

Political engagement using New Media: Psychographics and user status of potential voters

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Abstract

To look into the adoption process of New Media for political engagement, the association between psychographics and user status of potential voters was established. Three most relevant psychographic variables - civic consciousness, innovativeness, and personality type - were analysed to study the impact of the personality traits of the respondents on their decision to make political use of New Media. It was assumed that the potential voters' personality attributes come into play in pushing him into using online tools for getting political information. It turned out that innovativeness is the most important psychographic variable in usage/non-usage of New Media by potential voters.

Keywords:

Psychographics, e-campaign, electioneering, M-Politics, online political engagement

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1. Introduction

Even as most young, educated internet-users are increasingly using New Media for getting political information, besides participating in the online political discourse, the psychographic profile of the potential voters also comes into play in terms of adoption of New Media for political use. Factors such as the innovativeness, civic consciousness and personality type have a role in the potential voter's decision to switch to online tools from the traditional methods of political participation and the keenness to gratify his need for political information. The New Media usage by potential voters can be seen in light of Festinger's (1957) theory of cognitive dissonance. Cognitive dissonance can occur when one's positive self-image is challenged by evidence that one's actions are inconsistent with that favourable assessment, says Garrett, R. K. (2009b). Past studies find that people search for online information that strongly supports their political beliefs (Bimber & Davis, 2003; Garrett, 2009; Mende, 2008; Mutz & Martin, 2001). Engaging in political conversation reinforces an individual's pre-existing partisan disposition. Psychological

biases (e.g., homophily) in communication processes primarily account for the partisan reinforcement caused by political conversation. Sveningsson, M. (2015) is of the view that the younger generations are more likely to prefer the actualizing type of citizenship with a citizen has a more individualistic approach to politics and citizenship and a diminished sense of government obligation. Coupled with the attribute of innovativeness in trying out New Media tools and devices, young voters can contribute immensely to the online campaign by accessing, sharing and also generating political content.

A need was felt to analyze the role of psychographics in detail as some past researchers have found that despite the growing popularity of SNS and the efforts of civic and political organizations to adopt these services, there is limited empirical research on the effects of using these services on citizens' political attitudes and civic behaviors (Ellison, Steinfeld & Lampe, 2007, Gil de Zúñiga, H., Jung, N., & Valenzuela, S. 2012). At the same time, it has been established that like demographic, psychographic variables too play a role in use of internet for social tools or other purposes (Citrin, A. V., Sprott, D. E., Silverman, S. N., & Stem Jr, D. E. 2000; Dutta-Bergamn, M.J. 2002; Carlson, T. 2007; Correa, T., Hinsley, A. W., & De Zuniga, H. G. 2010).

Past studies have tried to define who is a good citizen in terms of civic engagement. Bennett W. L., Wells C., Rank A. (2009) point out that dutiful citizens see voting as the core democratic act, become informed about issues and government by following mass media. Giving a new dimension to this, Sveningsson, M. (2015) says the younger generation tends to believe in being “actualizing citizens”, who have a more individualistic approach to politics and citizenship. Unlike the older lot, they experience a diminished sense of government obligation and a higher sense of individual purpose. Analysing the process of online discourse, past studies have noted that more people indulge in social interaction online; more are the chances of participating in online political discourse and sharing of information. This can have a bearing on the potential voters’ political choices and also their tendency to participate politically (McClurg, 2003; Kenny, 1992). Giving a different perspective to commenting and posting of user generated content, Cho, J., Ahmed et al. (2016) say making political opinions public result in reinforcement of one’s stand by way of feedback.

In terms of innovativeness, the very malleability of social media offers the prospect of innovative modes of political communication say Loader, B. D., & Mercea, D. (2011). It facilitates exhortation of Young, I. M. (2000) that testimony, storytelling, greetings and rhetoric can all be employed as discursive forms of democratic engagement capable of enabling a more inclusive democracy.

The personality type of potential voters too comes into play and those open to listening to the opposite political view are likely to spend more time discussing the political scenario on New Media channels. (Johnson, T. J., Zhang, W., & Bichard, S. L. (2010) point out that contrary to the reinforcement paradigm, politically heterogeneous news groups do exist online and selective exposure to political information is due to variables such as political knowledge, political interest, political tolerance. While studying of online groups defined as politically heterogeneous, researchers have found deliberative exchanges among open-minded participants (Albrecht, 2006; Stromer-Galley, 2003; Brundidge, 2006).

2. Research Method

For the study, data was collected through a survey of potential voters with questionnaire posted through e-mail and personal administration to potential voters. The questionnaire comprised open-ended and closed-ended questions and also included scales for

psychographic profiling and Likert scales framed for determining attitudes such as the use to which the potential voter puts online presence of politician. A survey of 150 potential voters was conducted in Punjab and Chandigarh.

3. Results and Analysis

4.1. Psychographics and User Status

The study looked at user status of potential voters in terms of three key psychographic variables - civic consciousness, innovativeness, and personality type. Except for personality type, there was a clear association between the other two variables and adoption of New Media as a source of political information (Refer Table 4.1).

Table 4.1: Significance levels of association between psychographics and User Status

Psychographics	Significance levels		
	Chi-square	df	Significance
Civic Consciousness	9.750	2	.008
Innovativeness	18.932	2	.001
Personality Type	1.217	1	.270

H2 (2): Civic Consciousness is the most important psychographic variable in usage/non-usage of New Media by potential voters.

