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Politics on Social Networking Sites

'Politics' is not a word that is taken lightly. The word itself comes with a catalog of connotations and opinions, thus it seems odd to associate the word with social networking sites often perceived as frivolous places for teenagers. Yet Facebook and other social networking sites are revolutionizing the way in which political discourse is conducted. The fast-paced, constantly connected nature of these sites not only expands friendships, but is exceptionally useful in recreating a more intimate and active political environment. Typically, the youngest generation of Americans' eligible to vote are assumed to have an apathetic attitude toward politics; however, political discourse and involvement on social networking sites suggest the opposite: an increase in political involvement. While the nature of politics on social networking sites is a double-edged sword, the benefits of stimulating political involvement far outweigh the few negative consequences of conducting politics via social networking sites.

With more than 800 million active Facebook users each connected to an average of 80 community pages, groups, and events, the popularity of social networking sites is undeniable (Facebook.com). The massive amount of social networking site users has not evaded the attention of political figures and candidates. According to a 2008 study conducted by Scott Robertson, "Almost one third of U.S. senate candidates and one in ten U.S. House candidates in 2006 updated their Facebook pages" (Robertson et al.). The significance of this statement should not be overlooked. Social networking sites are increasingly serving as a place to condense political updates and ideas and promote the agendas of politicians. Condensing political information is crucial in engaging youth accustomed to receiving constant tidbits of information. Youth do not often feel compelled to read lengthy articles when concise summaries are available. Additionally, the fact that these politicians have Facebook accounts, let alone use them to promote their political identity, is evidence of a shift in the way politics are presented and discussed by the people. Clearly, politicians see past the societal perception that social networking sites are trivial in content and take advantage of the plethora of information-hungry users.

Moreover, political discourse on social networking sites generates a stronger sense of political importance in the average American. Prior to interactive web pages such as Facebook, citizens had limited means of voicing their opinions to politicians. Now, anybody who has internet access can voice their opinions on presidential candidates, political actions, policies and more. Scott Robertson, author of "Off the wall political discourse: Facebook use in the 2008 U.S. presidential election" argues President Obama's administration recognized the importance of two-way voter/politician interactions.

Central to the Obama Internet effort was the extensive use of social networking systems (SNSs) such as Facebook to involve users in ongoing two-way interactions with the campaign, to enable and encourage users to form online

political coteries among themselves, to facilitate "micro-payments" in the form of campaign contributions, and to

support personalized environments (e.g. "my.barackobama.com") that may engender a stronger sense of participa-

tion and ownership. (Robertson et al.)

Consequently, the ease of participating in politics on social networking sites forges a sense of individual worth. In com-

parison to the mass of bureaucracy rampant in our country, it is quite common to feel as if individual opinions and voices

no longer have consequence. Social networking sites bring back that sense of individual importance by allowing every-

one to have a voice and a more personal connection.

While increased political participation on social networking sites is exciting, it does not necessarily translate into

tangible political participation. The widely used proverb "actions speak louder than words" carries some weight in this

circumstance. Discussing politics without physically voting does little to propel change; thus a study conducted on the

prominence of social networking in the 2008 presidential election argues, "Facebook may be encouraging a rise in

''slacktivism,'' a term that describes participation in Internet-based forms of political participation—such as joining

online groups or signing online petitions—that has little to no real-world impact" (Lampe et al.). However, on the same

note, discussing political issues is certainly better than not, and discussion is the first step toward action. Before social

networking sites, young voters had few places to speak their mind without being ridiculed or patronized. Newspapers

and television programs often welcome the opinions of older, more established and esteemed persons; sadly, this leaves

out the newest generation of voters. Social networking sites provide a place for the layman to share opinions and insights

regardless of age or social status.

Politicians who recognize and exploit the potential of social networking sites more effectively capture the often

ignored youth. In the 2008 presidential election, statistics taken from ProCon.org exemplify just how powerful the

Obama Administration's presence was on Facebook: "On Nov. 3, 2008, the day before the US presidential election,

Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama had 2,379,102 Facebook supporters while Republican candidate John

McCain had 620,359. Obama had 833,161 MySpace friends and McCain had 217,811. Obama had 384% more Facebook

supporters and 383% more MySpace friends than McCain" (procon.org). Evidently, President Obama's campaign more

effectively utilized social networking sites. This correlation of politics on social networking site to the success of politi-

cians may be the cause of the mass amount of politicians and political campaigns with Facebook pages today. In essence,

politicians took note of President Obama's activity of social networking sites and jumped on the internet-savvy band-

wagon in hopes of capturing the attention of young voters.

