Influence of Social Networks in the Decision to Vote: An Exploratory Survey on the Ecuadorian Electorate

Daniel Barredo Ibáñez, Universidad Laica Eloy Alfaro de Manabi, Manta, Ecuador
Carlos Arcila Calderón, Universidad Rey Juan Carlos, Madrid, Spain
Jesús Arroyave, Universidad del Norte, Barranquilla, Colombia
Roxana Silva, FLACSO, Quito, Ecuador

ABSTRACT

The popularization of the Internet and the adoption of social media have brought major changes in the way of doing politics and managing the public arena. There is extensive scientific literature confirming the relationship between the use of new media and electoral political participation (Willnat et al, 2013; Lee and Shin, 2014; Ceron et al, 2014). The aim of this study is to determine the mechanism by which using social networks influences the decision to vote. Ecuadorian citizens (n=3,535) took part in an exploratory survey during the first half of 2013. The authors tested the measures and scales included in the questionnaire for validity and reliability; and they used a moderated mediation model (Hayes, 2013) based on regression. Results show that positive influence of using social networks on the decision to vote is not given directly, but rather through the search for information and need for political deliberation. In this mediation process, the indirect effect is in turn negatively moderated by age (the effect is stronger in young people). It is argued that despite the influence that networks may have on the behavior of voters, traditional factors related to the search for political information in more conventional means (e.g. radio or TV) seem to have a more significant effect. The authors explain both theoretical and practical implications. Finally, they address the study’s limitations regarding the representativeness of the sample and suggest testing the model in other political and cultural contexts.

Keywords: Decision to Vote, Ecuador, Political Information, Political Participation, Social Networks

DOI: 10.4018/IJEP.2015100102
1. INTRODUCTION: THE ECUADORIAN ELECTORAL CONTEXT

Ecuador’s democracy has been one of the most unstable systems in the world due to the lack of “a strong support group” (Sánchez, 2008, p. 233) to the democratic model, among other circumstances. From 1996 to 2006, for example, all the elected presidents had to terminate their terms abruptly (Tibocha and Jaramillo, 2008). However, with the electoral victory of Rafael Correa in 2006, the Andean Republic has initiated a new process in which the economic, cultural, social and legislative bases are being examined, as described by Hawkins (2011); Becker (2012, 2013); Polga (2013); Arevalo (2014); and Barredo, Silva and Martens (2015), among others. Rafael Correa, unlike other presidents, has managed to extend his term for at least eight years by adopting a style that Levitsky and Loxton (2013, p. 107) named as “competitive authoritarianism”. But the truth is that, according to Latinobarometro (2013, p. 7), Ecuador is the second country in Latin America where the support for democracy further increased - 13 percentage points-, between 1995 and 2013. On the other hand, the same source notes that, in 2013, support for authoritarianism still reached 13% of the population, compared to 18% in 1996 (p. 10).

The Ecuadorian electoral context, along with the customization of the Citizen Revolution (Revolución ciudadana in Spanish) lead by President Rafael Correa1, has particular characteristics. First, voting is compulsory for people over 18 years of age -in accordance with Article 62.1 of the 2008 Constitution-, but it is “optional” for people aged between 16 and 17 years -in accordance with Article 62.2 of the same- (Constituent Assembly, 2008, p. 45). This feature encourages a high participation in the presidential elections, estimated at about 70% of the population (Freidenberg, 2013b, p. 81), a percentage that contrasts with the low levels of social participation observed in overall politics (Col. and Mier, 2011) and media (Ayala and Calvache, 2009). Second, unlike other neighboring countries, the Executive Branch, Legislative Branch, Judicial Branch and Citizen Participation Branch are complemented by the Electoral Branch, established by the Article 217 of the Constitution (Constituent Assembly, 2008, p. 71), and regulated by the Organic law on elections [LOE in Spanish] enacted in 2009. Said law establishes criteria of quality and transparency in the electoral routines (art. 6), the regulation of “political rights” (art. 14) and, among others, the appointment of institutions -the National Electoral Council and the Electoral Dispute Settlement Court- as guarantors of the principles contained in the legislation (art. 18). The approval of the LOE brought many changes regarding the transparency of parties, the candidates’ selection process, as well as the “depoliticization of the Electoral Power” (Freidenberg, 2011, p. 42), to name a few.
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