The Wisconsin Spring Revisited

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ABSTRACT

Five years have passed since the origins of the Arab Spring in Tunisia took place. It has been almost three years since the impact of the Wisconsin Spring on Scott Walker’s attempts at policy changes in the state occurred. At that time the effect of social media on public awareness and public participation in political events was considered new and innovative. Since then Walker had been through a recall election and won. He has been through a re-election and also won. In addition, Walker attempted a presidential run in the Republican primary. This article is an update on what has transpired since then and the impact of social media on the events that have taken place in Wisconsin determining whether social media has had an impact on political participation in the state.

Keywords: Arab Spring, Governor Walker, Political Participation, Social Media, Wisconsin Spring

THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Based on the original chapter, social media is a major player in disseminating information, both accurately and inaccurately. Social media tools such Twitter, blogs, YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram are used to explain and document issues and events, but more dramatically, provide a platform to potentially polarize, misinform, or reinforce people’s perceptions and opinions.

In Wisconsin, social media was intensively used especially beginning in 2010 and through Governor Walker’s presidential attempt five years later. What was reported in Wisconsin through social media during 2010-15 became part of the national discussion particularly entering the 2016 presidential primary race. In addition, social media staffers themselves contributed controversy as presidential candidates tried to become distinctive and gain followers. The Wall Street Journal observed this effect by pointing out as politicians develop through their own “political profile” the social media staffers they hire for their campaign “already have personal brands” of their own—years of social media posts to thousands of followers, and a sometimes provocative online voice that can cause the candidate problems.


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THE ARAB SPRING REVISITED

Appropriately enough, Sohrab Ahmari’s article in the Wall Street Journal talks about how five years after 2010 when the Arab countries experienced uprisings toppling autocracies and bringing the promise of democratic transition find themselves no closer to stability than they had expected. The popular uprisings and anger in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen and Syria have died down. The revolution social media brought was only effective against the unpopular regimes they sought to unseat but has not been effective in bringing about the kind of power that would bring about stability to these nations. Thus these Arab countries are still finding their way towards democracy.

THE WISCONSIN SPRING REVISITED

A previous chapter by the two authors discussed the impact of social media in Wisconsin when Governor Scott Walker introduced policies removing most of the collective bargaining rights of public workers and the reduction of transparency in state government. His policies regarding unions brought hundreds of thousands of protestors to the state Capitol, many emboldened and inspired particularly through social media and mainstream news outlets. Wisconsin had become politically charged and dramatically divided. Social media was largely responsible for increased public awareness and citizen political participation throughout the state. With the elimination of collective bargaining and unions, Governor Walker and the state GOP majority solidified its power and control of the state’s Assembly and Senate. While social media was actively used by both state political parties, Democratic and Independent leaning Wisconsinites together mobilized the citizenry and extended its base and platform onto the national political scene through social media tools.

The Democratic base in Wisconsin was hopeful this citizen participation could be sustained to prevent Walker’s re-election bid. But this attempt was minimized and likely overshadowed in large part due to the tidal wave of money flowing into political advertising from outside of Wisconsin. This phenomenon can be attributed to the Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission Supreme Court decision. (“Citizens United,” 2010). As the Walker administration pushed for the elimination of tenure in higher education, the promotion of right to work, and a “pro-business” mantra, it appeared the Democratic voice could not effectively utilize social media effectively enough to change the priorities and legislation of the Wisconsin GOP.

Still, two key events would work in tandem to demonstrate that social media can dramatically affect and influence political public opinion. First, in the summer of 2015 the Wisconsin GOP introduced legislation to change the language and emphasis of Wisconsin’s legendary Wisconsin Idea. The Wisconsin Idea “signifies a general principle: that education should influence people’s lives beyond the boundaries of the classroom. Synonymous with Wisconsin for more than a century, this ‘Idea’ has become the guiding philosophy of university outreach efforts in Wisconsin and throughout the world.” (History of the Wisconsin Idea, n. d.).

Citizens throughout the state, and in particular leading academicians and state historians voiced outrage of the suggested change in the Wisconsin’s long time tradition of education for the public’s good. With social media in full force in Wisconsin, national and international scrutiny became even more intense. In September of 2015, the Center for Media and Democracy’s PR Watch filed a, “lawsuit against Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker for unlawfully withholding public records related to his office’s alteration of the University of Wisconsin System’s mission statement and the Wisconsin Idea. (“As Walker tries to gut,” 2015).
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