

Youth Political Participation through Facebook in Pakistan

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Abstract

This research paper is aimed to explore how young adults understand and experience political engagement on Facebook. Some scholars suggest that traditional, active forms of political participation may be declining. However, other findings suggest that young adults may be choosing to engage in politics through non-traditional avenues, including facebook. To explore this possibility, 10 in-depth interviews conducted to investigate the nature of youth's political participation on Facebook. The data suggest that Facebook is a meaningful space for political engagement among youth. Moreover, it is helpful to think about Facebook as a place for political expression and talk.

Keywords:

Political engagement, facebook, non-traditional, in-depth interviews, expression.

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper discusses traditional definitions of political participation, and findings that suggest traditional forms of participation are decreasing, especially among youth. Later on alternative perspectives suggested that political participation is not disappearing, rather social and economic shifts have led younger generations to participate in new ways, for instance social networks like Facebook for political purposes (Bang, 2005; Bang & Sørensen, 1999; Bennett, 1998; Dalton, 2006; 2008).

It summarizes research about how the internet is being used for political participation, and how specific features of the internet are changing participation. Then, it was demonstrated that why Facebook is an important space for an exploration of youth's everyday political participation. Furthermore, it asserts that the norms surrounding political participation and social engagement on Facebook have an important impact on participation, and a study about participation on Facebook is incomplete without a consideration of such norms. Theoretical perspectives such as social learning theory (Bandura, 1977), models of self-presentation (Goffman, 1959), the influence of perceived opinion climate-spiral of silence theory (Noelle-Neumann, 1974) and the concept of

political efficacy provide insight into youth's everyday political engagement on Facebook.

Youth are an integral part of any society. Participation in civil society activities assures that youth are keenly engaged in shaping their future. Young people need to be involved in decision making processes that help to shape their own socio-economic environment. Thus youth is the backbone of society and plays a major role in shaping up a mature, conscientious society. Political conversation is accepted as an essential element of any democratic political system. In order to discuss the participation of youth in politics, first it is necessary to understand the term politics.

Politics is the art or science of government or governing, especially the governing of a political entity, such as nation, and the administration and control of its internal and external affairs.

Participation is the main way citizens can express their needs and desires and influence the distribution of important resources (Barber, 1984; Habermas, 1996; Verba&Nie, 1972). However, a number of scholars have recently drawn attention to apparent declines in these forms of political participation, particularly among youth (Bennett, 2008; Putnam, 2000; Zukin, Keeter, Andolina, Jenkins, & DelliCarpini, 2006). Evidence suggests, however, that the internet is being used as a space for engaging in different types of political talk and activity, especially among youth who may feel unwelcome in more traditional political spaces (Schlozman et al., 2010; Smith et al., 2009).

Pakistan has a long history of youth politics and students have played a major role in shaping the directions taken by the state and the government of Pakistan. The history of Pakistani politics reveals a long, influential and revolutionary role of student politics in national affairs. Students have often served as ideological vanguards for larger political movements, as well as powerful actors in their own right within the political landscape. The huge turnout in the May 2013 general election increased political participation of young Pakistanis, the role and potential of the youth promises to be more influential than ever before. The difference appears in the way of participation.

A survey by the British Council showed less than 30 per cent support for democracy among

young Pakistanis, the same survey showed that over 60 per cent intended to vote in the May 2013 elections. A CCE survey showed that over 80 per cent of young Pakistanis felt that greater youth involvement in democracy would be beneficial. This suggests that while young people have low enthusiasm for current political options, they are eager for greater participation and representation in the political process.

1.1. Limitations

In Pakistan the trend of youth participation is not common till now but the number is increasing with the passage of time. Interviews of only 10 young adults including both male and female interested in politics have been taken so the number of interviewees likely does not represent the average individuals in their age group.

1.2. Research Questions

To explore youth's political participation on Facebook, following research questions have been examined:

RQ₁: How do youth define and describe political participation on Facebook?

