

Social Media, Hashtag Activism, and Youth Civic Engagement: How social media activism translates to real-world participation in politics

Thesis: Youth civic engagement is a point of contention in world politics and social activist groups. The trend in the history of U.S. politics indicates that young adults ages 18-29 have the lowest turn-out in elections than other age groups. However, in the last decade, there has been an uptick in civic engagement discussion on social media; particularly on Facebook and Twitter, and recent reports are displaying an increase in real-world youth involvement in politics. Despite past trends of apathetic participation, communication via social media, hashtag activism, and sharing of political information via social media is a direct contributor to an upward trend in civic engagement, not only in digital spaces but also in offline spaces as well.

Introduction

Social media is providing a new space for the youth of today to express their thoughts and ideas to the world. Whether it is sharing a 280-character post from Twitter to sharing images and video on Instagram, or joining social groups on Facebook, there are a plethora of places to express oneself, stay connected, and involved in what's happening in the world. Digital communication has become the primary medium for self-expression. We are no longer idly taking in information from an analog radio or a television set. Instead, people are making their radio via podcasts. They are making their TV shows using YouTube. The democratization of information allows

anyone can create a blog and share information with the world. It is no longer controlled only by corporations or news outlets.

Digital communication is ushering in a new wave of social activism with 2.0 causes (Galera 130). The 2.0 signifies the second generation of communication from analog to digital. It is easier now more than ever to join a cause someone views on one of their social media platforms. In the recent past, social activism involved collection signatures from people with a clipboard or stand outside a store to ask for donations. These forms of activism are done today, but now we can sign online petitions and fundraise right from a social media page.

This paper argues that the never-ending cycle of online communication leads to off-line civic engagement. We can see evidence of this in social movements like #blacklivesmatter and the #metoo movement. These social issues started a global discussion about privilege and discrimination, and inspired marches and a new wave of political candidates in the 2018 election. We will explore to what extent these 2.0 causes have influences online political participation and how they have translated to real-world political engagement.

Off-Line: Youth Political Participation

The Institute of Politics at Harvard University conducted a survey with Harvard's undergraduate student about their plans to vote in the 2018 midterm election. The poll has shown that 37 percent of American under 30 said that they "definitely will be voting" in the election (See Figure 1). It is a significant jump from 2014 when 23 percent of young voters said they would vote. The number was at 31 percent in 2010.

