

Young voters for political participation through online campaigns

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Abstract:

The aim of the present study is to elaborate the ideas and concepts that motivate young voters to participate in elections through on-line campaigns. The paper is divided into three parts. The first part of the paper analyzes how some of the best political campaigns are used for motivating people to vote. The second theoretical part explores the notion of political participation and sheds light on the factors that affect civic engagement, as well as the specific components that must be considered while focusing on young people. Finally, the last part deals with methods and approaches that can be used to integrate young social media users into the conceptual design process of on-line campaigns, as well as to determine young people's political participation behavior.

Key words: young voters, online, political participation

Introduction

Political participation of youth may serve as an eminent role in eradicating cohort tensions and illogicalities. The introduction of Convention on the Rights of the Child by United Nations in 1989 was a major step in spreading the idea of youngsters' and children's political participation. This idea was followed by many European countries while framing different legislations for enhancing youth participation; hence, they tried to enhance the participation level of youth in politics. However, due to limited research in this topic, it seems really difficult to obtain a documented overview of the recent developments in this area.

The lack of political participation among youth is ultimately resulting in an increase in youth disengagement from electoral matters. This concern has been raised by some organizations which are responsible to monitor elections in different countries. This paper examines how youth can be politically motivated via on-line campaigns to take part in electoral process with the help of recent examples and practices.

Best Practice Examples

Campaign: Edding's Digital Highlighter

Edding is an international company that manufactures writing and marking tools. It has been famous for felt pens and permanent markers for over fifty years. Although digital age has turned the communication channel into wired and paperless ones, it does not hinder Edding's business as the company acted contrariwise and created a new innovation to catch up with the technology. Therefore in 2011, Edding launched the "Digital Highlighter" campaign that allows users to highlight texts on-line, share them via social media sites and email or save them as PDF files regardless of which website is being used.

This campaign is one of the best selected practices of participatory campaign because of several reasons. It contains the original idea of a "digital web marker" that no other company has ever done. With this captive idea, it entices people to participate in the use of this digital web marker. Surprisingly, Edding makes participation very easy. Users only need to drag the symbol of digital marker to the toolbar and it is ready to use. The campaign is a good example of a product that can normally be used in the off-line world and adapts its application to on-line world. In this sense Edding exploits the strength of its brand very well.

The results of the campaign participation show that 81 percent of users added the highlighter to their toolbars. The flash banners generated 2.7 percent click rate and the number of visitors to Edding's web-page increased 12 percent during the campaign. Besides, this campaign has received a number of awards that guarantee its success, such as the Gold Medal Media for the Best Use of Digital Media in Golden Award of Montreux 2011, the Bronze Direct for the use of Direct Marketing in Cannes Lions International Festival of Creativity 2011 and many more.

Campaign: Kony 2012

Kony 2012 was a campaign run by Invisible Children, a non-profit organization founded by Bobby bailey, Jason Russell and Laren Poole with a target to bring awareness among people about the activities of Lord Resistance Army (LRA). The campaign was named after Joseph Kony, leader of LRA and no.1 wanted criminal by the International Criminal Court. The aim was to arrest Joseph

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Kony, whose guerilla army was encircled around Central Africa, by the end of 2012. The campaign's tactic was to stop Kony by making him famous.

The campaign created films documenting violence and screened them to audiences all over the world. They used three categories of media for the promotion of the campaign; on-line media which comprised of Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and blogs, traditional media which included Newspaper, 12 documentary films, 363 campaign videos and 30 radio networks in USA and 6 in African nations, and through "Action Kits" which included T-Shirts, posters, door hangers, magazines, banners, fliers all translated into four different languages.

The campaign was further successful by the participation of 20 culture makers including George Clooney, Angelina Jolie, Oprah Winfrey and 12 policy makers which included former U.S. President George W. Bush and his Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. The public figures helped to bring more influence and awareness among the audience and this had an impact on donation rising. The donations are used to run schools and scholarship programs in Africa for the war-affected people. There is also a crisis tracker on their website which shows real time LRA activities over civilians.

