Chapter 86
Political Behavior in Social Network Sites

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ABSTRACT

The increasing popularity of social network sites (SNSs), such as Facebook, MySpace, LinkedIn, YouTube, and Twitter, in political campaigns and governance, has captivated researchers in the past several years. This entry aims to provide a comprehensive review and synthesis of the burgeoning empirical research literature on political behavior in SNSs by leading researchers from various fields. Research domains under review include how citizens use SNSs for political purposes and the effects of SNSs on political attitudes and behavior such as social capital, civic engagement, and political participation, how candidates and voters utilize SNSs during election campaigns, how governmental institutions employ SNSs, and the potential dark side of SNSs such as selective exposure and political polarization. Finally, future research directions of the field are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Social network sites (SNSs) are online communities that allow users to "(1) construct a public or semi-public profiles within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within

the system" (boyd & Ellison, 2007, p. 211). SNS profiles are used to share identity information and facilitate communication. Although SNSs share many features of earlier communication technologies, they are unique in their ability to facilitate interactions and articulate one's networks. Such communities are centered on the purpose of connecting with others (Kaye, 2010). The use of SNSs, such as Facebook, MySpace, LinkedIn, YouTube, and Twitter, has become commonplace

in recent years. Currently, 69% of adult American Internet users use an SNS (Smith, 2011). dahah m. boyd and Nicole B. Ellison (2007), pioneers in SNSs research, began defining, reviewing, and synthesizing SNSs research. Their comprehensive review maps out the conceptual themes and tools of SNSs in politics and other fields. Currently a multitude of research concerning SNS uses and their effects is flourishing in a variety of domains.

SNSs are increasingly used for political campaigns and governance, ushering researchers in a new era of research. The purpose of this entry is to provide an overview of the history, current knowledge, and future research directions on political behavior in SNSs. Political behavior is broadly defined as the attitudes and activities that aim at directly or indirectly influencing the selection of elected officials and/or the development and implementation of public policy (Delli Carpini, 2004). Specifically, this entry attempts to provide a comprehensive review and synthesis of the emerging empirical research literature on political behavior in SNSs by leading researchers, including: (1) uses and gratifications of SNSs; (2) campaign uses of SNSs; (3) credibility issues in SNSs; (4) social capital; (5) political participation of SNS users; (6) the uses of SNSs by governmental institutions; and (7) the dark side of SNSs such as selective exposure and political polarization. Lastly, future research directions will be discussed.

OVERVIEW: POLITICAL BEHAVIOR IN SNSs

SNSs did not gain mainstream popularity until 2003 (boyd & Ellison, 2007). SNSs, especially popular among young people, enable citizens to establish a member profile, provide online venues to connect to existing offline relationships (boyd & Ellison, 2007, p. 221) and potential new friends, and view other members' connections. Individuals are increasingly using SNSs for political purposes. According to the Pew Research Center's Internet

and American Life Project, 22% of adult Internet users in 2010 reported using SNSs for politically-related activities (Smith, 2011). Of those, 45% of young SNS users (ages 18-29) reported using SNSs for political purposes during the 2010 midterm elections (Smith, 2011). Additionally, users who use SNSs for political purposes tend to do so mainly for social reasons (Kaye, 2010).

Scholars have begun to examine political uses of SNSs and the impact such uses have on individuals. Existing political research pertaining to SNSs has focused on examining the use of Facebook though many other SNSs exist (e.g., Kaye, 2010; Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007). Therefore, one major area of research is types of users of SNSs, their different levels of political uses of SNSs and the diverse motivations for visiting political SNSs from a uses and gratifications perspective (e.g., Kaye, 2010).

A related area of research is how voters and candidates use SNSs in election campaigns. Voters can use SNSs to express political beliefs, seek and share political information, connect with others, and coordinate groups in support of a candidate. On the other hand, candidates can use SNSs to better communicate with their constituents, advocacy groups, political parties, and news media and to mobilize voters. Candidate SNSs with their unique features of interactivity and personal flavor create a sense of social relationships with the constituents. In addition, for the first time during the 2008 presidential campaign, SNSs provided the opportunity to connect with within SNSs the potential voters who were already hanging out. That is, voters did not need to visit a candidate's Website but could be pushed to campaign materials while using his or her social network sites (Sweetser, 2011). SNSs such as Facebook also have the potential to facilitate dialogue with voters, as evidenced by Kaye D. Sweetser and Ruthann Weaver Lariscy's (2008) research.

Governmental institutions and elected officials also use SNSs in order to serve their constituents better by increasing transparency, responsiveness,

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