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Use of Social Media in Presidential Campaigns: Do Social Media Have an Effect on the Political Behavior of Voters Aged 18-24?

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Introduction

On February 10, 2007 a relatively unknown junior Senator from Illinois announced his candidacy for president. Almost 20 months later, that unknown senator was elected President of the United States. Barack Obama's presidential campaign was unorthodox (Simba 2009). As Simba (2009) noted, Obama's campaign success had frequently been credited to his public speaking and ability to inspire. However, his use of the Internet and social media to engage new voters provided Obama with a level of support that most candidates never see.

The Obama campaign not only revolutionized how campaigns reached out to their audiences, but it also affected how they fundraised. Simba (2009) pointed out that Obama outspent his Republican opponent after years of Republican candidates outspending Democratic candidates. The use of the Internet as a fundraising tool led to a remarkably high number of small denomination donations from a group of voters who had never previously been engaged in the political process (Simba 2009).

Although Barack Obama's campaign marked the most successful use of new and social media by a presidential candidate, it certainly did not mark the first. Howard Dean's 2004 bid for the Democratic presidential nomination offered the country a glimpse into what Internet campaigning was capable of producing. Murray (2005) stated that Howard Dean's rise to fame was centered on his use of new and social media. Much like Barack Obama after him, Dean was unknown prior to announcing his candidacy. By disseminating his message through new and social media, Dean was able to mobilize a new group of supporters. These supporters thrived on the ease that the Internet provided in making a donation, getting information, or coordinating an event (Murray 2005).

While Internet use was the main factor in setting Dean's campaign apart from

point scale. The first dependent variable was the likelihood that the participant would vote in the upcoming election where the candidate that (s)he read about in the candidate brochure was on the ballot. Intention to vote was measured by the following question:

On a scale of 1-5 with 1=Strongly Disagree and 5=Strongly Agree, how much do you agree with the following statement: I would vote in this election.

The second dependent variable is the respondent's likelihood of voting for the candidate and is measured by the question:

On a scale of 1-5 with 1=Strongly Disagree and 5=Strongly Agree, how much do you agree with the following statement: I would vote for John Smith in this election.

Analysis and Results

The hypotheses lend themselves to be tested using an analysis of variance (ANOVA) statistical analysis. I analyzed whether either of the experimentally manipulated factors (focusing mainly on presence or absence of social media) or their interaction, had a statistically significant effect on voter participation or voter choice. Given the limited sample size, conclusions were drawn with caution.

I expected that the presence of social media would cause a significant increase on both voter participation and positive voter choice. However, prior to analyzing my data it was important to recognize that candidate party could play a role in lowering the significance of my results. For example, a respondent may not have had a positive likelihood for voting for a candidate because they did not agree with the ideology or issue positions of a particular candidate regardless of their social media use.

My results did find that participants rely heavily on social media in order to gain information on political candidates. However, the vast majority of respondents utilized Facebook

Although both of my original hypotheses were not supported, there still seems to be room for further research regarding the influence of social media on young voters during presidential campaigns. The nature of new and social media are that they are constantly changing and evolving. As such, new research constantly has to be completed in order to effectively measure their impact. Future extensions of this study would need to consider both sample and survey design in order to appropriately expand upon my findings. A more representative sample, broadening the age range of 18-24 year olds to 18-98 year olds is in order. A sample of college students aged 18-24 is problematic in that this age group is younger and therefore lacks experience in the political realm. In addition, the characteristics of this sample group may tend to bias the results.

When expanding on this study, it would be helpful to include a two-candidate presentation. This will provide an opportunity for participants to directly compare two candidates—this would be more realistic of actual elections. A two candidate race could either be inter-party (i.e. one republican and one democrat), or intra-party (a primary setting with either two republicans or two democrats). In each setting one candidate would utilize social media, while the other would not use social media. For the primary campaign design, this would allow the participant to directly evaluate candidates with similar beliefs, with the only experimental manipulation being social media use.

Social media has made an impact on the world of political campaigns. Regardless of whether the impact is positive or negative, in the case of Republican candidates, does not change the fact that social media clearly does influence young voters aged 18-24. This study simply illustrated that social media usage by candidates is not always a good thing. While the campaigns of Barack Obama and Howard Dean have shown the positives of utilizing social media in

engaging previously underutilized young voters, the findings of this study show the negatives that can be associated with it. It is important to recognize that however popular it may be becoming, social media usage by presidential candidates is not always the most effective way to reach young voters; and in some cases, its use can actually be detrimental.

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	Strongly Disagree 1	Disagree 2	Neutral 3	Agree 4	Strongly Agree 5
I take the advice of friends before voting for a political candidate.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I look at political candidate's web pages.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
If a candidate wants to appeal to me, he/she should use social media (Facebook, Twitter, blogs, etc.).	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I read political blogs.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Information presented on the Internet about political candidates is generally true.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I would follow a candidate of a different political party than myself on social media sites (Facebook, Twitter, blogs, etc.).	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

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