The campaign used a number of successful activities such as the "Cover night" where the whole New York City was covered by posters and fliers of Kony 2012, followed by another activity known as MoveDC.

The success of the campaign can be traced out as the White House released a statement of support that was passed by the congress. Kony 2012 has been by far the most successful campaign of 2012, with a total of 123 million on-line video views and more than 3 million Facebook likes.

Theoretical part

Definition of political participation

Definitions of political participation range from traditional forms to newer ones, including Internet and social media utilization. The respective area of research in participatory communication generally aims for the same purpose. Teorell's (2006) three models of democracy exemplify how participatory communication has been

undertaken as a broad and in some cases, rather diverted field in political science.

Teorell in 2006, distinguished three normative models of democracy; the responsive, the participatory and the deliberative, and argued that the definition one gives to political participation is related to which model of democracy they adhere to. "System responsiveness to citizens' needs and preferences is the key normative issue" of the responsive model of democracy (Teorell, 2006: 789) and therefore, the concept of participation is restricted to the representation mechanism. Similarly, Tian (2011) indicates that "through political participation, citizens choose their representatives at different level of political institutions" (Tian, 2011: 381). The next model, the participatory model broadens opportunities for direct participation indecision making through small-scale spaces outside the traditional representative system. Finally, participation within the deliberative model exists in the context of political discussions, as "...discussions aimed at forming opinions may occur even if no collective decision is to be reached" (Teorell, 2006: 791).

Himmelboim, Lariscy, Tinkham and Sweetser (2012) start from a similar definition where political participation includes "...activities performed by citizens who attempt to influence the structure and selection of government policies" (Putnam, 1995, as quoted by Himmelboim et al, 2012: 93) and moves on to examine what citizens perceive as political participation, as this determines their awareness of civic engagement. According to the authors, social media provide on-line platforms for sharing information and political opinions (Pew, 2009a, 2011, as quoted by Himmelboim et al, 2012: 95) and in addition, individuals have an interest in participating in political discussions (s.a.a.). Therefore, activities like joining interest groups, on-line interacting with political institutions or on-line political discussions should be considered valid forms of political participation.

Factors that influence participation

Albrecht's approach (2006: 63-64) gives a further explanation on how on-line participation is taken into account and points out the importance of public distrust in politics. The theoretical model he suggests has four sets of factors in on-line deliberation; the first is determinants of political participation (economic background,

education, age, political interest etc.), the second is determinants of internet usage (for example; background, education, age, gender, and on-line skills), and the third is mediating factors (cultural practices of technology use, communication's embeddedness in political context, the usability of particular web services) and the fourth is properties of large-scale communication (news factors, factors that determine the chances of a news item appearing in various news media, economy of attention, etc.) The first three set of factors help to determine who participates, whereas the last set of factors determines what is communicated, but there are also interactional effects.

Aligned with Albrecht and from a vice versa point of view, media usage, especially online media, and the way people access online information on a daily basis is becoming a highlight (cf. Lister et al, 2003). This means online political participation is taking place within vast internet usage and among a wide range of audience. Thus, there are several factors, such as the audience age range, educational background, media usage etc to be taken into consideration. The next question is therefore, what kind of audience is participating politically, in different kinds of media?

This leads to exploring political efficacy, as defined by Campbell, Gurin, & Miller (1954): "the belief in one's own competency and the feeling that political and social change is possible" (Campbell, Gurin, & Miller, 1954, as quoted by Hoffmann & Young, 2011: 161). As Wang (2007) observes:

The conventional wisdom regarding political efficacy is that citizens participate in politics more when they believe they can influence government (internal political efficacy) and when they believe government is responsive to them (external political efficacy). People, however, do not participate in politics when they believe that their efforts will be useless (Morrell, 2003, 393).

