EFFECTS OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON INDIVIDUAL VOTING

A Thesis

Presented to the Faculty in Communication and Leadership Studies

School of Professional Studies

Gonzaga University

Under the Supervision of Dr. John Caputo

Under the Mentorship of Professor Kipp Preble

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements of the Degree

Master of Arts in Communication and Leadership Studies

By

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December, 2012
EFFECTS OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON INDIVIDUAL VOTING

Abstract

In the 2008 presidential campaign, Barack Obama established social media as an essential part of the campaign toolbox. Twitter, a widely-used social media site, provides a means of creating virtual communities that can instantly send messages and move “followers” to action. This thesis seeks to ascertain if Twitter messages sent to known supporters by a presidential campaign asking a person to vote can positively affect that person’s likelihood to cast a ballot and, if so, would that vote be for the candidate whose campaign tweeted the message. Media ecology, as proposed by Marshall McLuhan and developed by Neil Postman, provides the primary theoretical framework for the study. Also referenced is the critical theory of Stanley Deetz, which examines words and language as a way to explain the exploitation of political power, and Stuart Hall’s cultural theory, that explains how culture influences political activities. McCombs and Shaw’s agenda setting theory is also applied as it describes how mass media influences what voters consider important in political campaigns. The literature review examines the use of Twitter in various political and social movements in countries such as Germany, Tunisia and Iran. Research for this thesis was conducted using an internet-based survey taken seven days prior to the 2012 election day. The survey reveals that Twitter messages asking supporters to vote have “little” to “no effect” on getting them to the polls, but for those that it did prompt to vote, respondents said they would vote for the candidate they supported because of the Twitter message. Further research is necessary to determine if Twitter, as one form of social media, is unique in yielding these results, and to determine why it does not have greater influence in encouraging voting.
SIGNATURE PAGE

We, the undersigned, certify that we read the project or thesis and approve it as adequate in scope and quality for the degree of Masters of Arts.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Social media, as currently employed on the internet, has the advantage of being brief, targeted, and instantaneous. While it has gained in popularity worldwide, social media is not new. With the widespread adoption of personal computers in the mid-1990s, services such as chat rooms, newsgroups, and instant messaging were among the early attractions for users of the World Wide Web (Thurlow, Lengel & Tomic, 2004). What is new, however, is the attention that has been given to expanding forms of social media – YouTube, Facebook, and especially Twitter – as a means of not only creating virtual communities, but as a way of instantly communicating and moving to action members of these communities.

Previously, messages on these sites had been considered trivial, providing a means of either marketing to targeted groups or posting statements describing ordinary personal activities. In late 2006 when Twitter was launched, its creators stated that the purpose of “tweets” was to tell your followers what you were doing (Jackson & Lilleker, 2011). However, social media in the second decade of the 21st century is used not just for frivolity, but for serious social and political messaging, and giving calls to action that have aroused both protest and revolution.

The Problem

Importance of the study.

The evolution of social media sites, and the medium in which they reside, represent a significant change in how we communicate with each other. Social media has contributed to the idea of the “global village” (McLuhan, 1964). The combination of both mobile communication devices such as smartphones and tablet computers, and the user-friendly interface of social media sites, have allowed people with common interests and philosophies in divergent parts of the world to act as
if they are in one “village”. An important example of the use and influence of social media can be found at the beginning of what is now called the Arab Spring in 2010. In the North African country of Tunisia, Mohamed Bouazizi, a 26-year-old street vendor, set himself ablaze in public protest against the censorship and repression in that country (Thone, 2011). The primary media for spreading the story were social networks such as Facebook and Twitter. According to Thone, Tunisia has 3.6 million internet users, and many of these users became the replacement for the official but censored news channels, bearing the message of this extreme protest and controlling its initial distribution. In a cautionary statement about how the global village would evolve, McLuhan wrote that in response to the “problems of our global village, we become reactionaries” (p. 54).

The 2008 presidential campaign of Barack Obama proved the benefits of using social media for political campaigns (Learmonth, 2009). Nearly every aspect of that campaign used social media to advance its message to supporters including advertising, advance work, organizing in all 50 states, and fundraising. Learmonth reports that $500 million was raised from 3 million online donors. Continuing this trend in the 2012 U.S. presidential election, many political analysts consider social media a virtual battle ground for the support of a decreasing number of undecided voters. Reid Epstein (2012) reported in Politico that in early August, 2012 the Gallup daily tracking poll showed the number of undecided voters at between 6 percent and 8 percent, lower than the 11 percent reported at the same time prior to the 2008 presidential election. Statistics such as these emphasize the importance of every vote, and getting undecided voters to cast a ballot for a candidate - as well as getting registered voters who support the candidate to vote - is the vital final step to a political victory.
Statement of the problem.
Arguably, the use of social media in politics is widespread and shows no sign of abating. Furthermore, there is ample research to show the importance of social media in political movements. What is less studied is the use of social media in getting a voter to cast a ballot. This study, therefore, will investigate the use of one form of social media, Twitter messages, as a means to motivating a registered voter to cast a ballot in a presidential election.

