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Strategies for Increasing Political Participation via Social Media

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Abstract

In the digital age, social media has emerged as a powerful tool for enhancing political participation among diverse populations. This research explores various strategies that leverage social media platforms to engage citizens in the political process, particularly during elections and civic initiatives. By analyzing case studies of successful campaigns, the study identifies key elements that drive engagement, including targeted messaging, interactive content, and community-building efforts. The role of algorithms in shaping political discourse is also examined, highlighting both opportunities and challenges in reaching marginalized groups. Additionally, the research discusses the importance of digital literacy in empowering users to navigate online information critically and participate meaningfully. Strategies such as grassroots mobilization, influencer partnerships, and the use of multimedia storytelling are proposed to foster a more informed and active electorate. Ultimately, the study argues that effective use of social media can not only increase voter turnout but also cultivate a culture of civic engagement that transcends traditional barriers to participation. This research aims to provide actionable insights for policymakers, activists, and educators seeking to harness the potential of social media for democratic engagement.

Keywords

political participation, social media, civic engagement, digital literacy, grassroots mobilization, targeted messaging, community-building, voter turnout

1. Introduction to Social Media and Political Participation

Political participation has been identified in different ways since the 1950s, ranging from directly contacting politicians to wearing or showing campaign materials. However, in the light of these narrow definitions of political participation, it became evident that political participation could no longer be limited to activities directly related to political parties. The growth of various types of channels within the participation of new groups of actors and the increasing erosion of barriers between the political and the non-political spheres forced the search for more elaborate definitions. Social media platforms play a significant role in this search. It has been offered new opportunities and forms of political participation.

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In many countries, it is believed that politicians, public institutions, and political parties, as well as newspapers and the internet media, are the most important sources of information on politics and government activities. It is very important to act as a good citizen in a democratic society and some form of political participation is needed to protect citizens' rights and legal interests in the political and social sense. Therefore, political participation is recognized as the main requirement of the democratic governance, and the effort of safeguarding the level of participation became an integral part of the policy of developed democratic states. In most circumstances, political participation only refers to those channels that enable citizens to directly influence decisions made by governments. Political participation is evaluated by the behavior of citizens expressing their involvement in the management of public affairs. Broadly speaking, political participation is the way in which citizens contribute to the activities that determine the choice of politicians and/or government officials. Voting, attending political rallies and campaign activities, calling for legal protests or other political interests are just a few forms of political participation. In short, citizens who actively participate in the political process use various forms of action to present their differing policies or opinions. Political participation involves freedom of speech, press and publication; the right of association, assembly, procession and demonstration; the right to contest a local legislative, administrative or judicial election; the right to take up public employment, and the right to join a trade union. Social media can play a vital role in increasing civic engagement, political efficacy, and political participation (Pepra Djan, 2019). All of these are seen as the five vital tools needed to convey an important message about political actions, ideas and proposals and to elicit a comprehensive response to political mobilizations. In order to be able to practice those actions effectively and appropriately, it is necessary that every individual be a well-informed and active participant in the political process. In recent years, there has been a structural transformation of the traditional technologies used in political communication and their gradual replacement by new technologies, which is considered to be evidence of the influence of Western democracies. It is believed that this will reveal important changes in the behavior of political actors and, as a result, in the shaping of political discourse. It is expected that new forms of technology will contribute to information exchanges, which will create a broader public dialogue. At the same time, the increase in the speed of information flow is expected to increase by allowing the participation of the general public through powerful interactivity tools. This situation helped to revitalize the political process and created the expectation that a new, more participatory democratic structure would come to the fore through the development of democracy. After the detailed analysis of some research findings on the use of social

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media in the way of civic, political campaigning, and advocacy in relation to its impact on political participation, the research results will be compared with the findings on the strategies developed and proposed by different authors. The main influence of this article is to create an understanding of the fact that effective social media use is significantly influenced by certain strategies. (Kwon et al.2021)

1.1. Definition and Importance of Political Participation

Democracy is dependent on citizen involvement for its survival (Pepra Djan, 2019). As such, political engagement is critical to enabling a healthy democratic system. Political participation is essential for maintaining a democratic system and underlines the active role of the citizens in governmental and political activities. Political participation is an aspect of political behavior that highlights when, where, how, and to what extent individuals are involved in all political activities. The significance of political participation has been emphasized since democracies rely on the active participation of the individual citizens and institutions. Nonetheless, engaged citizenry can effect policy-making and holds the governing officials accountable. Political participation is often illustrated as an important civic duty or an element of civic responsibility that contributes to a beneficial and thriving community. Increasing the involvement of marginalized and underprivileged individuals in the governance process is seen as a means of guaranteeing that governance is more representative and responsible.

