Social Media and Youth Participatory Politics: A Study of University Students

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Abstract

The present paper investigated the role of social media in youth participatory politics. A survey of university students was conducted in March, 2013. The findings of the present study indicated that a large number of the respondents participated in political activities through social media. Facebook provided the respondents with common platform to discuss issues confronting Pakistani society. Respondents' engagement with discussion on national issues was significantly related with their participation in political campaigns and persuasion to vote in upcoming elections 2013. A small proportion of the respondents participated in traditional political activities. This finding underscored the need to enhance youth participation in institutional politics to cultivate civic minds.

Introduction

Social media are becoming instrumental in changing traditional political space (Schlozman et al., 2010; Smith et al., 2009) and have drawn the attention of scholars towards increasing youth participatory politics in the wake of Arab Spring. Youth participatory politics refers to interactive engagement in civic and political life such as forming political group, sharing information on political manifesto, showing concerns on some political issue, promoting particular political party/leader and shaping specific agenda (Cohen, et al., 2012). Participation in civic and political life is considered cardinal in influencing democratic process (Fishkin, 1995; Habermas, 1996). Social media (such as facebook, twitter, and blogs) are considered important facilitator of new form of political engagement that does not require prior permission from the gatekeepers usually involved in traditional media (such as newspaper editors and owners of TV channels). Rapid growth of social media has led to the emergence of engaged citizens (Dalton, 2008) who participate in broad civic and political spectra. These

engaged citizens may create awareness and mobilize masses against the forces of status quo. However, traditional media are inextricably intertwined with social media. Traditional media give coverage to stories that appear in social media and use social media to reach diversified audience. Political interest groups also use social media for political campaigns and issues. However, it may not necessarily be assumed that participatory politics bring about positive outcomes in terms of preparing good citizens for the society. Social media can create new opportunities to give voice to youth and pose new challenges for the political arena.

According to media reportage, social media are offering a common platform to the people in Pakistan to raise their voices against corruption, energy crisis, and incapable leadership. For example, Latif (2013) has highlighted the role of social media in changing future of Pakistan. Referring to various suo moto actions of supreme courts, the author clearly recognized the important role of social media. Reportedly, many political parties, for example Pakistan Tehrik-e-Insaf (PTI), Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz (PML-N) and Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM) used social media to promote their respective political agenda and mobilize youth to vote in the upcoming elections 2013. Apart from sporadic media reportage, youth participatory politics has received little attention of the researchers in Pakistan. Social media can integrate society through participatory democracy and trigger revolution as well. The present study is an attempt to investigate the role of social media in civic and political engagement of youth. In so doing, the major focus is to assess whether social media promote participatory and democratic culture (such as participation in political campaigns, engagement with discussion on national issues and convincing others to vote in upcoming elections 2013).

Methods and Materials

The data for the present study was attained from the students of the University of the Punjab, Lahore in March, 2013. Seven Faculties (Arts and Humanities, Behavioral and Social Sciences, Commerce, Law, Islamic Studies, Science and Life Sciences) out of the total thirteen Faculties were selected through simple random sampling procedure. Subsequently, one Department from each of the selected Faculty was randomly selected. Randomly selected Departments included: Department of English language and Literature, Institute of Communication Studies, Hailey College of Commerce, Law College, Sheikh Zayed Islamic Centre, Centre for Undergraduate Studies and Institute of Biochemistry and Biotechnology. Quota sampling procedure was used to select 20 students from each of the randomly selected Department. A semi-structured questionnaire was distributed among the desired number of students available during the break time of the classes. The total sample of the present study comprised 140 students. Although the youth comprises individuals aged 15-29 years (Government of Pakistan, 2008), the youth in the present study referred to

the University students usually aged 18-26 years. It is the main imitation of the present study. However, the data were attained from the University students on three grounds:

a)   the University students partly represent young population;

b)   the University students are considered to have more access to information technology/internet;

c)   a large share of students across the universities in the Punjab received lap-tops under 'Shahbaz Sharif Youth Initiative' scheme. Owning a personal lap-top is more likely to expand an individual's choices and connectivity.

Social media in the present study referred to facebook, twitter and blogs being used by the study population. Youth participatory politics are considered important in influencing civic and political life of the young people. Participatory politics are believed to give greater control and voice to the issues confronting youth in their daily lives. In the present study, youth participatory politics referred to interactive engagement in political life such as forming political group, sharing information on political manifesto, showing concerns on some political issue, promoting particular political party/leader and shaping specific agenda.

