Acceptance, Use, and Influence of Political Technologies among Youth Voters in the 2008 US Presidential Election

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ABSTRACT

The visibility of network-based technologies in the 2008 U.S. presidential election is indicative of their importance as tools to inform and motivate a populace. By explaining what factors impact usage behaviors with respect to these technologies, their use can be better encouraged. In this paper, the authors examine the constructs influencing usage behaviors for political technologies using the unified theory of acceptance and use of technology (UTAUT) model. The authors also explore the impact of the use of political technologies on political interest and activism in organized movements. The model was tested on a large sample of youth voters, and results suggest that performance and effort expectancy, along with social influences, impact the use of political technology. Evidence was also found suggesting that the usage of political technologies positively impacts political interest and political activism. Findings suggest that room for growth exists in devising novel ways to use political technologies to motivate active participation.

Keywords: Political Activism, Political Interest, Technology Acceptance, UTAUT, Voters

INTRODUCTION

In a survey conducted by the Pew Internet and American Life Project, it was found that 75% of Internet users, constituting 55% of adult Americans (Smith, 2009), went online during the 2008 United States presidential election. This was the first time that the percentage of voting age persons utilizing the Internet for politically focused purposes had been found to be above 50% (Smith, 2009). This is in contrast to 25.7% of Internet users who reported receiving campaign information about the 2000 U.S. elections online in an earlier study by Nisbet and Scheufele (2004). This increase in the use of Internet technologies for political purposes over the last 10 years did not go unnoticed. The attention lavished upon technology usage by the
political campaigns and the mainstream media in the 2008 US presidential election (Kiyohara, 2009) clearly indicates the perceived importance of capitalizing on network-based technologies.

When considering Internet usage for political purposes, the major focus becomes the collection and dissemination of information about political persons, issues, and events. The Pew survey referred to “online political users” and separated them into three categories: those who go online for news, for communicating with others, and for sharing or receiving campaign information using specific tools (Smith, 2009). It may be argued that these can be condensed into two primary purposes for using the Internet for a specific (e.g., political) function: information gathering and information exchange. The technology utilized for information gathering and exchange, at the highest level of abstraction, is the Internet. Much has already been studied about the adoption and influence of the Internet in general (Porter & Donthu, 2006; Shih, 2004). Thus, examining usage from this high level of abstraction is not likely to provide many answers to the interesting questions that remain. Consequently we evaluated the use of the Internet for political purposes at an operational level.

The popularity and dramatic growth in usage of the Internet has led to the development of many popular tools for information gathering and exchange. These tools can be loosely classified as static text-based informational websites, interactive text-based informational websites, streaming video applications/websites, social networking websites, messaging applications, and email applications. These classes of tools are general in nature and can service any number of functional areas (specific domains for which a technology is utilized). By examining functional areas (e.g., politics, personal relationships, sport, work, etc.), we can classify the technologies by specifying the type of information being gathered/exchanged (or the domain from which the information arises). Thus one can utilize a group of “dating technologies” or “sport technologies”. By defining the technologies by functional categories, we can narrow down the usage intent. Several researchers have recently called for theoretically driven investigations to understand particular usage domains of the Internet (Case, 2006; Shklovski, Kiesler, & Kraut, 2006; Wellman, 2004).

Determining what factors impact usage behaviors for political technologies can help organizers understand how to better encourage and better leverage the use of technologies for a political event. For example, if it is known that social influence impacts the use of political technologies, then perhaps political campaigns could encourage their technology savvy supporters to hold workshops to demonstrate and encourage the use of political technologies. If, for example, ease of use is demonstrated to impact usage, designers of specially tailored technologies (which are becoming increasingly more common in political contests) could take more care with the usability of their creations. Insights gained from a model such as the one presented in the current study can be used to make strategic choices regarding the use of, investment in, development of, or marketing of political technologies. This could lead to increased and more efficient use of technology, with the promise of lower costs from reducing the need for physically distributed contact, as well as increasing the number of constituents reached.

Also of interest are the desired technology usage outcomes. Determining if and how the usage of political technologies impacts the outcomes desired from their usage may provide some insight into the current value of implementing technological aids for political events. In the political domain, two of the most widely mentioned outcomes are to increase interest and to encourage more active participation in the political process. Better understanding the impacts of technology use on these outcomes is of great interest to researchers and political organizers as it may lead to creative new methods of utilizing technologies for this purpose. For example, use of, investment in, and novel additions to newer technologies that allow for more interaction (such as social networking sites) may be increased if the findings indicate support for the usage outcomes.
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