

THE EFFECTS OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON POLITICAL PARTY PERCEPTION AND VOTING BEHAVIOR

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ABSTRACT

This study sought to determine to what extent social media influences political party perception (PPP) and political voting behavior. Based on literature a conceptual model was developed which measures political interest, political trust, religion and the use of social media and their effects on PPP and voting behavior. Using an online questionnaire the conceptual model was tested towards and during the Dutch national elections of 2010. Although data analysis indicates several significant effects on PPP, voting behavior is solely determined by political interest. Certain effects of social media seem evident, though further research is necessary in funding and legitimizing its future role in political marketing.

KEYWORDS

Social Media, Voting, Social Politics, E-Democracy, Political Party Perception.

1. INTRODUCTION

John F. Kennedy was helped into the Whitehouse by a new and popular medium: television. Reflecting the 2008 United States presidential elections perhaps something similar can be stated regarding current President Barack Obama. However, in the new millennium television is replaced by a new medium: social media.

This paper explores a highly debated issue; the effects of social media in politics. Ever since the Obama victory in 2008, much has been said about the influence of social media in the political spectrum. On a global scale politicians are increasingly accepting social media as a modern method for political campaigning. Although many assumptions are done, hardly any scientific research was performed to underline these claims and justify actions. Regardless of these absences, the proposed positive value has been functioning as a catalyst in motivating politicians in their social media appearance and usage. Especially in the Netherlands social media has been a rising star in the political landscape. Applications like Twitter have been dominated by politicians in marketing their political message. Towards the Dutch municipal and general elections in 2010 many politicians and other party representatives used social media in reaching their target group. The intrinsic value of the micro blogging messages is somewhat controversial, especially considering political relevance, yet political visibility seems to be increased.

The purpose of this study is to identify the role of social media in political campaigning. Do social media change regular political strategies and alternate the course of political marketing or do traditional media continue their reigning dominance. Speculation on the effects of social media on political voting behavior resulted in the following research question:

“What are the effects of political social media use on political party perception and voting behavior towards the Dutch general elections of 2010?”

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

During the 2008 elections the Obama campaign team successfully integrated the use of social media (Panagopoulos, 2009) and placed him above competition. This was not the first time media (co) determined

the election outcome. Ever since its introduction media has been a definable factor in political opinion and voting behavior.

2.1 Media Influence: Agenda Setting

The mass media influences political perceptions and codetermines voting behavior (Campus, Pasquino & Vaccari, 2008; Pabjan & Pekalski, 2008; Schmitt-Beck & Mackenrodt, 2010). Multiple election studies documented the significance of the media in political campaigning by claiming agenda-setting theory effects (Campus, Pasquino & Vaccari, 2008; Dunn, 2009; Balmas, & Sheaffer, T, 2010; Nesbitt-Larking, 2010). This explanation theorizes that the media have a strong influence on audiences by their choice of what stories are considered newsworthy and by the amount of prominence these are awarded with. The theory postulate salience transfer. This is regarded as the ability of the news to transfer issues of importance from the media agenda to the public versions. In 1972 McCombs and Shaw (1972) demonstrated the concept of agenda setting, which is defined as the process through which certain issues become more relevant than others. Their agenda-setting hypothesis treated the public agenda as a dependent variable influenced by the independent variable of media agendas (Dunn, 2009). The theory was derived from their study on the role of the media in the 1968 United States presidential campaign. McCombs and Shaw surveyed 100 undecided voters on key issues and reflected those on the actual media content. The outcomes validated their hypothesis. Balmas & Sheaffer (2010) also confirm this theory. In their study on second level agenda setting and affective priming they presented further evidence on media influence on political opinion and voting intention.

Concerning the media effects almost all above publications refer to media in their traditional manifestation. As stated in the introduction the recent impact of social media demands a shift in focus towards these interactive information applications.

2.2 Social Media Campaigning: Introducing Social Politics

So to what extent do social media influence political perceptions, engagement and voting behavior? Do political websites and (micro) blogs mobilize inactive citizens? In *The Myth of Digital Democracy* Hindman (2009) reveals that, contrary to the belief, online media has done little to broaden political discourse but in fact empowers a small set of elites. Contradictory Panagopoulos (2009) claims positive effects of modern technology campaigning in the political system when adapted successfully. In the race for the 2008 presidential elections online media were variedly and successfully used for political announcements, information and viral videos, social networking and online fundraising. Strategically using social media may not only result in party and candidate victory but even optimize and strengthen democracy (Panagopoulos, 2009). Social Politics, revolutionizing democracy by enhancing (online) political participation and interaction, hence might be the new transition in the political landscape.