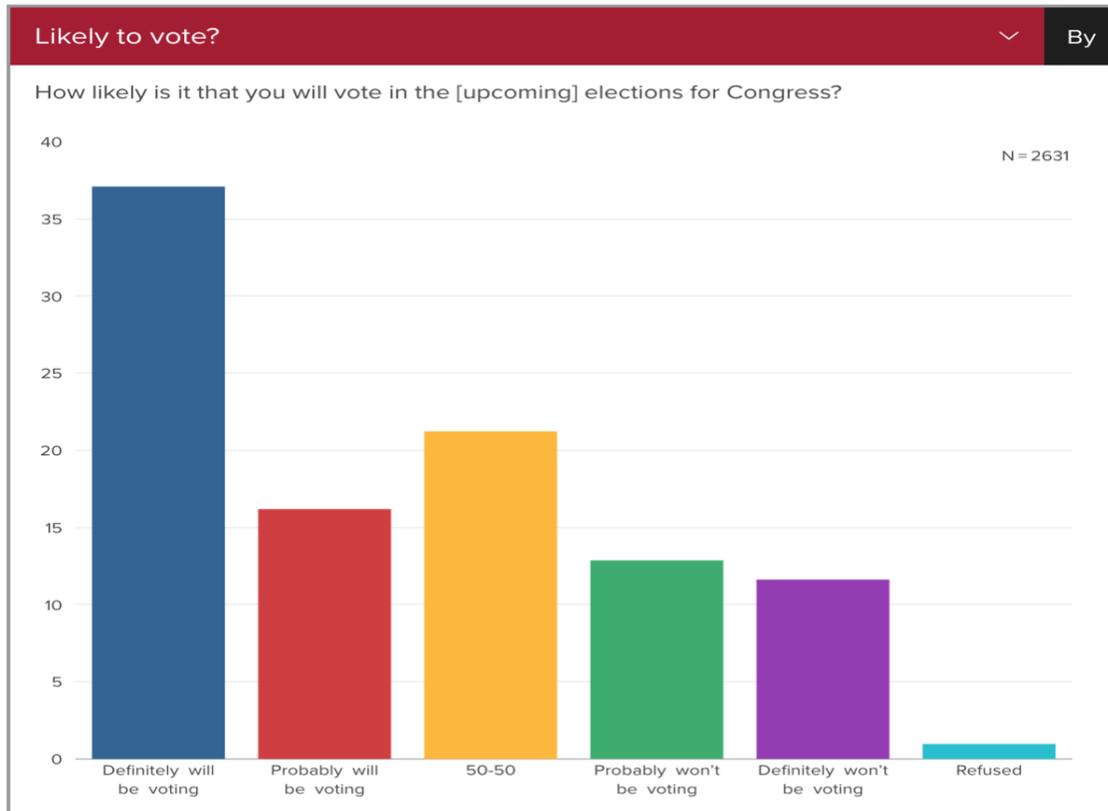


Figure 1. Poll of potential voters between the ages of 18-29 in the 2018 election, Spring 2018. Graph from *Institute of Politics at Harvard University*, The President and Fellows of Harvard College. 2018. iop.harvard.edu/spring-2018-poll.

The results from Harvard University shows a 14 percent increase in voter interest since 2014.

John Della Volpe, Polling Director at Harvard Kennedy School’s Institute of Politics, expressed his opinion on the poll numbers.

“This generation of young Americans is as engaged as we have ever seen them in a midterm election cycle. The concern they have voiced for many years about the direction of the country is

being channeled into a movement that will extend to the midterms elections and beyond” (The President and Fellows of Harvard College 2018).

The increase in voter turnout could be attributed to the divisive climate between the two political parties in the U.S. government or the rise of social media. The youth of today are comfortable expressing their political views through digital channels and having their voices be heard. Except current events are showing that the majority of American's concerns are not acknowledged. For example, we take a look at the March for Our Lives march for gun control that took place in March 2018. The march started with high school students from the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School shooting in Parkland, Florida, which killed 17 students. The protesters used the hashtag #enough on Twitter and other social networks to rally people around their cause.

After the march, political parties brushed off their concerns, and no new legislation was passed to prevent school mass shootings. There are other instances of hashtag activism leading to in-person mobilization, but the effects of these online and offline protests didn't see much political gain in gun legislation. The Atlantic posted a narrative about the March for Our Lives protest and expressed her surprise at how motivated the youth were. *“They still believe that change can happen—that thought defined the day. For gun-control advocates, March for Our Lives brought hope dimmed with much else: loss, trauma, and years of defeat”* (Meyer 2018).

Online: The Rise of Social Media Activism

Pew's Research Center stated that 88 percent of 18 to 29-year-olds are using some form of social media, which shows a majority are using this form of communication to spread their views on the current political climate. The majority of youth are using platforms like Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube. Facebook usage fell by 2 percent. More research is needed on the viability of specific social media channels to spread civic engagement. The social media channel, Instagram, is on the rise from 28 percent to 35% in the U.S. Snapchat users are at 78 percent for 18 to 24-year-old users, but falls to 54 percent for ages 25-29 (Smith & Anderson 2018).

A hashtag (#) followed by a word connects a conversation to a group of Tweets or social media posts based on that subject. The youth are using these hashtags to organize a conversation, and they're often using these hashtags for social change. Galera praised sites like Facebook and Twitter for offering dynamic activism. In this sense, it gives the participator the feeling of being part of something greater. Except this also introduces the concept of *clickactivism* and *slacktivism*, which helps a user feel as if there are active citizens in social discourse, but they're only sharing news articles and "liking" posts about a political movement (Galera 131). Many celebrities are often accused of these faux pas interactions. An example of this was pointed out by Spring-Serenity Duvall and Nicole Heckemeyer from the paper, "#BlackLivesMatter: black celebrity hashtag activism and the discursive formation of a social movement."

Celebrities such as Kim Kardashian tweeted a post about systemic racism, but didn't do anything else to the problem. (Duvall & Heckemeyer 404). However, celebrities have the power to attract millions of viewers to a cause. Galera argues that the act of sharing a friend's tweet is a

way of participating in social engagement, and it can often inspire others to engage in a political movement in real life. Galera researched a group of students in Spain and found that young people care about causes more if they affected them personally. Global events had less youth involvement, but what was most striking about Galera's research is that 50 percent of the students stated that social media increased their social engagement. In the same results, 20 percent of the group had no prior interest in politics until they saw the issue on their social networks. Galera's results align with Joseph Kahne and Benjamin Bowyer's research paper, "The Political Significance of Social Media Activity and Social Networks." They found that when information is shared from a friend, the act of civic engagement becomes contagious. Online participation increases. Although, when political information is shared through interest-driven channels, an example would be from a video game group or a soccer sports group, had a statistically significant correlation with off-line activity. Also, the size of a friend's social network promoted participatory politics (Kahne & Bowyer 13).