RQ₂: How do social norms affect youth's political participation on Facebook?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Aday et al., (2010) suggest that new media tools promote freedom, expedite the process of democratization and empower activists to fight against despotic regimes. Blogs, Twitter, Facebook and YouTube as new media forms have played a major role in political conflicts particularly with reference to Middle East politics. 'Arab Spring' has popularized the notion of social media affecting politics. According to the World Internet Users and Population Stats, Egypt falls in the top twenty countries with the highest number of internet users. Nugroho and Syarief (2012) in their study about new 'media and political process in contemporary Indonesia' shown Facebook statistics that Indonesia is the 4th largest Facebook nation in the world in 2012, after the US, Brazil, and India in terms of absolute users.

"Societies have always been shaped more by the nature of the media by which men communicate than by the content of the communication" (McLuhan, 1967)

Scholars are quite pessimistic about Facebook's role in strengthening the deliberative aspect of public sphere. Instead, they argue, that while broadening communication, has also led to

increased fragmentation. Some argue that Facebook can further erode collective life through dangerous balkanization with extremism as the potential outcome. The Youth and Participatory Politics study defines participatory politics as interactive, peer-based acts through which individuals and groups seek to exert both voice and influence on issues of public concern. Examples of participatory political acts include starting a new political group online, writing and disseminating a blog post about a political issue, forwarding a funny political video to one's social network, or participating in a poetry slam.

2.1. Political Usage of Facebook in Pakistan:

In Pakistan social media particularly facebook is getting popularity especially among youth. According to Kugelman (2012) social media in Pakistan as a communication tool is used in five ways; breaking stories ignored by traditional media; mobilizing people for social and other campaigns; promoting and coordinating humanitarian aspects of issues and problems; activist for social causes; and accelerating communication between politicians and their publics.

People are using new media for launching campaigns, motivating and mobilizing people to take desired action. Restoration of judiciary in 2009 is a conspicuous example of this mobilization. NICL, Steel Mills, Hajj Scam are a few examples that faced criticism and pressures from social media. "The YouTube videos of soldiers engaging with the local population, playing football with children and saving a kidnapped Iraqi is an effort to humanize an inhuman war" (Karatzogianni, 2009, p. 4). During the catastrophes like earthquake of 2005 and floods of 2010, new media helped people to promote and coordinate humanitarian aspects.

Regarding political disagreements, Zaller (1999) compare the old dynamics of politics with the new ones. He writes, "In the old days, political disagreements were settled in backroom deals among party big shots... But in the new environment, disagreements are fought out in the mass media and settled in the court of public opinion. The weapons of combat are press conferences, photo opportunities, news releases, leaks to the press, and 'spin.' When the stakes are especially high, TV and radio advertisements may be used. Politicians still make backroom deals, but only after their relative strength have been established in the public game of media politics." New media has expedited this process and provided

maximum opportunities to people to participate in this game.

2.2. Social Norms of Facebook Political Participation

Although Facebook users clearly participate in some political activities, a key point to remember is that Facebook is first of all a social space (boyd, 2010). It is a fact that political participation is strongly influenced by social relationships. More recent studies have shown that youth whose parents, teachers or friends talk about politics are more likely to be interested in political events and activities (Dostie-Goulet, 2009). As Facebook users engage in political activities alongside their peers online, it stands to reason that users influence each other's political activities on the site (Robertson et al., 2009).

To understand possible contributions of the new information technologies towards political progress it is important to consider them within the context of society.

Early psychology experiments demonstrated that individuals conformed because they wanted to act appropriately, or desired to be like their peers. Vitak et al. (2011) found that Facebook users are somewhat comfortable when friends share their political views; they also noted that users are less comfortable when being persuaded to vote or support a specific candidate. If Facebook users do impact each other's participation, a study of such participation is incomplete without a consideration of the norms of political participation in social spaces.