Considering the possible effects of social media as the independent variable, two dependent variables are proposed. Firstly, political party perception refers to de cognitive observation based on specific party characteristics. Secondly, voting behavior measures a combination of voting intention and political election behavior.

2.3 Political Party Perception & Voting Behavior

To measure social media effects in political campaigning the constructs political party perception and voting behavior are introduced. Political Party Perception (PPP) is based on party confidence, party intelligence, progressiveness, vision and reputation. Party confidence refers to the extent in which voters perceive the party as being confident defined by a faithful relationship. Next party intelligence conceptualizes individual perceptions of deliberate and understanding policy. Finally, progressiveness, vision and reputation are measured based on party characteristics.

Next to PPP voting behavior acts as a second dependent variable. Voting behavior is constructed of voting intention and factors construing voting behavior.

2.4 Alternative Variables

To determine to what extent social media influences PPP and voting behavior several other relevant factors are measured. These variables serve as conflicting influencers on which we want to consider how social media has an impact. Extensive literature studies suggest three variables: political interest, political trust and religion.

2.4.1 Political Interest

Although highly self-explanatory and logical relevant, literature describes political interest as a building stone in forming political opinion (Glenn & Grimes, 1968). We see that involvement in politics is positively correlated with increases in political interest. Substantive political awareness among the public has a strengthening effect on voting behavior (Thomassen, Aarts & Van der Kolk, 2000). Subsequently political is an important indicator of political engagement. If citizens are not interested they will not want to engage in politics or want to deepen their political knowledge. Political interest is defined as a sense of curiosity about political matters and can be measured by directly asking about interest in politics (Thomassen, Aarts & Van der Kolk, 2000).

2.4.2 Political Trust

Equal to political interest, political trust seems inherent to constructing political perception and voting intention (Anderson, 2010; Rosas, 2010). Globally trust plays an important part in politics where voter's perception of fair and trustworthiness elections are crucial towards the outcomes (Rosas, 2010). Trust is further strongly related to sociological concepts like social capital. Civic engagement develops social capital in the form of shared feelings and understandings that members of a group have in common. The psychological analysis of social capital and its association with voting is important because sociologists argue that, at a broader level, social capital enables government to bridge social cleavages that create tensions between people within society (Boeckman & Tyler, 2002). According to Boeckman & Tyler (2002) the underlying factor of interpersonal trust functions as an activator towards political opinion and voting behavior. Opposing trust, distrust is also shown to significantly affect electoral participation, thus acting as an alienating factor indicating that decreasing trust acts more as a motivation to support third-party alternatives (Bélanger & Nadeau, 2005). Trust declining has been extensively investigated in literature (Bélanger & Nadeau, 2005) and most studies tend to use trust as an independent variable to explain political actions such as voting, campaign involvement, and the like (Anderson, 2010). In the Netherlands the changing political landscape also influenced the rigorous transition in voting behavior. In 2008 Aarts & Thomassen presented the effects of multiple high impact changes on political voting behavior. Their study aimed at showing how the shocks that affected the Dutch party system and the outcomes of recent parliamentary elections are related to the opinions of Dutch voters. These high impact changes stimulate distrust.

Summarizing it can be said that previous research demonstrates a strong correlation between trust and political behavior (Brehm & Rahn, 1997; Anderson, 2010) thus suggesting political trust as a second conflicting independent variable.

2.4.3 Religion

Religion is believed to be an important sociological factor in voting behavior (Liddle & Mujani, 2007). According to Warhurst (2007) the interaction between religion and politics is varied, complex and heated. Focusing on Australia Warhurst claims a long history on religion and politics, most of it associated with Christianity. In the United States a similar perception counts. As reported by McDermott (2009) religion has been increasingly intertwined with politics. In her publication on candidate religion affiliates effecting voting intention she found positive results on the proposed relation and argues the impact of religion on politics. Further in their paper Finke and Grim (2006) showed that most of the governments in European countries favor religion, again validating the relation. Finally, following the study of Brañas-Garza & Solano in 2010, the majority of the Dutch population supports religious policy. Concluding their publication they stipulate a positive correlation between the religiousness of the population and favoritism of religion influenced political policy. These articles clearly identify religion as an independent variable on political perception and voting behavior and therefor legitimize implementation in the conceptual model.