Celebrity Engagement From #Blacklivesmatter to the #Metoo Movement

The importance of a celebrity following shouldn't be ignored when discussing social media and youth civic engagement. The Black Lives Movement was started by Oppal Tometi, Patrisse Cullors, and Alicia Garza after the acquittal of George Zimmerman, the man who shot and killed Trayvon Martin. The movement highlights the systemic racism in U.S. society against African Americans. It includes the mass incarceration of black people and police brutality against black and brown individuals. The movement started the hashtag #blacklivesmatter or #blm for short on

Twitter. Duvall and Heckemeyer emphasized the importance of the hashtag. “#BLM-related hashtag #SayHerName, can contribute to collective identity formation” (Duvall & Heckemeyer 397). In other words, the hashtag creates a sense of community and a collective identity one can rally behind. The hashtag spreads to other social media channels, and celebrities, as well as average citizens, used it to continue an online discussion about racism. The #blm movement mobilized individuals to protest off-line and vote out certain elected officials in the police force. The same energy is spreading through the #metoo movement, which was started by Tarana Burke, an African American woman, who felt silenced by sexism and her stories about sexual harassment and assault. The movement Burke states, "It started with young people, and I quickly realized adults needed it too," she said. (Santiago & Criss 2018). Actress Alyssa Milano tweeted a link to Burke and helped mobilize the movement, which has inspired protests around the world. “Spike Lee used his smartphone to capture a march in New York for the Black Lives Matter movement and used the hashtag #blm, further advertising the movement (Duvall and Heckemeyer 401). Duvall and Heckemeyer argue that having celebrities advocate for an online social movement validates and amplifies it. The theory is supported by Kahne and Bowyer who showed a statistical correlation between the number of followers and the ability to start online civic engagement. Taylor Swift boldly stated her political beliefs to her followers on Instagram to get out at vote. Swift once a Republican, changed her party allegiance for the Democratic party. As a direct result of her statement, 100,000 new voters registered the same day (Calfas 2018).

Conclusion

Social media is one tool to increase youth civic engagement. Hashtag activism has gone through significant criticism including the rise of slacktivism with only "liking" a post on social media and not using the information to make a donation or protest offline. Recent findings prove that even participating in online discussions increases a person's interest in civic engagement. The youth of today appear to see that it isn't enough to only post on social media. The evidence lies in the research studies. The Institute of Politics at Harvard has seen a 14 percent increase in 18 to 29-year-old voters. The hashtag movement mobilized a generation to protest in the streets and involve friends in political discussion. Social media is a tool which works synonymously with off-line civic engagement. Creating a video, sharing a post, or creating a blog is a step in the right direction for improving off-line social engagement.

References

- Calfas, Jennifer. "Taylor Swift's Instagram Post Spurred More Voters to Register." *Time*, Time, 9 Oct. 2018, time.com/5419276/taylor-swift-instagram-post-voter-registration-spike/.
- Duvall, Spring-Serenity, and Nicole Heckemeyer. "#BlackLivesMatter: Black Celebrity Hashtag Activism and the Discursive Formation of a Social Movement." *Celebrity Studies*, vol. 9, no. 3, Feb. 2018, pp. 391–408., doi:10.1080/19392397.2018.1440247.
- Galera, M^a Del Carmen García, et al. "Youth Empowerment through Social Networks. Creating Participative Digital Citizenship." *Communication & Society*, vol. 30, no. 3, 2017, pp. 129–140., doi:10.15581/003.30.3.129-140.
- "Institute of Politics Spring 2018 Youth Poll." *The Institute of Politics at Harvard University*, The President and Fellows of Harvard College, 2018, iop.harvard.edu/spring-2018-poll.
- Kahne, Joseph, and Benjamin Bowyer. "The Political Significance of Social Media Activity and Social Networks." *Political Communication*, vol. 35, no. 3, May 2018, pp. 470–493., doi:10.1080/10584609.2018.1426662.
- Meyer, Robinson. "A Generation Under Siege." *The Atlantic*, Atlantic Media Company, 27 Mar. 2018, www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2018/03/march-for-our-lives/556475/.
- Santiago, Cassandra, and Doug Criss. "An Activist, a Little Girl and the Heartbreaking Origin of 'Me Too!'" *CNN*, Cable News Network, 17 Oct. 2017, www.cnn.com/2017/10/17/us/me-too-tarana-burke-origin-trnd/index.html.
- Smith, Aaron, and Monica Anderson. "Social Media Use 2018: Demographics and Statistics | Pew Research Center." *Pew Research Center: Internet, Science & Tech*, Pew Research Center: Internet, Science & Tech, 19 Sept. 2018, www.pewinternet.org/2018/03/01/social-media-use-in-2018/.

Lori Moody
LIS 791
November 1, 2018
Social Media, Hashtag Activism,
and Youth Civic Engagement