Avoidance of civic responsibility can lead to incorrect decisions being made by decision-makers. Furthermore, political engagement creates a "bind" among the citizen and state, and results in greater feelings of loyalty, shared obligation, and patriotism. Variables such as interest, education, occupation, and other facets of socioeconomic status have long been identified as determinants of political engagement. With reference to political participation, the poor and indigent are typically thought to be significantly less involved than the rich. Indeed, recent research underlines the concern that persons or organizations with limited resources, knowledge, or social relevance had less political engagement than their wealthier complements. (Le & Nguyen, 2021)

2. The Role of Social Media in Political Engagement

The interactive nature of social media platforms allows for real-time communication between citizens and political entities. Political actors and political parties have been able to use social media as a new tool for campaigning, opting to communicate information and engage with individuals, voters and society. Their two-way direction of communication differs from the traditional one in which the political actors used to impart their message to the audience in a top-down approach. The transformative impact that social media has in this way on traditional mechanisms of campaigning are still largely unknown and difficult to interpret. Social media has now allowed

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mobilizing quickly a large group of citizens not only for political, but also for other causes. On the other hand, the internet has a great potential to empower groups traditionally under-represented in orthodox mechanisms of political participation, having started to fill the gaps created because of the social, political and economic cost associated with participating in opinion formation and decision-making. Even watchdog activities, monitoring democratization processes, have been facilitated by the combined use of social media and the internet. Furthermore, lack of treatment on the digital divide issue, misinformation and fake news through social media have led to some deviations, undermining the potential positive effects on political participation and engagement. Following the rise of social media and its ever-increasing adoption, web metrics have been adapted to social media in order to measure and compare their impact and their influence in the cyberspace. Beyond standard engagement metrics, recent literature has proposed some other metrics to more thoroughly capture the role of social media in the public attention of political actors. Polarity analyses of these alternative metrics show a much more balanced impact of social media on different political groups than that suggested by conventional metrics. This contribution raises some questions about the dominant narrative on the importance of social media for political participation and activism, advocating for a more careful attention to the pattern of (dis)engagement across mobile and online platforms. The effectiveness and virality of online movements, collective actions and revolutions are often ascribed to the use of social media and digital platforms, as in the case of a significant event. Although the subsequent research on a major political event has questioned the original interpretation. (Kligler-Vilenchik et al.2021)

2.1. Advantages and Challenges of Using Social Media for Political Participation

Social media has emerged in the last ten years as a powerful tool for interacting, sharing ideas and building relationships. There is substantial evidence that it can also be used as a means to foster political engagement (Pepra Djan, 2019). Both decentralized protest movements, such as the Arab Spring, and highly controlled national election campaigns, such as the 2016 US Presidential elections, have seen social media used on an unprecedented scale to circumvent or manipulate official channels of communication. Social media has the potential to complement existing political systems but it also represents a threat to the status quo, which explains the increasing interest of world leaders for these new tools (A Ayankoya, 2013). As evidenced by a recent workshop held by the World Economic Forum, worldwide political leaders are actively seeking advice on how to ensure that the rise of social media do not lead to greater social fragmentation. The interest for political activities of netizens may reflect the perceived potential of social media to impact the real world. Everything is in the

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public data, and its analysis could help predict and support the outcome of political actions and also understand better politology and the effect of our political system. Social media data can be seen as a digital mirror of the political landscape, and its analysis can reveal a lot about the underlying structures and processes. However, social media data can also be seen as a biased sample of the real world, and care should be taken in the interpretation of trends observed on social media that may not be representative of the real world. Given the potential impact of social media on public opinion, several countries have started engaging with social media platforms in the last few years, increasing significantly the footprint of these platforms in the political landscape. Efforts have been done to achieve similar monitoring capabilities on other platforms as well. There are increasing concerns over the factors shaping the visibility of political content on social media. A common expectation is that the emergence of social media should contribute to a more open debate, through the emergence of new, diverse sources of information. In practice, the algorithms controlling the display of information in social media accounts do not encourage content consumption in such a way. On the contrary they are usually designed to maximize traffic, privileging filter bubbles and echo chambers formation, and making counter-narratives harder to be accessed. This leads to a distorted perception of the political reality, which might in turn affect even further the political opinion. The proposed hypothesis will be tested on some of the largest European countries and it leverages a variety of digital data sources, including also Twitter, news and Wikipedia.