The accessibility of political information on social networking sites is instrumental in engaging our youth. Today's adolescents are accustomed to fast paced, rapidly changing information; therefore, social networking sites provide the perfect medium to post current information. Not surprisingly, younger generations are turning to social networks for political information. A study conducted by Cliff Lampe states,

> Media use has been associated with greater levels of involvement in civic activities, as well as higher levels of political awareness amongst U.S. adolescents. Young adults aged between 18 and 29 years extensively used the Internet for obtaining election information in 2008: 58% went online for political news, 48% watched a political video online, and 65% of those with SNS profiles performed at least one of five political activities on the site (Lampe et al.).

Clearly, politics have been powerfully integrated into social networking sites, but why? Social networking sites are masters of organizing and categorizing, thereby accessing information on these sites is as simple as typing in a keyword. Information that would otherwise be scattered throughout the internet, newspapers, and television is compiled into one continuously updated source. For example, information on President Obama's latest policies and actions is still available through his Facebook page. Moreover, posts and information from years past is also available via social networking sites. Condensing mass amounts of information into one user-friendly source is appealing to the generation addicted to updating and organizing their virtual worlds.

Furthermore, social networking sites allow youth to explore different political arguments and parties, thus encouraging them to formulate their own political convictions. Social networking sites expose users to an exceptionally broad range of opinions and ideas. Cliff Lampe, Ph.D, supports the notion that social networking sites promote political diversity in his claim,

> Facebook and other SNSs may offer young citizens an opportunity to experiment with their political opinions and beliefs while also being exposed to those of their peers, which could, in turn, stimulate their own interest and knowledge. Likewise, the highly interactive nature of Facebook's News Feed may encourage users to become more active political participants and possibly expand beyond basic forms of engagement to more vigorous and effective political behaviors (Lampe et al.).

Exposure to differing opinions gains perspective and understanding. One cannot truly justify his or her own views if the opposing perspective is not introduced and addressed. Additionally, opinions that may never have occurred to one might

alter previous personal beliefs. Facebook and other similar sites are blind to preconceived biases because it is users who participate in debates and post comments, not politicians swayed by ulterior motives.

Unfortunately, social networking sites undergo scrutiny for both the quality of information on the site and the way in which political information is sought out. Critics argue the political discussions on social networking sites lack quality because of anonymity, exclusion of others, and radical ideas (Baumgartner, Morris). However, this contention is short sighted. Both the extreme opinions and anonymity create a more realistic national opinion. Anonymity is an equalizing factor, as it relieves commentators of the pressure of strictly adhering to the beliefs of their political party or their political reputation; moreover radical opinions are certainly prevalent in society. Furthermore, the claim that social networking sites exclude others is incorrect. Anyone can join a group or view and comment on status updates. In fact, the lack of exclusion is what makes social networking sites an excellent place to discuss politics.

Social networking sites promote free speech. Social networking sites enable users to express ideas, organize rallies, and revolutionize traditional forms of protesting. The importance of an outlet that promotes free speech is exemplified by this statement from ProCon.org,

> During the protests of the Iranian election in June 2009, protestors used Twitter to circumvent government control over phones and the media. Twitter was so important that the US State Department asked Twitter to delay a network upgrade that would have taken the website offline at a busy time of day in Iran. Twitter complied and rescheduled the downtime to 1:30 am Tehran time. The ability to remain anonymous helped protect people who were spreading information in real time (ProCon.org).

Most Americans and much of the world, would agree that free speech is crucial to politics, as the freedom to debate and protest is highly revered in our society. Social networking sites promote the idea of free speech. It is remarkable that a business would aid citizens in their protest against their government not for the sake of profiting, but for the wellbeing of users in a distant country. Social networking sites are revolutionizing the way in which we communicate and protest. Any outlet that allows individuals to speak up for themselves despite the strict control of their nation must certainly be a positive force in politics. Giving the average person an opportunity to express their opinion on the politics of their nation and world is absolutely crucial. Social networking sites allow anyone to challenge or support politicians and policies anytime and anywhere.

Social networking sites promote a more intimate type of politics; a more personal way of communicating and de-

bating ideas that is reminiscent of early American democracy. Free speech, accessibility of information, political diversity, and increased political participation among historically politically apathetic youth are just some of the benefits of conducting politics on social networking sites. Moreover, discussing politics on social networking sites not only engages young potential voters, but broadens our political exposure. Despite criticism, social networking sites are positively revolutionizing traditional, ineffective politics.

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