In this scope, certain media use, such as satire and parody shows, might motivate individuals to politically participate and by watching them; viewers evaluate their own efficacy and enhance their feeling of self-competence.

Specific factors to be considered when focusing on young people

In remedy with Albrecht's explanation on the diversity of this field, young people are one essential factor, as it has been a general notice that they are a main target of political participation, thus messages are articulated to engage this specific audience.

Although some sources indicate that young people of today are not as active as previous generations used to be (Mindich 2005; Putnam 2000, as quoted by Calenda and Meijer, 2009: 879), studies also suggest that students who are very active on the internet are more likely to participate online and that those who participate offline are more likely to participate online too (Calenda and Meijer, 2009). Moreover, Quintelier and Vissers (2008) observed that certain activities such as blogging, discussing, following the news, and forwarding e-mails with political content are positively related to Belgian young people's political participation, as their interactive features helped them expanding social communication, relations, and civic skills.

Another dimension about young people's political participation is their extensive media use. Social media has been considered as one of the most accessed media for young people. Furthermore, social media contains information that has been infused from the mass media (cf. Anduiza, Gallego & Jorba, 2012) because it is accessible through several different media devices. The effect of social media's contribution for engaging young people into political participation is vice versa. The reason is that for young people, social media is considered as peer-based and elite-free (Pfaff, 2005), thus the 'share' button is the basic measurement of participation itself, despite any other discussions or forms of participation that exist in the platform. Another reason is the concept of 'participation' itself in this context. If participation is expected as proper understanding about politics, it creates a whole different paradigm upon the matter.

Political learning is an approach recommended to be used towards political participation, provided that one scrutinizes the significant amount of coefficients in the researches. For instance, the interesting research by Pfaff (2005) shows that the way Eastern Germans are raised politically influences their skepticism toward political bureaucrats and parties. For this reason, their interest in politics is significantly lower than the average young people in Germany.

Methods and approaches for user-centered-design

The aim of the paper is to find what is helpful for designing an online campaign that will motivate young voters to go to the elections. This section deals with methods and approaches that can be used to integrate users into the conceptual design process of the online campaign as well as finding information about young people's political participation behavior.

Approaches

Co-creation

One strategy that can be used is co-creation. This strategy will help in designing a successful online campaign, one that will motivate young voters to go to the elections, as it allows the target group to be directly involved in the creation of the campaign. And in this case, the target group is the youth.

As explained by Kambil, Friesen and Sundaram (1999), by following the co-creation strategy, customers can be involved at just about any stage of development of a product and they can become co-creators of value. A strong relationship is also built between producers and users as well as user loyalty. Even though much of the paper's discussion focuses on the electronic economy market, the same concepts and ideas can be transferred to the project of designing an online political campaign.

In the creation of the online political campaign, involving the youth with particular skills beneficial to the campaign will increase the value of the campaign. An example here could be, involving students from certain universities with graphic design skills, communication and marketing skills, event management skills, and students from politics majors who can contribute with political content etc.

User-design

A step further into designing a good online campaign is to understand the needs and preferences of the target group on the design of the online campaign and the suitable political content to match the young people's preferences. One way of achieving this is by applying the user design form, and according to Randall, Terwiesch and Uirich (2007), user design is a "particular form of product customization that allows the user to specify the properties

of a product" (p.268). The authors continue by stating the benefits of this customization form, and they include; closer match of products to user preferences, willingness to pay for goods and services, a chance for a manufacturer to cater to different needs of a market etc hence, an increase of different offers and all these can lead to a strong brand loyalty. The concept can be transferred to the building up of an online political campaign. The user becomes the target group of the campaign which in this case; it is the youth. However, first there is a need of establishing methods of knowing what the youth prefer before customizing an online campaign especially for them.