Major Findings

Table 1 provides information about characteristics of the respondents, their access to digital technology and use of social media. The data show that a substantial proportion of the students was below the age of 24 years. Only 15 percent of the respondents were in the age group of 24-26 years. It is necessary to mention here that upper age limit to get admission in the regular programs of the University is 26 years. A little more than one half of the respondents comprised males, while 47 percent of the study population consisted of females. A substantial proportion of the respondents were enrolled either in B.A/B.Sc (honors) or M.A/M.Sc programs. A tiny proportion of respondents was enrolled in M.Phil program. The gender and enrollment divide of the respondents almost corroborated with the corresponding data (given in the fact book 2011) of the University. Therefore, the study population may represent the University students in terms of gender and enrollment.

With a slight difference, almost equal proportions of the respondents reported ≤25,000 and ≥26000 rupees as their monthly household income. However, the data with regard to income profile may be skewed, as people are usually reluctant to report their actual monthly household income due to various reasons.

Table 1 Characteristics of the respondents, their access to digital technology and use of social media

Age (in years)			%	N=140
18-20	39.0			
21-23	46.0			
24-26	15.0			
Total	**100.0**			
Gender				
Male	53.0			
Female	47.0			
Total	**100.0**			
Program				
B.A/B.Sc (Honors)	41.0			
M.A/M.Sc	53.0			
M.Phil	06.0			
Total	**100.0**			
Monthly Household Income				
≤25,000 rupees	52.0			
≥26000 rupees	48.0			
Total	**100.0**			
Access to Digital Technology				
	Yes	No	Total	
Own a personal computer/lap-top	81.0	19.0	100.0	
Access to internet	71.6	28.4	100.0	
Own cell phone	93.7	6.3	100.0	
Cell phone connected to internet	57.4	42.6	100.0	
Use of Social Media (such as face book, twitter, YouTube and Skype)				
Source of social media use	Response		Total	
	Yes	No		
Personal Lap-top connected to internet	86.5	13.5	**100.0**	
Cell phone connected to internet	67.6	32.4	**100.0**	

The data in Table 1 show that a substantial number of respondents had access to digital technology in terms of personal computer/lap-top, cell-phones and internet connectivity. A large number of the respondents (81.0 percent) had personal computer/lap-top and internet connections. Most of these respondents received lap-tops under 'Shahbaz Sharif Youth Initiative' scheme. 86.5 percent of the total (81.0 percent) respondents were using lap-tops for face book, twitter, skype and youtube. More than two-third of the students, who had cell-phones connected to internet, were using their cell-phones for face book, twitter, skype and youtube. These findings clearly imply expanded choice and connectivity of the students.

Table 2 presents information about students' perceptions about major issues, their satisfaction with current democratic government (i.e., PPP and its coalition partners) and suggestions to overcome issues confronting Pakistan in 2013. The data show that most of the respondents viewed energy crisis as the major issue confronting Pakistan in the year 2013 followed by corruption, poor governance, terrorism, insecurity/lawlessness, poverty and unemployment and other (such as sectarianism, poor economy, intolerance and violence).

Table 2 Students' perceptions about major issues, perceived satisfaction with current government and solution to overcome major issues

Response Categories	% N=140
Perceived major issues by order [a]	
Energy crisis	86.6
Corruption	67.7
Poor governance	56.8
Terrorism	51.7
Insecurity (lawlessness)	41.6
Poverty and unemployment	40.5
Other (Sectarianism, poor economy, intolerance and violence)	34.0
Perceived satisfaction with the current democratic government	
Satisfied	4.6
Somewhat satisfied	16.7
Not satisfied at all	78.7
Total	**100.0**
Suggested solution for major issues	
Change through vote	78.0
Military take-over	12.6
Government of technocrats	9.4
Total	**100.0**
Preference for political party	
Pakistan Tehrik-e-Insaf (PTI)	57.7
Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz (PML-N)	38.3
Other (religious political parties, PML-Q)	4.0
Total	**100.0**

[a] Multiple response question

Although a large proportion of the respondents expressed dissatisfaction with the performance of the present democratic government (People's Party and their coalition partners), a substantial number of the respondents viewed democratic process as a viable solution to overcome the major issues. In this regard, a significant number of the respondents expressed their preference for Pakistan Tehrik-e-Insaf (PTI) followed by Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz (PML-N). It is important to note that none of the respondents expressed preference for current ruling party (PPP). However, considerable proportions of the respondents viewed Military take-over and government of the technocrats (such as judges, economists and upright bureaucrats) as alternative to democracy. These respondents were of view that democracy means corruption and corrupt practice. To them politicians make empty promises and mint money in the name of democracy. It is better to have honest people to put the country on right track. This is an important finding which shows that a considerable proportion of youth does not trust democratic institution, which could have ramification for the upcoming elections 2013.

