Attitudes of University Students Voters Towards Political Messages in Social Media

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, social media has become one of the most important political marketing tools. The aim of the research is to determine how university students voting have attitudes towards political messages run across several different social media channels. Undergraduate students in Tekirdağ Central Campus of Namik Kemal University are generating the population of the study. In this research, sample was not taken. Questionnaire form was used as data collecting tool. Data obtained through questionnaire forms were presented as descriptive statistics (frequency, percentage, mean, standard deviation). For differences between group means, T-test and One-way ANOVA were implemented. It was concluded that messages with political content in social media had intensifier effects on present preferences of university student voters and had directive effects on indecisive students. Twitter users had more negative attitudes towards messages with political content in social media.

KEYWORDS

College Student Voter, Demographic Features, Political Marketing, Social Media Culture, Social Network, Turkey

INTRODUCTION

Politicians nowadays use websites and e-mails to introduce themselves to voters (Shaw 2002). According to Akman (2012), social media contributes to transparency of politics all over the world. Thanks to social networks, it is possible to introduce people, institutions, events, ideas and thoughts, goods or services to a target audience and share a lot of information related to various topics. As well as marketing of goods and services, social networks are efficient in the process of political marketing, and they have become very important media for promotion, advertising and propaganda. Social media makes it possible to reach broad educated masses by providing several opportunities such as sharing audio and video files, exchanging ideas, finding information, follow people and events. The use of advanced social media tools to communicate with voters has created a need for political marketing and accelerated its improvement. However, political messages in advanced social media tools can be evaluated differently by young voters. The attention given to and attitude towards these messages may vary depending on demographic characteristics of young voters.

There have been many studies on the use of social networks in political communication (Baysal 2010; Tuncay 2012; Genel 2012; Ergen 2013; Bayraktutan 2014). There have also been studies on
social media usage habits of university voters (Bostancı 2010; Koçer 2012; Dikme 2013; Vural & Bat 2013), promotion tools used in political marketing and attitudes of voters regarding the medium on which these political marketing activities were carried out (Tura 2006; Erdınç, 2010). From this point on, this study investigates the attitude of university voters towards political messages in social media in the process of 2014 Local Elections in Turkey. To this end, survey forms were distributed to undergraduate students in the main campus of Namik Kemal University, Tekirdag.

**SOCIAL MEDIA’S INFLUENCE ON YOUNG VOTERS**

Especially promotion mix elements such as advertising, public relations, personal selling, sales promotion and direct marketing are widely used in the process of planning and executing election campaigns. The development of modern media tools necessitates the use of political marketing. Political marketing is mostly based on political communication with voters. Therefore, “political communication is “the use of various communication types and techniques by political actors to establish certain ideological objectives on certain groups, masses, countries or blocks and take action to implement these objectives” (Aziz, 2007). According to some studies there is no significant relation between social media use and political cognition and behaviors (Ancu and Cozma, 2009; Zhang, 2010). However, Teresi and Michelson (2015) state that research with student samples and broader survey data find a statistically significant relationship between intensity of social networking sites use and political participation, both online and offline. It was reported that voter registrations increased, volunteers were found for electoral campaigns, voters communicated with candidates online, made comments and watched videos on these sites (Gueorguieva, 2008, pp.293-294).

Internet users are able to reach the content of their interest thanks to websites and softwares such as social networks, blogs, micro-blogs, instant messengers, chat sites, and forums, which allow them to share content and information with each other. Social media is different from traditional media. Materials found to be interesting by voters can be posted, commented and shared on social media 24/7. Social media is participative, variable, accessible, convenient, instant and continuous; users can make comments and have the control. Social media is part of and supports the feedback cycle. Social media has some disadvantages. Individuals can quickly and efficiently communicate their negative reactions and criticisms about political campaigns through social media.

Social media is used as a means to direct political messages to particular groups of users during the campaign. Social networking sites can be a useful additional tool to deliberately target young people (the age group most likely to be disengaged from politics) because they are more likely to use social media (EPRS, 2014). In general, the majority of voters in elections consist of individuals from middle and advanced age groups. Therefore, the use of digital tools has not spread yet and is more common among the young population. For this reason, social media is an environment that mostly involves the youth. These environments are important places where politicians can introduce themselves to young people, understand their criticisms and demands. Social networking sites are fields for political parties to spread their messages to young people. Bode (2012) finds that particular Facebook activities generate various types of political participation. Facebook has an important function that providing political participation and developing dialog among university students (Fernandes et al. 2010, p.654). Facebook is a very important online environment especially for candidates to gain young voters and to build bidirectional communication with young people (Sweetser ve Larisey 2008, p.196).

In recent years social media have been a significant phenomenon as a political communication source. For example, during the 2008 campaign in USA, nearly all major party candidates used social media (Hayes, 2008). According to Ergen (2013) Barack Obama used social media much more effectively compared to his opponent McCain. It is known that young people have become more interested in active politics in the last 10 years and the rate of participation by young people in the elections has increased. “In his 2008 presidential campaign, Barack Obama has received the biggest support from tech-savvy group of voters aged between 18 and 29” (Güler & Ülker, 2010, pp.101). Özgün (2014) supports this
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