3. METHOD

3.1 Conceptual Model & Hypotheses

Based on the theoretical framework a conceptual model was developed. As figure 1 illustrates the dependent variables voting behavior and PPP are influenced by political interest, social media, political trust and religion.

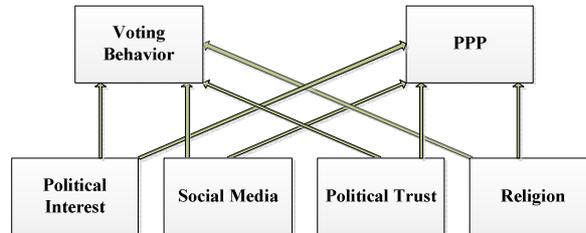


Figure 1. Conceptual model

The model assumes the following hypotheses:

- H.1 Political Interest influences Voting Behavior
- H.2 Political Social Media usage influences Voting Behavior
- H.3 Political Trust influences Voting Behavior
- H.4 Religion influences Voting Behavior
- H.5 Political Interest influences PPP
- H.6 Political Social Media usage influences PPP
- H.7 Political Trust influences PPP
- H.8 Religion influences PPP

3.2 Quantitative Approach: the Survey

Measurements were performed online using a quantitative instrument. Political Online, a commercial organization for strategy, policy, participation and communication in the Netherlands, helped distributing the questionnaire by mentioning the study on its website, twitter account and in its newsletters. Further they also contacted over 300 governmental organizations and stimulated them in posting news on the questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted of 53 political statements covering the six main constructs and several items concerning demographic information and voting behavior. To rule out translation issues in analyzing the data, for example the loss of meaning in the answers, the respondents had to answer the questions by means of a 5-point Likert scale. Items were randomly formulated positive and negative optimizing the instrument's reliability. Answers varied from strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree and strongly agree. Some example statements are:

"Political parties are only interested in my vote, not in my opinion"

And

"Politicians do what they say"

These two items reflect the construct of political trust. The other variables were constructed of similar statements, each construct consisting of five items.

4. RESULTS

In total 403 respondents successfully completed the questionnaire. The sample was composed of mostly higher educated individuals (69,7% higher education: HBO/Applied University 42,6%, University 27,1%). They are geographically spread with minor stronger representations in the East and West Netherlands. Less than 30% have lower incomes and over 40% earn a high salary. General TV usage varies between 1-3 hours daily and is slightly surpassed by internet use with 84% spending 2-4 hours each day. At the last general elections 397 respondents went voting. Concerning the anticipated national elections on June 9th 401

individuals claim they will be voting. Two persons do not want to vote and one person has not made up his or her mind. On religion 45,3% of the respondents are Christian, 37,4% Atheist, 1,7% Buddhism, 1% Muslim and 14,6% selected the other religion option.

The items representing the variables of the conceptual model were formed into constructs and verified on factor loadings and reliability. The factor analyses suggest no modifications and, as table 1 explains, all constructs are internally consistent.

Table 1. Internal consistency

Construct	Alpha
Political Interest	.841
Political Trust	.842
Religion	.887
Social Media Use	.719
PPP	.837
Voting Behavior	.736

Next correlation and stepwise regression analyses were performed. Towards PPP all independent variables reveal a significant influence as table 2 is showing. No interaction effects were found. Interestingly, social media significantly influences PPP surpassing political trust and only a marginal lower magnitude than the effect of political interest. Religion has the lowest correlation on PPP showing lower property and significance.

Table 2 Stepwise regression analyses on PPP

Independent	Dependent	Beta	t	Sig.
Political Interest	PPP	.238	4,523	.000
Political Trust	PPP	.149	2,966	.003
Religion	PPP	.094	2,085	.038
Social Media Use	PPP	.181	3,738	.000

When analyzing voting behavior as the primary dependent variable the stepwise regression analyses disqualifies political trust, religion and political social media use as influencing factors. The analyses indicate a positive relation between political interest and voting behavior. Arguing that rising magnitude of political interest positively influences voting behavior.