According to Randall et al. (2007), there are two approaches to user design, first is parameter-based approach where users directly specify the values of design parameters of the product and the second one is needs-based systems where users express their important needs, and an optimization algorithm recommends suitable design parameters that will likely meet the needs.

Needs-based approach is a more suitable system to apply in the making of an online campaign, as stated by Randall et al. (2007), for novices needs-based approach gives better results and in lesser time since the parameter-based approach requires the user to have knowledge of the product in question. The campaign aims to target young people, likely to be without much expertise in politics or skills in designing an online campaign. By following the needs approach, the campaign designers will be able to identify the political characteristics and design preferences of the target group.

Methods

Based on Cotti and Cornolti's research (2004), the following are methods found quite useful for getting information from youth about their political participation.

- a. Focus group
- b. Individual in depth Interviews.

Following the Cotti and Cornolti (2004) procedure, the recruitment of subjects can be through collaboration with different Youth Centers and reach young people through acquaintances and friends. To encourage young people participation, a reward of some sort needs to be offered to the young participants. All the interviews and

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the focus group discussions should be taped and video recorded and then fully transcribed.

Through the focus groups, participants will have a chance to conceptualize ideas about “politics” and its concerns. An active discussion will be held as participants interact with each other confronting their points of view.

Through the individual interviews, in depth questioning can be carried out on a one-to-one level with the young participants. The interviewer should establish a peer relationship in order to get more information out of the interviewee.

Antonio M. (2008) suggests that the highest level of participation that can exist in a person is during their youth stage. However, how could this extent be fully utilized in order to motivate youngsters for greater political awareness and participation? This question provokes scholars to find more substantial and implementable methods for convincing youth for their greater political roles.

The report titled “Political Participation of Youth – A remedy against Marginalization and Social Exclusion” by the European Centre for Social Welfare Policy and Research gives a comprehensive overview about the methods and techniques that could be used for enhancing the level of political participation in youngsters, as well as to bring them closer to the electoral process.

- a. An overview/desk research about recent development of youth’s share of political decision-making. Here, desk research refers to gathering/ analyzing of data already present in published form.
- b. A thorough analysis of cross-national reports of surveys, questionnaires of existing projects from different countries.
- c. Selective evaluation of youth participation projects. Besides questionnaires, interviews and surveys, the major focus should be on arranging youth workshops and other campaigns of youth activism.
- d. Announcement and discussion of the findings.

The major findings of “Political Participation of Youth – A remedy against Marginalization and Social Exclusion” study, revealed that when political participation is already present, special support should be given to action-oriented participation of youth as it has

often been overlooked in the past, and also because it is most likely to be started and implemented by young people themselves. It is also worth mentioning that modern political participation of youth can supplement but never replace traditional youth politics. So, in order to enhance the level of political participation of youth, the above model/methods serve as the best example.

The “Political Participation of Youth – A remedy against Marginalization and Social Exclusion” report also proposes other initiatives that can be taken, such as promotion of the idea of youth political participation via publications, lectures, workshops etc. as well as the promotion of youth’s political participation on regional, local and international level, awareness-raising among key-persons and institutions engaged in youth work and initiation of a discussion on legislative changes, to extend the possibilities and secure the quality of political participation of young people.

Therefore, we propose using strategies of co-relation and user-design followed by methods of focus groups, one to one in depth interviews, and gathering data through desk researches as the best approach to motivate the participation of youth in the online political campaign.

Conclusion

In conclusion, every campaign and research conducted for political participation has contextual and delicate factors, thus the differences in the researches should not create any confusion. That said, by following examples of the two most successful campaigns elaborated at the beginning of this paper, students will be able to choose practices that will fit in the development of an online political campaign. The different definitions of political participation presented in this paper will increase students’ understanding of the concept and give them an insight on factors that influence political participation, specifically among young participants. To find information on young people’s political participation behaviors and how to integrate them into the development of the campaign, this paper proposes approaches and methods that will produce satisfying results.

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