2.3. Social learning theory

Bandura's (1977) social learning theory also offers insight into how social norms might affect political activities on Facebook. Bandura posits that people learn from one another via observation, imitation and modeling. The theory has often been called a bridge between behaviorist and cognitive learning theories because it encompasses attention, memory and motivation. Bandura argued that people rely partially on the experiences of others to determine whether or not they should engage in a particular behavior. In the case of political participation, these findings mean that individuals who witness political activity on Facebook are more likely to engage in political behaviors. Indeed, Vitak et al. (2011) found that individuals who watch others engage in political activities on Facebook are more likely to join in these activities as well, suggesting that perceptions of political participation do influence behavior on the site.

2.4. Model of self-presentation

Studies of self-presentation and identity management suggest that individuals control their self-images by highlighting certain information about them for others to see (Goffman, 1959). People use to behave differently in front of others depending on the goals of that situation. People control their behaviors according to the requirement of situation. Leary (1996) added that individuals manage self-presentation by sharing or withholding their opinions about different topics. When individuals do share their opinions and attitudes, others infer a great deal about them based on these opinions. This process of selective self-presentation clearly takes place on Facebook, where individuals can choose to include or exclude information such as their political views from their profiles.

2.5. Theory of spiral of silence (Opinion Climate)

The phrase "spiral of silence" actually refers to how people tend to remain silent when they feel that their views are in the minority. Noelle-Neumann (1974) argued that the closer a person believes the opinion held is similar to the prevailing public opinion, the more they are willing to openly disclose that opinion in public. As the perceived distance between public opinion and a person's personal opinion grows, the more unlikely the person is to express their opinion. Wyatt et al. (1996) found that a main reason individuals refrain from sharing their opinions is to be polite and avoid hurting others' feelings. Social norms may keep individuals from expressing their political opinions for fear of upsetting others.

However, as Wyatt et al. (2000) demonstrated, there are situations where people are comfortable discussing politics. As Facebook is a space that is both public (boyd, 2010), and a space where individuals gather with friends and acquaintances (Ellison et al., 2007), it is worth considering when or where users feel comfortable expressing political opinions on Facebook, and to whom they feel comfortable expressing those opinions.

3. METHODS

In order to examine how youth define political acts and participation on Facebook and examine the role of social norms in their perceptions, 20 in-depth interviews conducted with 10 college-aged Facebook users. Kvale (1996; p.2) describes the qualitative interview as "literally an *interview*, an inter-change of views between two persons conversing about a theme of mutual

interest”. Qualitative interviews are designed to help participants tell stories about events they have experienced, and they result in personal, detailed descriptions that cannot be easily obtained by other methods of inquiry.

The phenomenon of Facebook participation is still relatively new and unexplored, a qualitative approach helped provide rich data about the participation and norms of participation that operate in the space, providing what Geertz called “thick description.” At the same time, a qualitative approach allows the researcher to be open to new experiences that help describe the phenomena of interest. Through the interviews, participants indicated that online discussion was meaningful because it allowed them to talk to individuals from diverse places, hear different perspectives, develop a sense of public opinion, and think about their own views on political issues.

3.1. Research Design

Approximately 30 potential interviewees were identified, and 10 were ultimately selected for inclusion in this paper, and contacted via email, or phone to arrange the interviews. All 10 interviewees in the sample were between the ages of 22-27, and selected from two different universities including NUML and FUAAST. They were most likely to engage in non-traditional forms of political participation. Finally, all participants were Facebook users who have engaged in or seen political things on Facebook. Each interview was recorded and later transcribed. The interviews took place over a three week period, and each lasted approximately 45 minutes. Data analyzed by discourse analysis. Generally, discourse analysis refers to the study of language as it is used to give meaning to concepts and ideas (Taylor, 2001).

4. FINDINGS & ANALYSIS

To demonstrate the political participation of youth in Pakistan on facebook, I have taken 10 interviews with students of age 22-27. These interviews revealed the importance of facebook usage for political expression, and its consequences.

4.1. Definition of Politics on Facebook

The definition of politics on facebook was required to discuss with participants to explore how interview participants understand political issues and topics, and to identify the specific topics and issues that youth include in their discussions about political participation on Facebook. Interview participants frequently described political things as related to the government, in line with many

traditional definitions of politics. Political participation on facebook includes *liking* political figures, diffusing their vision, joining political groups and commenting on posts related to politics. The discussions with students also supported the idea that communication and political action are not easily separable.

