to take active participation in the election. This article examines the various social media platforms and strategies adopted by Barack Obama and India's current Prime Minister Narendra Modi to mobilize voters and how they continued to lead the elections making them the most social media savvy political candidates.

Introduction

The advent of social media has been touted as a revolutionary way for politicians to connect directly with voters and engage in online political discussions (Grant, Moon, & Grant, 2010). Social media use grew in leaps and bounds from 2008 to 2012 presidential campaigns. The use of social networking sites is increasingly widespread in political campaigns and among voters. For example, about 10 million tweets were posted during the first presidential debate and 20 million tweets were posted on the Election Day using the #election2012 hashtag, making it the most tweeted event in the U.S. political history (Zhang, Seltzer, & Bichard, 2013). Social media function

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as alternative channels of communication and through networking, connecting and sharing of ideas and knowledge, social media is playing the role of an influencer. Hence, there definitely appears to be a link between social media and election outcomes (LaMarre & Lambrecht, 2013).

The 2008 U.S. presidential elections marked a significant shift in political campaigning, as Obama campaign made unprecedented use of social media. In 2011, the incumbent President Barack Obama publicly announced his reelection bid with a YouTube video and a tweet. The digital video was emailed to the 13 million online backers who helped power his historic campaign in 2008 (Huffington Post, 2011). The emphasis on different mediums of social media during the campaigns reflects the candidates increasing presence in people's daily lives and their potential role in facilitating more direct and interactive communication between politicians and citizens (Gerodimos & Justinussen, 2014). Similarly, the current Indian Prime Minister, Narendra Modi understood the power of social media and utilized the open-access internet platforms to connect, build conversations, share and mobilize opinion. For the first time in India's history, social media played an important role in 2014 national election and Modi's aggressive use of social media has regarded him as 'India's First Social Media Prime Minister'. Modi, is in fact the second most followed politician on Twitter with 16.2 million followers after Barack Obama whose current follower base is 66.3 million.

In both these cases, other than the traditional platforms, social media appeared to be the most immediate and reliable platform to connect with citizens, interact with them directly and make information accessible to public at large. This paper looks at how social media encouraged active political participation and campaigns, the all-encompassing use of social media platforms by Obama and Modi to engage and how social media acted as an influencer for citizens to form decisions and ultimately decide the outcome of the elections.

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Influence of social media in Obama's Presidential Campaigns

The 2008 U.S. presidential election and the Obama campaign in particular made history. For the first time, an African American was voted into office, the campaign in many ways was organized like a social movement, young voters turned out to the polls in the highest numbers since 1972 and it was also arguably the first 'social media' election given the role of internet and new digital technologies (Takaragawa & Carty, 2012). By capitalizing on content of 'hope' and 'change', transmitted through new media forms which privileged horizontal information flow, the Obama campaign specifically appealed to and mobilized the millennial demographic (Takaragawa & Carty, 2012). An estimated twenty-three million young Americans under thirty years of age voted in the 2008 (Tisch, 2008). In 2008, the Obama staff specifically targeted youth not only to vote, but more importantly to participate in the campaign by serving as recruiters, fundraisers, mobilizers and canvassers. By creating opportunities the campaign not only appealed to but also mobilized this demographic through language they understood and harnessing the familiar territory via social networking sites including Facebook, MySpace and Twitter (Takaragawa & Carty, 2012). The use of digital forms of technology was extensive in political campaigns by 2008. Blogs, social networks, text messaging, email lists, candidate's web pages, social networking sites, photo and video sharing sites were enormously used to reach, inform and mobilize supporters (Takaragawa & Carty, 2012). The creation of Obama's own social networking site, myBarackObama.com (MyBO) provided detailed information and channeled people to the specific activities and causes that were deemed most important to fulfill the campaign's electoral strategy (Lutz, 2009). Towards the end of the campaign in 2008, there were two million active users of MyBO and the site raised over $200 million (Ambinder, 2008). The Obama team intertwined MyBO, the Internet and other media platforms into every aspect of the political

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organizing efforts and far surpassed those of Republican contender, John McCain's (Takaragawa & Carty, 2012). In scholar's and political analyst's perspectives, McCain's campaign was as social-media-deaf as Obama's was social-media-savvy in 2008 elections.