3. Case Studies of Successful Social Media Campaigns

With the influence of social media on public opinion and voter behavior increasing in recent years, political leaders are experimenting with various social media platforms to engage their supporters as well as to attract new votes. An increasing number of research projects examining social media have focused on politics, showing how political actors use social media to achieve different goals. Generally, researchers focused on the communicative aspects of social media. For example, the Obama campaign in the U.S made extensive use of social media to reach potential supporters (A Ayankoya, 2013). Candidates in the 2011 Norwegian Elections were successful in using social media to spread their messages, while Dublin South West candidates were found to interact with their Twitter audience in a persuasive manner. In a similar vein, the People's Party of Freedom and Democracy, a Dutch political party, received support during the 2012 parliamentary elections through a social media campaign. Successful social media use requires integration with other forms of bi-directional communication to involve customers and stakeholders. In politics, there are several examples of the successful implementation of social media marketing strategies.

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Several viral social media campaigns emerged in social media. In the 2012 U.S. Presidential Elections, the anticipation of Obama losing resulted in a campaign being carried out through social media to urge Americans regulations allowed to vote to write in Hillary Clinton as President. A Twitter follower strategy used by the Democratic Alliance in South Africa in the 2014 general elections was questioned, although the party attempted to delete the questionable profiles after the illegitimacy was discovered. As seen from the examples above, the successful implementation of social media marketing strategies is not mutually exclusive from collective action. Thus, the incentives for various actions taken by the involved actors are considered, such as focusing specifically on publicity arrangements toward collective action. Diplomatic support was used as an attempt to influence the Norwegian Nobel Committee's decision on the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize through Facebook, also by addressing a digitally designed petition from an organization in the Philippines to the Norwegian Ambassador concerning the release of their arrested members. (Puriwat & Tripopsakul, 2021)

3.1. Impact of Social Media on Elections

Social media is reshaping how elections are run around the globe, helping more people to access information, and enhancing transparency. Politicians increasingly use websites like Facebook and Twitter to run campaigns, while voters utilize social networks to stay informed to an unprecedented degree. With the advent of social media, volunteer-driven movements not only resonate across cities and regions but can also span continents. In many countries, governments and candidates do not shy away from attempts to sway political preferences through backhanded means, influencing the media or rigging the vote count. In this environment, many see social media as a democratic force (Destiny Apuke & Asude Tunca, 2018). The digital revolution makes it much harder to shackle information, as one observer has put it. Inevitably, almost every candidate and party wants to use social media too. A brand new arsenal of instruments is at their disposal, from precisely targeting voters to shaping messages that would appeal to them.

In the public domain, social networks help configure an image of a candidate, a party or a decision. Every retweet, article, timeline or photo will be put within a context, consciously or unconsciously shaping a shared narrative. Power brokers hone an image of "their" candidate which they hope the networked audience will subscribe to, boosting chances in the election. It also means faster mobilisation for flash rallies and quick response to the opponent's faux pas. But this will have as an immediate effect opposition candidates being picked on as well. The myriad real-time distorted real stories in circulation on social media platforms often appear to be completely true. So, the flood of information and opinion leads at best to confusion and at worst to

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paranoia. To effectively manage it, a huge investment needs to be made in a battle often fought on uneven ground. When all political parties are heavily involved on social media, it can mirror a situation where minors can become relevant again, overcoming the smokescreen spawned by the continuous flow of information. Now people in a neighbourhood have the means to find out quickly and organize against backroom decisions (A Ayankoya, 2013). On the elections night, tallies are tweeted hours before the first official results. Security around ballots is enhanced. In some cases, the state shuts down the network altogether, eventualizes that will unjustly benefit the incumbent. As a result, an entirely new policy sector emerges to ensure fairness—ranging from funding transparency efforts to preserve internet freedom. The sum of self-imposed and regulatory measures needed to guarantee a level playing field confirms that social media is a double-edged sword. But campaigning strategies prevail and on balance candidates using social media savvy win more often than they lose.

4. Strategies for Encouraging Political Participation through Social Media

In order to increase political participation, engagement strategies on social media are needed. The success story of the 2012 Obama campaign is then presented as an example of driving political participation via social media, with most messaging strategies focused on user engagement. Next, a set of engagement strategies using social media are proposed in the framework of the 2018 Indonesian regional head election, drawn from the experiences of the Obama campaign. The proposed framework is aimed at informing political parties, candidates, or incumbent officials about developing effective campaign strategies using social media to drive political participation, especially in developing countries, such as Indonesia.

Social media provide people with easy and cheap means to communicate and share information. Large numbers of people now engage in social media, expressing their views on diverse issues. Its availability on various media allows for sharing different types of content, like text, images, video, and links. Thereby, social media has become a new platform for many public discussions (A Ayankoya, 2013). Discourse in social media is characterized by its horizontality, enabling people to communicate bilaterally or multilaterally. People are likely to engage in local discussions there, hence mitigating the space and time constraints. In both mature and developing democracies, social media has driven political participation, such as through joining a political campaign, attending a discussion of political-themed films, participating in political discussions, or signing an intern's appeal letter. Political participation is crucial for the democratization of a country and the fostering of accountability towards political constituents. Although Asian countries like Indonesia have had many advances in their democratic establishments, getting people politically involved is still a problem. This is apparent in

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Indonesia, where the popularity of general election participation is dwindling - with only 76.73% of the voting-age population voting in the 2014 general election, compared to the 85% voter participation in both 2009 and 2004.

