Will Facebook Encourage Citizen Participation?

The Case of Taiwan Legislators' Facebook Strategies

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ABSTRACT

Facebook, the most popular social media in the world, has changed the ways of citizen involvement in governance. Politicians and (elected) public administrators worldwide have adopted Facebook as an important approach to connect with citizens. This study explores whether the Facebook phenomenon can improve the process of online political communication and citizen participation. The study adapts a content analysis method and proposes six strategies for analyzing Facebook page posts of Taiwanese legislators. The authors compare Facebook posts during both election and regular sessions to see the difference in patterns of these posts and communication strategies adopted by the legislators. The findings reveal that a percentage of e-participation achieves an acceptable rate, but most communication of legislator Facebook is one way. The results indicate that legislators' Facebook is another platform to distribute public information to citizens, and many have potential to create more public values.

KEYWORDS

Campaign Strategy, Electronic Participation, Facebook, Legislator, Web 2.0

INTRODUCTION

As Web 2.0's sharing, interaction, and collective creation platforms become increasingly commonplace, a democratically-oriented Internet environment has been created which draws upon the fields of public administration and political communication. Facebook, which is dominant with more than 1.59 billion monthly active users as of 2015, now is the most popular Web 2.0 and social media in the world (Statista, 2016). As access has increased, Facebook has changed ways of citizen involvement in public governance and has even contributed to social change in countries such as Egypt and Iran. Scholars believe that social media could play an instrumental role in promoting open governance, strengthening the government to citizen relationship, motivating citizen participation,

and fostering transparency in the public sector (Bertot, Jaeger, & Grimes, 2010; Khan, Yoon, Kim, & Park, 2014; Patrice, 2010).

Social media have become increasingly popular as channels that enable political participation. In the aftermath of the 2016 presidential elections in the United States, Trump had 17.6 million followers on Twitter, having used Twitter as a main information channel during the campaign (Enli, 2017). Politicians and public administrators worldwide have adopted social media to communicate with citizens (Bronstein, 2013; Samuel-Azran, Yarchi, & Wolfsfeld, 2015). Following the trend, most legislators in Taiwan[1] have created personal Facebook accounts and Facebook pages as an additional way of reaching potential voters and communicating with the public. Legislators can thus efficiently organize their supporters and directly communicate with their "friends." On the one hand, legislators' Facebook pages seem to offer the promise of electronic participation (e-participation), reaching out to citizens on a common platform and allowing for citizen feedback (Schweitzer, 2005; Graham, Jackson, & Broersma, 2016). On the other hand, citizens can establish a link to legislators via the information-sharing, dialogue, and consensus-building features of Facebook (Schweitzer, 2005; Robertson, Vatrapu, & Medina, 2010). If two-way communication works properly and successfully, Facebook is effectively able to create increased citizen participation and strengthen public values (Emerson, Nabatchi, & Balogh, 2012).

The purposes of this study were to investigate differences in communication strategies and patterns of legislators' Facebook strategies between election periods and regular legislative sessions. In addition, we are exploring in terms of the Facebook phenomenon whether such strategies can improve the degree of online political communication and citizen participation, utilizing Taiwan legislators' use of Facebook as a case study.

The paper is organized as follows. In section two, we first discuss the development of citizen participation and particularly the trend of e-participation. We also utilize studies on political campaigns and election websites to summarize a list of issues commonly addressed by politicians and (elected) public administrators on their websites and blogs, such as calling for change, mobilization and participation, emphasis on the future, nostalgia for the past, moral appeal, and emphasis on personal characteristics. We apply content analysis to review and compare differences in communication strategies and patterns of Facebook posts of legislators in Taiwan during elections and regular legislative sessions. We summarize the methodological approach in section three, present the results of content analysis in section four, and in the final section we discuss how the lessons we learn from this study will help pave the way for future research on political campaigns, e-participation, and e-governance.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Development of Citizen Participation and Electronic Participation

Citizen participation, an accepted foundation of democracy, can be broadly defined as the processes by which public concerns, needs, and values are incorporated into decision-making (Emerson *et al.*, 2012). To improve legitimacy, transparency, accountability, and other democratic values in governance, public managers at all levels of government are expected to engage citizens in various public issues. Citizen participation occurs in many places and takes many forms. Arnstein (1969) first provides a ladder of citizen participation that explains levels of interaction and influence between governments and citizens in the process of decision making from non-participation to citizen power. To review the historical shifts of civic engagement in the United States, Cooper, Bryer, and Meek (2006) introduce a conceptual model to classify traditional forms of citizen participation such as social movements, voting, polling, legislative and administrative hearings, public forums, and citizen jury into five categories: adversarial approach, electoral approach, legislative and administrative information, civil society, and deliberative approach.

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