Although participants came up with a variety of different purposes and goals for political engagement through Facebook, the following explanations recurred throughout the interviews: To express beliefs, to vent or release strong emotions, to start discussions or arguments, to provide information or raise awareness, and to organize or motivate others. Taylor (2001) suggests that the ways youth think about and talk about ideas gives those concepts importance and meaning.

Sana, 24, expressed her views regarding definition of politics as all the topics relevant to government. The activities of government officials, government initiatives, schemes and budget introduced by government and etc are the topics that come under the definition of politics. I use to like and read the posts thoroughly that are neutral and supports my thoughts. In my point of view posts that mock people of other culture, religion or society are unacceptable posts.

Khadija, 26, defined politics on facebook as all international and national issues that revolves around election campaigns, political campaigns, opponent parties, foreign relations, and provincial government matters and so on. I do like, comment and share on political posts. People are free to take part in politics as they like but sensitive issues like terrorism which may harm others' sentiments are unacceptable.

Ehsan, 22, replied in question regarding definition of politics as, all the government initiatives, government officials' speeches and their performances mostly contrary to their speeches. I take participation in voting and other political polls as well shared on facebook. Furthermore, I like and comment on friends' political posts as well and also motivate others to take interest in such kind of matters. Everything against the national interest is unacceptable to me.

Moiz, 27, responded similarly as Khadija and included public affairs, relations of government with other countries and government activities in definition of politics. Moiz said, I send invitation to others to join political pages, and also ask them to take part in rallies or political marches out of facebook. I do share and comment on political posts as well. To me all those posts are acceptable

which resembles and supports our culture and are in interest of public rather government. Informative posts are also acceptable to me.

Maleeha, 26, expressed her views on definition of politics as; basically politics is all about government and opponent parties, like what measures which party is taking to solve public issues. Favoring or denying one's party's views is also included in politics. I use to like, comment and share regarding political posts. I like to raise my voice on facebook regarding politics and try to present logics neutrally by posting video or images with my arguments. People sometimes blindly supports to their parties despite of analyzing their performances. So those posts are unacceptable to me if blindly supporting element is there.

Waqar, 22, defined politics on facebook in terms of government officials' activities, their visits, their statements, and what advancements have been done since those officials elected. Once I had unfriend my co-worker due to argumentation on politics that's why I usually like the political posts so that nobody may get upset by my comments. Those posts are unacceptable to me that carries aggressive attitude towards a particular party and such posts where comments turned towards abusive language.

Alina, 19, thinks politics on facebook changes with time. For instance, during election campaign all users share or comment in favor or against a party or try to motivate others as well to vote for their party. Once election held then the focus of discussion turns towards elected political figures and discussing their pitfalls. I use to like and comment on political posts but with some preservatives. I have also joined all the leading parties' pages to keep watch on their activities and I also upload update of current political issues. I think everyone is free to share his or her views on facebook so aggression should be avoided while someone does not agree with any post.

Saqib, 24, gave mix definition of politics with religious posts. In his point of view people sometimes get on others' nerves by imposing their views which should be avoided as facebook is free to speak space. Sometimes people divert political posts towards religious one, for instance sensitive issues like terrorism need to be define. Such posts should be avoided and are unacceptable to me.

Naveed, 25, included all internal and international affairs of government level. Politics on facebook also includes the raising of voice in support of innocents of other countries. As we saw few days ago people has been uploading the symbol of hand as their display picture to show

their support for Egypt's protest. I fully participate by sharing and commenting on political posts. I like to start discussions or arguments to mould the beliefs of others to help them in taking right decision.

Maryam, 27, shared his views while defining politics on facebook as the other participants. Maryam said, I also use facebook for donation and other political and social causes. I share such posts to motivate others to take part in such causes.