Information was attained about traditional political participation during the last six months. The data in Table 3 show that a significant number of the respondents participated in political protests. Most of these protests were against energy crisis, drone attacks and sectarian violence. Small proportions of the respondents had

membership of political parties/groups and participated in political campaigns. A tiny proportion of the respondents organized political events and reported wearing stickers of political party. Overall, large proportions of the respondents did not participate in institutional politics during the last six months. Arguably, this finding reflects low political space for youth in the institutional politics of Pakistan. On the contrary, youth participation in civic and political life through social media (facebook) may be viewed as an alternative to traditional political participation.

Table 3 Percent distribution of respondents by traditional political participation during the last six months

Traditional Political Participation (during the last six months)	Response		Total
	Yes	No	
Member of any political group/party	15.6	84.4	**100.0**
Participation in political activities at university level	6.5	93.5	**100.0**
Participated in political campaign	17.5	82.5	**100.0**
Attended political meetings	12.8	87.2	**100.0**
Took part in political protests	34.6	65.4	**100.0**
Organized political events	3.0	97.0	**100.0**
Wearing sticker of any political party	4.0	96.0	**100.0**
Distributed pamphlets of any political party	6.0	94.0	**100.0**

Table 4 provides information about respondents' online participation in political activities. The data show varying online political engagement of the respondents on the items under reference. A little more than one-fifth of the respondents (22.6 percent) reported that they had joined political party/group during the last six months. 72.0 percent of the total respondents forwarded political manifesto/agenda of a political party, while more than two-third of the total respondents participated in online campaign. It is important to note that rate of online participation in political campaign was almost fivefold to that traditional political campaign. Various factors may enhance understanding in this regard. For instance, people may not find time to physically participate in political campaign due to various reasons. It may also be argued that online participation in political campaign could provide the participant with anonymity, in turn less vulnerability to political vengeance.

Table 4 Percent distribution of respondents by participation in political activities through social media (facebook) during the last six months

Participation in political activities (through facebook)	Response		Total
	Yes	No	
Joined some political party/group	22.6	77.4	**100.0**
Forwarded political manifesto/agenda of some political party	72.0	28.0	**100.0**
Participated in political campaign	83.4	16.6	**100.0**
Forwarded funny videos related to some political party/leader	65.5	34.5	**100.0**
Commented on political issues	71.6	28.4	**100.0**
Convinced others about the importance of vote for upcoming elections 2013	74.4	25.6	**100.0**
Convinced others to vote for some political party	73.6	26.4	**100.0**
Participated in discussions about national issues	71.5	28.5	**100.0**
Uploaded and circulated interviews/speeches for or against a political party/leader	32.7	67.3	**100.0**

It is important to note that almost three-fourth of the respondents persuaded others to vote in the upcoming election of 2013 in Pakistan. This finding clearly implies that a substantial number of youth was aware about the power of vote in bringing the change and keeping the democratic process intact. A considerable proportion of the respondents uploaded and circulated interviews/speeches for or against a political party/leader. More than two-third of the respondents participated in discussions about national issues. Table 5 provides information about the Pearson correlation (2-tailed) matrix of membership of political party, participation in discussion on national issues, participation in political campaign and persuasion to vote in the upcoming elections 2013. Although respondents' political affiliation (membership) was significantly related with their participation in political campaign and persuasion to vote; respondents' engagement with discussion on national issues had robust relationship with their participation in political campaign and mobilization to vote in upcoming elections 2013. The results of correlation matrix clearly indicate that social media largely influenced youth participatory politics.

Table 5   Pearson Correlations (2-tailed)

Variables	Membership of political party	Participation in discussion on national issues	Participation in political campaign	Persuasion to vote in upcoming elections 2013
Membership of political party	1	0.631*	0.670*	0.623*
Participation in discussion on national issues	0.631*	1	0.731**	0.763*
Participation in political campaign	0.670*	0.731**	1	0.782**
Persuasion to vote in upcoming elections 2013	0.623*	0.763**	0.782**	1

*$P \leq 0.05$; **$P \leq 0.01$

Discussion

The findings of the present study showed that youth participation in institutional/formal political activities was lower compared to that through facebook. This finding is in agreement with previous researches (for example; Dalton, 2008 and Pattie, et al., 2004). Overall, large proportion of the youth participated in under reference political activities through social media. It implies that social media (facebook) provides the youth with more political space to that of traditional politics. However, digital sphere seem to posit the challenges of judging credible online information and its circulation for persuasive effects. Since social media influences youth participatory politics without formal instructions or scrutiny, it may have repercussions for the overall development of the society. Youth is an important resource that can be tapped through education and capacity building measures.

The findings of the present study warrant increased participation of the youth in institutional politics. It remains a challenge for policy makers to find ways to make the youth civic minded. However, the findings of the present study may not be extrapolated to the whole youth of Pakistani society. It is the major limitation of the present study. Non-availability of precise measure of youth participatory politics is another limitation of the study.

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