The campaign team maintains a profile of the candidate on every social network during the campaign. They ensured that the candidate's profile appeared on all most famous social networks with tailored messages for different communities, such as short-URL-visits for students, pre-retirement election promises for pensioners. When the campaign considered reaching minority groups, the Obama campaign, as a presidential campaign, was a pioneer among political actors who used social media data to model and predict communication that specifically resonated with each group. Before designing tailored communication models, a data analysis was done on social media users that provided a comprehensive view of community ties between users, words, and online behavior. Then set each community's topic based on user interests, communication characteristics, and classification of subjects using information provided on profiles, wall posts, and likes. Finally, outcomes were tested on the prediction of the participation of different communities in an online challenge and tested on the adoption of political activity-related innovation within each different community. (Kriesberg and Acker2022)

4.1. Targeting Specific Demographics

Political campaigns can have different approaches and initiatives which are tailored to specific demographics, such as millennials, minority communities, and LGBTQ groups. In order to effectively reach these people and activate them in the political process, certain key issues should be taken into consideration. Campaign initiatives can be effectively improved in order to maximize their reach and ensure that the people who are reached are better able and more likely to actually vote. There is no one-size-fits-all strategy that works, and various demographic factors need to be accounted for when crafting such strategies. One of the most important demographic factors in determining voting behavior is the age of the voter. In addition to age, it is also highly relevant to consider gender, race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status when crafting a campaign initiative. There is a wide variety of data available on this issue at all levels of government, which can be used to inform the best ways of reaching out to certain demographics. Campaigns that are more inclusive and feature a wider variety of voices could make underrepresented populations more likely to become involved in the political process. Another key component of crafting an effective campaign initiative is an understanding of how social networks operate. It is vital to know how social media analytics can be used to identify the preferences of people who use social media in order to tailor one's messages, advertisements, and other online material to appeal to

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them most effectively. In particular, it would be useful to know who tends to see what posts from other users and how quickly those posts tend to spread. Successful social media campaigns that target specific demographic groups will be highlighted in this section.

5. Ethical Considerations and Challenges in Social Media Campaigns

The nature and effect of social media campaigns together with political elections have brought about need for discussions around some ethical as well as moral matters. As the effectiveness and prevalence of political campaigns through social media have been increasing all over the world, many important ethical questions regarding a variety of issues from misinformation to invasion of privacy began to emerge. While political campaigners, be they professional marketing agencies or amateurs, are seeking electoral successes, the ethical and moral aspects are often overlooked. This also becomes significant considering the possible (intentional and unintentional) misuse of social media data in a manipulative way. Political campaigners have a responsibility to uphold the integrity of the election process, including running campaigns with transparency (Destiny Apuke & Asude Tunca, 2018). A wider participation in elections is only possible when there is confidence that the elective process is honest and open. A failure to follow these measures can lead to all and any of these dimensions of the debate becoming further intensified. On the other hand, it is seen the potential for social media to direct messages towards only select audiences who already agree with certain viewpoints, making it more difficult for different perspectives to emerge. This can take forms of 'echo chambers', where thoughts or beliefs are amplified among the like-minded audience, to the complete exclusion of other viewpoints. Or it can manifest as 'filter bubbles', where the algorithms driving social media platforms create a unique reading experience for each individual, which is ever more selective in the 'type' of view presented, often without the reader being aware of the selectiveness in operation. Furthermore, there is disturbing and unsettling evidence that where women political participants are concerned the arena of the internet, in particular during an electoral campaign, can be dominated by violent, sexual, and abusive communications that are aimed at silencing and intimidating female politicians. This recent and significant growth in online harassment poses several challenges for parties and election agencies around developing new guidelines and procedures to ensure that women are not marginalized or excluded from public debate on social media. Additionally, majority of these problems are equally valid for BAME participants, and those within the LGBT communities. There is growing awareness that some of these examples on social media may contravene electoral law. Fundamental to all the possible risks evaluated above is online interaction, communication and behavior. As the physical space in which people

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meet becomes irrelevant in the digital world, a number of platforms and applications mushroom for creating and debating on a particular topic, causing concerns about the harassment as well. Therefore, it is argued that any political meeting extends to the cyber, the debates remain the same no matter the physical or virtual place and harassment should be treated equally in either environment. In this sense, regulation and compliance with the standards to avoid and prevent online harassment are necessary, as well as setting up specific monitoring and fact-checking services in place. (Suarez-Lledo & Alvarez-Galvez, 2021)

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