With every presidential election, the role and impact of the Internet grows. In 2012, so-called 'social media,' such as Facebook, Twitter and the likes, have become a prominent means of political communication. The changes from 2008 go beyond the candidates adding social media channels. In 2012, the Obama campaign focused on customizing information had localized its digital messaging significantly, adding dedicated state-by-state content pages filled with local information. Importantly, Obama's campaign had largely eliminated a role for the mainstream press. Back in 2008, the Obama campaign used press clips to validate his candidacy. The website no longer featured a "news" section with recent media reports. The only news of the day came directly from the Obama campaign itself. Overall in 2012, the Obama campaign made its digital messaging more targeted, voters played an increasingly large role in helping to communicate campaign messages, while the role of the traditional news media as an authority or validator had only lessened. (Pew Research Center, 2012). Online political campaigns have also become more efficient at improving reception and acceptance of political messages. This is effectively done when individuals see information diffused through low-threshold activities by supporters, for example, seeing content shared by peers (Vaccari, 2013). According to Pew Research Center (2012), social media platforms have also become a notable venue for people to try to convince their friends to vote. For 2012 presidential elections, 30% of registered voters were encouraged to vote for Democrat Barack Obama or Republican Mitt Romney by family and friends via posts on social media such as Facebook or Twitter. And 20% of registered voters encouraged others to vote by posting on a social networking site such as Facebook or Twitter. The Obama Campaign

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strategically mapped out and made concerted efforts to mobilize young people, which changed the game and really worked well in his favor. Moreover, Obama's targeted approach to reach out to the ethnic groups and minorities also played a significant role to help him get votes. Other than the issues that resonated with the public in general, both Obama and Romney also included lighter and more personal videos, including live chats with supporters, humorous mashups and montages from family films to keep the engagement going. The Obama team filled its campaign's news blog with citizen content, which was also a driving factor in determining Obama's win in 2012 election. The Obama campaign gave high priority to citizen voices and four-in-ten posts (42%) were written by citizens, while the rest which were written by the staff included quotes from citizens (Pew Research Center, 2012). The citizen contributions in the blog gave descriptive accounts of how they became involved in the campaign and shared personal stories of how particular policies initiated by Obama had positive impacts in their lives.

Digital technology allowed leaders to engage in a new level of conversation with voters, transforming the campaigning into something more dynamic, more of a dialogue than it was in the 20th century (Pew Research Center, 2012). In 2012 elections, journalists played a smaller role in shaping what voters heard about the presidential candidates, as campaign updates directly came from the political partisans (State of News Media, 2013). Social networking via the Internet serves as an impetus for increasing voter participation (Gainous & Wagner, 2011). The tools used for increasing social media usage has proved to be effective and has transformed the ways campaigns are being conducted. For example, raising campaign funds online which makes candidates less dependent on traditional fundraising networks. In 2012, Obama relied more on small donations through online networks compared to 2008, when he raised a larger proportion of his money from wealthy donors before grass-roots supporters drove his fundraising. Majority of the mainstream

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media outlets such as Guardian, New York Times, Huffington Post and Al Jazzera have reported on the central role of social media in the 2012 political campaigns to communicate, attract younger votes, raise funds at extremely low costs and wide-ranging outreach efforts. Twitter especially played a significant role in shifting the 24-hours news cycle to a 140-character one. Twitter and Facebook were considered the biggest avenues for online canvassing in 2012, with their broad demographic reach and user numbers that had grown tenfold from four years ago (New York Times, 2012). Facebook's core purpose of connecting people was appropriated by the Obama campaign as it sought to emulate the interpersonal connectivity that is native to the platform (Gerodimos & Justinussen, 2014). Social buttons such as 'like', 'comment' and 'share', enabled dissemination, exposure and citizen dialogue, thereby empowering them to make well-informed decisions.