The data failed to support the hypothesis. The chi square value of 9.750 with p-value of .008 was significant but it was innovativeness that was best associated with user status with p-value of .001. The statistical test used to determine the association was Chi Square.

With use of WhatsApp still catching up among voters in election campaigns during the 2014 and then 2019 Lok Sabha campaigns, especially in the semi-urban and rural areas of Punjab, the personality traits played a role in determining the user status of potential voters. The initial idea of Motivation Theory was given by Deci (1975; 1972; 1971) which says that an individual's behavior is based on different forms of motivations. But later a different line of argument was taken in "Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA)" by Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) that tends to analyse actions of a society by pin pointing the causal connections between "beliefs, attitudes, intentions, and behavior." Davis (1989) developed on the TRA model to propound the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) that focuses on the computer usage behavior and with perceived ease of use and perceived usefulness being the key variables.

4.2. Civic Consciousness differences

A clear impact of civic consciousness on the tendency of a respondent to use New Media is reflected in the fact that none (0%) of the non-users scored high on the civic consciousness scale. Considerable number of respondents (26.5%) with poor civic consciousness too was non-user. However, those with fair degree of civic consciousness have no clear association between usage and non-usage - while 73.5% were non-users, 72.4% were users (Refer Table 4.2).

Table 4.2: Civic Consciousness and User Status

Civic Consciousness	User Status		Total
	Non-user	User	
Poor	9	13	22
Fair	25	84	109
Good	0	19	19
Total	34	116	150

Based on the responses to seven statements, the civic consciousness levels of the respondents were categorised as good, fair and poor. To make the scale more relevant to the current study, there is also a statement pertaining to use of new media to promote civic activism online. Low levels on civic consciousness can affect participation in online political discourse as 26.5% of those in the category are non-users. There is research that suggests that college students are moving away from political participation and voting (Hollander, 1999, Putnam, 1995). Doolittle, A., & Faul, A. C. (2013) says after these indications that young people are turning away from social problems and civic life too have made researchers get attracted to how they socialise (Boyte, 1991; Campbell, 2000; Flanagan, (2003). Wasswa, H. W. (2013) adds that new technology has further widened the gap between the politically active and inactive. The nosedive in civic engagement results in social capital too going down (Coleman, 1988; Lin, 2001; Putnam, 1995). According to Coleman (1988) social capital is linked to our relationships with the objective of bringing about social action. Hyman (2002) is of the view that in order to have social capital, there is need to have purposeful social relationships.

The respondents with high levels of civic consciousness may also act as opinion leaders as described in the Two Step Flow of Communication Model of public opinion formation. Social network by way of online communities on Facebook, blogs can motivate the voters to act on the political information that they have gained directly through new media. In that sense, the reinforcement aspect of communication can be achieved through the alternate route of social influence. Going by Uses and Gratification Theory, political activism on social networking sites may be linked to self-efficacy being a motivation. For instance, participation on Weblogs can help users get valuable insights with that may help them indulge in political activities for or against the existing set up (Kaye 2005).

4.3. Innovativeness differences

A high majority of 60.3% users score high with good innovativeness and none (0%) fall in the poor category. However, 76.5% of those having fair levels of innovativeness are non-users and 39.7 % of those in the category are users. A relatively less percentage (20.6%) of non-users has good levels of innovativeness (Refer Table 4.3).

Table 4.3: Innovativeness and User Status

Innovativeness	User Status		Total
	Non-user	User	
Poor	1	0	1
Fair	26	46	72
Good	7	70	77
Total	34	116	150

Innovativeness is a personality trait exhibited in varying degrees by all individuals in a society, and second that what is measured is this trait (Midgley, D. F., & Dowling, G. R. 1978). English and English (1958) and Wolman (1973) feel the idea of a personality trait is one's consistent characteristic or disposition that helps distinguish him from another. Sociologist Everett M. Rogers broadens the definition even further by referring to innovation as "an idea perceived as new by the individual."

4.4. Personality Type A/B differences

A majority of 80% of the users can be categorized into Personality Type A while a slightly lesser 72% exhibited traits of Personality Type B. (Refer Table A11). Even though a majority of the users tilted towards Type A personality type, there was no clear association between the two variables (Refer Table 4.4). The personality type of the respondents was determined by asking them to choose between 20 sets of two opposite statements. However, there was no clear association between the personality type and use of New Media for political purposes.

Table 4.4: Personality Type A/B and User Status

Personality Type	User Status		Total
	Non-user	User	
Personality type B	14	36	50
Personality type A	20	80	100
Total	34	116	150

Past studies, like the one by Kepler, J, 2010, found that personality traits are relevant in predicting entrepreneurial intention and entrepreneurs' performance. In a way, the adoption of New Media for getting political information is also linked to the urge to take initiative and individuals who are more outgoing and driven are more likely to opt for the information source that could save time with real time updates. The personality traits are often viewed as causes of mental and behavioral processes (John, Naumann, & Soto, 2008).

4. Conclusion

The study found that psychographics of potential voters such as innovation and civic consciousness do play a role in their decision to adopt New Media politically. The entire phenomenon of online political participation involves a shift to online tools to get political information and express one's own views. A voter who scores high on innovativeness is someone who would opt for a smart phone or internet connection on his devices to access political information, in contrast to someone you would not want to make the switch. These results resonate with findings of previous studies that citizens who are active in digital civic engagements are usually 'highly sophisticated, male, middleclass, and young professionals' Min, S. J. (2010), Davis & Owen, 1998; Hill & Hughes, 1998; Norris, 1999).

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