Table 3. Stepwise regression analyses on political voting behavior

Independent	Dependent	Beta	t	Sig.
Political Interest	VB	.186	3,806	.000

Hypotheses 1, 5, 6, 7 and 8 are supported. Hypotheses 2, 3 and 4 are rejected. Based on these findings the conceptual model is modified. Figure 2 reveals the revised version.

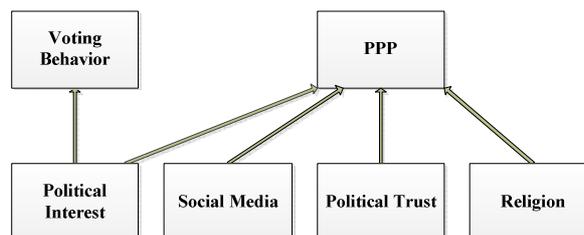


Figure 2. Revised version of the conceptual model

5. CONCLUSION

Our aim was to indicate whether social media influences political party perception and voting behavior. Although the results suggest a role in creating the political party perception towards voting behavior the research data does not validate a significant impact.

5.1 Advantages

This study does indicate a positive effect on the use of social media in political campaigning. Its effect on PPP has a higher magnitude than political trust and religion. Using social media in political party and candidate profiling might enhance political awareness and opinion. Though not confirmed in this study a relation between political party perception and voting behavior seems likely and therefore social media effects could possibly indirectly codetermine voting behavior (Cohen & Tsfaty, 2009). Additionally, social media has proven its value recently in alternating the political spectrum in the Arabic world. Using its high speed information capacity and scope, social media has been revolutionizing part of the Arabic world where its potential unleashed a democratic alteration. Stimulating Social Politics for optimizing democracy through (online) political participation is thus possible.

5.2 Limitations

Several limitations regarding the outcome must also be taken into account. First, the respondents are not indicative of the Dutch population which complicates the generalizability. Of the population sample 69,7% is higher educated and for this reason have more political knowledge (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Emler & Frazer, 1999; Hindman, 2009). They all participated online; cooperating on a political questionnaire distributed by political websites thus indicating political engagement. Given this affinity with politics it seems understandable that political trust scores lower than social media because high engagement implicates higher political trust.

Social media, political trust, religion and political interest all influence PPP but only the latter determines voting behavior. Regarding this effect Cohen & Tsfaty (2009) provide evidence in their study on the presumed media influence and strategic voting. They found that individuals seem to vote not equal to preference of opinion but more based on strategy.

Despite the demonstrated relation of (social) media on political party perception the range is exhaustive compared to regular social networks (Schmitt-Beck & Mackenrodt, 2010). Particularly the effects of traditional media, television news programs and talk shows, turn out to be comparatively smaller than those of interpersonal networks (Campus, Pasquino & Vaccari, 2008).

Besides the used variables many other influencing factors must be taken into account when determining Political Party Perception. Multiple influential studies towards provide insight in the significant role of economic and demographic variables conditioning the outcome of political elections (Glenn & Grimes, 1968; Fiorina, 1978).

Further the conceptual model places 4 different types of variables on one level. Individual level, social-structural level and mediating variables are all tied together. Each of them clearly has effects on opinion formation and voting behavior, however, each of these types of factors come into the equation at different phases of opinion formation. The conceptual model presented in the paper fails to adequately address this complex interplay.

Finally if one focuses on the role of information sources in influencing political choice, it appears evident that the political information coming from newspapers, television, and the new media is only a part of a broader context in which interpersonal communication also plays a significant role (Campus, Pasquino & Vaccari, 2008).

5.3 Future Research

As stated in the introduction, television has brought about a metamorphosis in electoral politics revolutionizing the way candidates' campaign, and changing the way citizens learn about politics. But a fundamental reshaping of the criteria voters use in making their choices is not one of television's effects (Hayes, 2008). The same might be true for social media. Although the influences of social media in the political spectrum seem plausible, the scope of these effects is still doubtful. Further research on Social Politics is necessary scientifically funding and legitimizing its future role in political marketing.

Concluding Politicking Online, Panagopoulos (2009) does state that technology is transforming the shape and designs of campaigns and elections. Modern technologies like social media do present new opportunities

in political marketing. However, adapting and implementing these instruments successfully is crucial. Identifying the factors decisive for successful implementation is thus needed.

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