4.2. Social Norms and Political Topics

Not only it is important to look at the topics youth describe as political ones, it is also necessary to examine whether or not youth view such topics as acceptable ones to address on Facebook. To explain why these topics were okay, nearly all participants emphasized strongly that Facebook should be an "open forum" for free speech and expression. The interview questions were also designed to explore which actions youth considered to be *acceptable* or *unacceptable* in the space. Another unexplored part of political participation on Facebook is how language reveals and affects participants' views of political participation. However, the language used in political posts was arguably one of the most important factors determining whether interview participants viewed a particular post as acceptable or unacceptable.

Sana, 24, replied in question of why people hesitate to participate in political posts as; usually people hesitate to share their views due to fear of hurting others. I think political posts are acceptable because I cannot disagree with the beliefs of others and it would be inappropriate if I impose my beliefs on others. Facebook is a space for free speech and it helps in practicing political skills and developing a political voice.

Khadija, 26, expressed his views as; in a democratic country, people are given freedom of speech so they should avail this opportunity I guess. Facebook is a space where people may release their emotions but some people who are reserve in nature hesitate to put their complete image in front of others by not sharing his/ her opinions.

Ehsan, 22, said youth should come forward to take part and interest in politics to change the traditional trend of politics. Many people follow such political posts due to their friends and acquaintances as I also started engage in political posts and pages to have conversation with friends on current political issues.

Moiz, 27, responded as; I am affiliated with a political party so it is obvious for me to agree with the acceptance of sharing more and more political posts. These posts pave way for entrance of youth in politics and also increase their knowledge of politics and ongoing issues.

Maleeha, 26, expressed her views by appreciating the sharing of political posts. Many people do not share or comment on political posts due to lack of interest in politics due to politicians' empty words. They found no use of arguing with people and consider it waste of time. But it does not mean political posts are unacceptable as they are source of information.

Waqar, 22, replied in favor of political posts as; political posts are acceptable to me because facebook is a space to speech freely. If anyone is not interested then he or she will avoid it and who are interested may take part. People mostly like such kind of posts even if they do not like such posts because it is a diplomatic action. By doing this they partially become part of it.

Alina, 19, shared her opinion as; my nature is peaceful so when I feel that person on another side is rigid in his views, I quit from that post as I do not want to hurt anyone by my words or actions.

Saqib, 24, expressed his views as; political posts are acceptable to me as they also work as bridge between government officials or political activists and public. Young individuals believe he or she has the ability to influence the political system so they are engaging more in political participation in my point of view. People who hesitate to participate are lack of courage to go against the opinion of majority.

Naveed, 25, replied as; term politics is different to everyone. People share political posts what they consider acceptable. I am none to decide but I agree that people should share political posts. Fear of being isolated or going against majority is the basic reason people hesitate to share their views regarding politics. That's why many anonymous accounts have also been seen on facebook so that they may share what they like.

Maryam, 27, responded as; social norms sometimes become obstacle to participate in politics on facebook. People feel bound themselves due to social relations. As one of my friends avoid commenting in favor of a political person because her friends and social circle then start to give logics against that political figure.

5. CONCLUSION

If we look at the history of Pakistani politics it has always been dominated by few families and dictators. The history tells us that political parties have always used the youth to achieve their political targets and the *role of youth in Pakistani politics* has always been limited. In recent times, a hope arose in the shape of youth participation through social networking. It created optimism, a fresh wave of breath. Young intellectuals are given importance, and it seemed finally Pakistan is on the verge of revolution.

There is not much hope that the current situation would change in the near future. Internet World Stats (2012) show that there is only 15.5% Pakistanis who have internet facility in the total population that is 187,342,721. Since Pakistan has a large number of illiterate people, they are unable to use social media directly. That's why Pakistan is left behind in the run of social media usage.

Despite the troublesome situation, there has emerged a ray of hope. The only pleasant change in the election campaigns of 2013 that all the political parties have realized the importance of youth. Now is the time for youth to take the responsibility and play their role to change the conventional political system in Pakistan. So if residents of Pakistan want to bring true revolution in Pakistan then youth needs to participate and try hard to change this system.

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