India's first social media elections and India's first social media Prime Minister

Until recently, the campaign strategies of political parties had centered largely on public rallies, print, television and radio advertising. The proliferation of internet and smartphones witnessed by the nation in the past few years has prompted politicians to look at the potential of the online medium to mobilize netizens. India's 2014 national elections will be remembered especially because social media platforms which have contended with government censorship since 2011, became vital political campaign tools and a place for free political expression and organizing (Quartz, 2014). During the 2009 national election, social media usage in India was minuscule. However as of March 2014, Facebook has 93 million users and Twitter has an estimated 33 million accounts in the country (BBC, 2014). This was India's first election with such large-scale usage of technology, open-access internet platforms to connect, build conversations, share, mobilize opinion, and citizen action. The current Prime Minister, Narendra Modi saw this

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firsthand and had the first-mover advantage in using these technology tools to reach out to India's

huge youth demographic (Quartz, 2014). Modi led one of the most ambitious, presidential-style

election campaigns in Indian history, mobilizing an army of volunteers across India and running a

24-hour war room that helped him dominate social media and tailor his messages. According to

Twitter India, Modi dominated 20 percent of all election-related chatter on Twitter, with 11.1

million mentions between January and May 2014 (Washington Post, 2014). Social media helped

bypass the mainstream media and played an important role in reaching out to people.

Many aspects of Modi's campaign were directly inspired by Obama's winning tactics.

From the beginning, Modi ran the campaign like a US presidential election and took a

commanding, front-row seat in building a community and driving engagement. As the national

campaign momentum picked up, Modi's fan base increased by 28.7% crossing 14 million fans by

May 12—the second most 'liked' politician on Facebook after Obama (Quartz, 2014). The figure
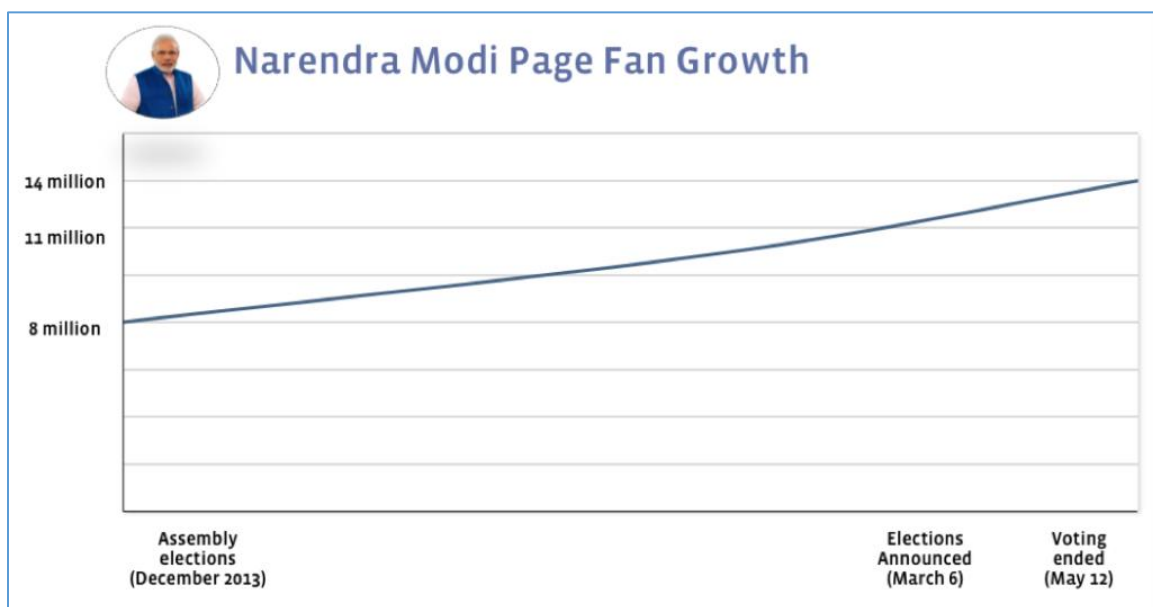
below illustrates Modi's follower growth.

Figure 1. Modi's Facebook Follower Growth (Quartz, 2014)

