Political Participation and Engagement via Different Online and Offline Channels

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how political participation and engagement via social media may affect political participation and engagement offline and via other online channels, drawing from the exchange concept in marketing theory. Social media political participation and engagement is distinguished from other online activities, as the latter is restricted to users already involved in politics, as opposed to social media, which even allow users not involved in politics to be exposed to political messages. This study takes place within the context of Greece, characterised by the financial crisis. An exploratory quantitative methodology, employing a self-administered questionnaire (N=215 online users) was adopted. Results suggest that users who engage in politics, whether this is through social media or other online or offline activities, are more likely to participate politically in more than one form of political engagement. Social media usage intensity was positively associated with social media political participation, while favourable perceptions about politicians who use social media was associated with higher online participation activities among users. Gender was a significant factor for other online political engagement, while age was a significant factor for offline political engagement. Interestingly, the high perceived stress resulting from the financial crisis was not associated with any form of political engagement.

KEYWORDS

Financial Crisis, Greece, Offline Political Participation, Online Political Participation, Political Participation and Engagement, Social Media

INTRODUCTION

Political participation is commonly defined as those legal acts by private citizens that are more or less directly aimed at influencing and/or supporting the selection of governmental personnel and/or the actions that they take (Verba, Nie, & Kim, 1978, p.1). Political participation is not restricted to electoral processes, but it involves much more than voting. For example, attending public hearings, putting up signs or using banners to advocate opinions, attending rallies, writing letters to public officials, volunteering and campaigning, as well as online activities such as emailing politicians, participating in political discussion forums and communicating with members of a political party through websites, among others. In this paper, we take a micro-perspective and focus on political participation, taking into account new media formats.

Technological advances in today’s world, in combination with an era of political unrest during the recent financial crisis have also resulted in the increasing popularity of non-conventional political participation activities via social media, which may or may not have a direct effect on the selection of
governmental personnel and/or the actions that they take. These may include, but are not restricted to, the use of social media for political-related communications and discussions among potential and actual voters, searching for information related to politics by using, for example, hash-tags on Twitter, voicing opinions to other voters/users and politicians/political parties via liking a politician’s Facebook page, tagging photos and posting messages on social media related to a politician. Therefore, the term political participation encompasses all the aforementioned activities, which may be at an individual or collective level (one-to-one, one-to-many, many-to-many), and can describe actual and potential two-way communications/interactions among external actors (voters and potential voters) and internal actors (politicians/political parties). This implies that not only can politicians engage with voters/users (the term ‘users’ here is used to refer to social media and online users) (Papagiannidis, Stamati, & Behr, 2013), but also that voters/users can engage with politicians.

Given these relatively new political activities that exist among social media users, in this paper we use the term “political participation and engagement” (PPE) to describe all these aforementioned political activities, both offline and online, which are not restricted to actual voters, but also extend to potential voters and users of social media. They do not necessarily have to be engaged politically, but could potentially become engaged with political activities and relevant content online. For online engagement we adopt the definition by Hutchins et al. (1985), which considers engagement as taking place when a user experiences direct interaction with the objects in a domain, leading to a feeling of involvement directly with a world of objects. Given the interactive nature of social media, which is ideal for political engagement, we differentiate these from any other technologies that could potentially be used by users.

Social media refers to using mobile and web-based technologies to create highly interactive platforms in order for individuals and communities to share, co-create, discuss, and modify user-generated content (Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, & Silvestre, 2011, p.241). Although social media is a relatively new phenomenon, its roots can be traced back to well-established, mature technologies with relevant social behaviours that have underpinned information exchanges for years. For example, viral email or video propagation can be seen as the online projection of offline word of mouth. What distinguishes social media from other forms of online communication channels (e.g. exchanging email, accessing websites, etc.) is that information shared via social media can reach wider audiences much faster, capturing the attention of other users, even when they are away from their computer screen. Social media usage spans a wide range of applications, including political communications, and political engagement. Social media are often integrated as part of election campaigns, and/or are used by voters as the communications vehicle for protests and lobbying, as well as voicing opinions. The role social media played in president Obama’s election campaign (Cogburn & Espinoza-Vasquez, 2011; Pack, 2010) and in facilitating the Arab Spring (Cottle, 2011; Shirazi, 2012; Wolfsfeld, Segev, & Sheafer, 2013) are examples of how social media can be used to engage citizens in politics, influencing and mobilising them to take specific actions. “It is unlikely that citizens will turn away from television and print newspapers, continuing to supplement traditional sources with new media” (Towner & Dulio, 2012, p.112), which is why it is important to explore how social media may affect political participation and engagement offline and via other online channels.

Between the campaigning and lobbying in the west (where social media access is high and freedom of speech is possible, but political and social issues may be of relatively smaller scale and impact) and the major political unrest in the middle East (where social media access and freedom of speech can be limited, but political and social issues may be on a grander scale) lies the on-going Eurozone political and financial crisis, which commands its own attention. In the Eurozone, social media access and freedom of speech may be high, but the political, economic and social challenges faced are major ones. This is why this paper explores PPE within the context of Greece, characterised by the financial crisis, as Greece is regarded as the epitome of the Eurozone crisis. More specifically, it aims to explore how PPE via social media may affect PPE offline and via other online channels. In addition, Demertzis et al. (2005) who explored voters’ social media interactions in an off-campaign
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