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Taking cues from Obama's Google Hangout success which included an "Ask Me Anything" Q&A session, Modi also participated in similar Google Hangout sessions, which were then viewed by millions of people on TV and web. Similarly, based on MyBO, Modi's campaign also launched the NaMo store (Narendra Modi Store) online to entice voters. Modi's campaign used a two-pronged approach to social media: increase its online presence while also helping in its offline activities. In a program called 'organize online to assist offline', the campaign used the reach of social media to recruit volunteers, eventually enlisting 2.2 million (Voice of America, 2014). While platforms such as like Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and WhatsApp were effectively utilized, Twitter and Facebook in particular helped break down information barriers between politicians and voters, allowing them to better understand the candidates and the issues they were promoting. Additionally, Modi's team crowd-sourced its manifesto with hundreds of thousands of people using Twitter and blogs to comment, resulting into a lot of those suggestions being incorporated in the manifesto (Voice of America, 2014). In India, 29 million people conducted 227 million interactions such as posts, comments, shares, and likes regarding the elections on Facebook and 13 million people engaged in 75 million interactions regarding Modi (Quartz, 2014). On each day of polling, Facebook ran an alert to its users in India informing them about the Election Day and encouraging them to share that they voted and this message was seen by over 31 million Indian voters (Quartz, 2014).

India is one of the world's youngest countries with 50% of its population still under 30, something was that reflected in the 150 million first time voters aged between 18 and 23 in the 2014 national elections (Time, 2014). As a voting class, the young Indians have traditionally been apolitical, however in 2014 elections, the youthful voters participated actively in organizing Google Hangouts, opinion surveys and other initiatives to help young voters make informed

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choices for the elections. Targeting most of the young voters through Facebook, Modi connected, initiated conversations and heard their concerns about three most pressing issues: need to provide better jobs, education and combating corruption. Modi addressed these concerns across every election rally to larger audiences with his unique 3D projection technology which enabled him to be in several places at the same time. Using social media, Modi also appealed to the younger audience to 'update your country first before you update your statuses'. Modi's targeted messaging on topics such as economic growth, development, modernization and digitization and technology resonated well with the audience that helped him win votes. As India' internet populace grew to 80 million, digital campaigning gained importance in an election where the young - first-time voters, in particular made up a large part of the electorate and traditional media began reporting on the online debate (Financial Times, 2014). On winning the elections, Modi took to Twitter to announce his triumph and his victory tweet, 'India has won. India's victory. Good days lie ahead', became India's most shared tweet and was retweeted more than 70,000 times (Forbes, 2014). Following his victory, Modi embraced the power of social media asserts that social media should be used to communicate with people across the world. Since Modi assumed power in May 2014 as leader of the world's largest democracy, foreign and domestic policy pronouncements have come in 140-character snippets. He has used Twitter and other social media services to engage in diplomacy, build his image and be more transparent with Indian citizens. According to social media experts and political analysts, while the 2014 elections in India saw a glimpse of social media being used, it will be the 2019 elections where its power will be fully utilized, political parties will have fully understood the significance of reaching out to the people in urban and rural India via social media platforms.

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Conclusion

Cell phones and the wide-ranging social media platforms are therefore playing an increasingly prominent role in how voters get political information and follow election news. The ways in which Obama campaign utilized social media changed American politics and the recent elections in India depicted how online campaign received phenomenal attention. As more and more citizens are consuming news online, social media provides new space for people to build political dialogue through individual interaction. Gainous and Wagner in Rebooting American Politics, argues the importance of using techniques and tools like cutting edge data analytics and voter targeting tools to benefit the election campaign. These tools and techniques reaffirm that the Internet and social media are the crucial part of campaign as politicians could reach out to enormous amount of people, listen to their thoughts, monitor people's response to politics and modify their campaign strategies accordingly. This direct dialogue and two-way interaction with voters helps candidates build lasting relationships and gain trust and support. Both Obama and Modi embraced the basic mechanisms of Internet and social media platforms such as openness and transparency that helped them mobilize, empower supporters and ultimately succeed the elections. Modi's win in 2014 elections was regarded as the landmark election victory in India's history, as his party won the biggest victory by any party for the past 30 years. The strategies adopted by Obama and Modi illustrates social media's influence in civic and political behavior and acts as a powerful medium in the future elections for reinvigorating democracy.

With the ongoing debates and campaigning for the forthcoming 2016 presidential elections, we are seeing how social media is playing a major role yet again, as voters are watching the debates, live tweeting during the show and creating a dialogue about what they like or dislike about the candidates and their policies. With many new technologies coming into play, such as Periscope

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which was used by the newly elected Canadian Prime Minister, Justin Trudeau, to show his swearing-in ceremony live to the citizens, it will be interesting to see how live streaming and online ads will make a big impact in the upcoming 2016 election results.

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