This study will also look at the content of Twitter messages for the purpose of encouraging presidential candidate supporters to cast their vote for the candidate. It is important to note that this study will not examine the persuasive content of political messages – that would be too broad a scope for this thesis. Rather, the focus will be solely on Twitter messages from presidential campaigns as they relate to the specific act of casting a ballot.

Definition of Terms Used
This study uses terms unique to forms of social media and Twitter, defined as follows:

Twitter: An online social networking and microblogging service that enables users to send, read, and forward text-based messages using up to 140 characters.

Tweet: An original message sent on Twitter.

Retweet: A tweet that has been forwarded to one or more followers on Twitter.

Followers: Those who have actively chosen to receive tweets from individuals, groups, organizations, or any user of Twitter.

YouTube: A video-sharing website where videos can be uploaded and widely viewed.

Virtual communities: Groups of individuals with shared interests, objectives, or goals who use internet based social media sites as a means of communicating
Facebook: A social networking site where users can post videos, photographs, texts, and links to other sites where full access to user’s postings is by permission.

Tumblr: A social networking and microblogging site used for posting multimedia content and short-form blogs.

Microblogging: Short, abbreviated messages usually transmitted in real-time containing limited content and is easily transmitted to multiple users.

Link: Short for hyperlink, it is a string of internet code embedded in words or images that allows direct access to a new website on the internet.

Organization of Remaining Chapters

This thesis is organized in five chapters. The current chapter describes the importance of this study for investigating the applications of social media for political campaigns, and addresses the problem of using Twitter messages to encourage voting. Chapter two describes the theoretical and philosophical framing of the study, as well as a review of existing literature addressing social media’s effect on political activity. Chapter three describes the scope and methodology that was used to answer the research questions. Chapter four reveals the analyses and discusses the results. Chapter five addresses the limitations of the study and makes recommendations for further study. The appendix lists the questions and response choices used in the survey for this research.
Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

The Rise of Social Media in Political Campaigns

The internet platforms that are collectively called social media have created virtual communities by employing communication technology that allows for brief, targeted, and instantaneous messaging. Although social media is tremendously popular and widely used, it is not new to the Internet. With the widespread adoption of personal computers in the mid-1990s, services such as chat rooms, newsgroups, and instant messaging were among the early attractions for users of the World Wide Web (Thurlow, Lengel & Tomic, 2004). What is new, however, is the attention that has been given to expanding forms of social media – YouTube, Facebook, Tumblr, and Twitter – as a means of not only creating virtual communities, but as a way of instantly communicating and moving to action members of these communities. Previously, messages on these sites have been considered trivial by providing a means of either marketing to targeted groups or posting statements describing ordinary personal activities. Social media in the second decade of the 21st century, however, has evolved to delivering not just frivolity, but serious social and political messages, giving calls to action that have aroused both protest and revolution.

Senator Barack Obama’s successful 2008 presidential campaign established social media as an integral part of the campaign toolbox. (Tumasjan, Sprenger, Sander & Welpe, 2012). Facebook, YouTube and especially Twitter were used to let Obama supporters know how he felt about important issues. These social network sites have become significant virtual communities in his campaign, being used frequently and giving legitimacy to their influence in the political arena.
With political discussions occurring on these sites, a relevant question is arised: could activity on sites like Twitter be a predictor of election results? Tumasjan et al. (2011) discovered that the relative volume of tweets closely mirrored the results of the German federal elections. The researchers concluded that Twitter was being used as a platform for political deliberation, and that the number of tweets reflected voter presence, which closely resembled the live political debate. However, elections are about deciding change by either rejecting it or choosing to move in a different direction (Tolbert, Smith & Green, 2009). Further, in order to have a meaningful election, voters must be encouraged to actually vote. Therefore, this study looked at how the use of social media not only encouraged voting, but also how it made voters take the final step of casting their ballot for a given candidate.

**Philosophical and Ethical Assumptions**

Much of the discussion regarding the merits of social media centers on its ability to join together people who share common interests. The ability that allows participants from different regions of the country – or the world – to associate as if they were in the same physical proximity, providing access to both opinion and information, provides the appearance of trust and affinity that we may have once had with the village elder. However, social media messages, as with any medium of communication, can be influential but are not always accountable to the truth. There has never been a guarantee that what is relayed by any medium of communication is truthful, moral or ethical. Social media - as a direct, instant, and personal medium - seems particularly susceptible to giving participants what they may want to hear, regardless of the facts. Additionally, users of social media tend to visit sites and participate in discussions that affirm their current beliefs (Burgess & Bruns, 2012; Tumasjan, Sprenger, Sander & Welpe, 2012).
As a result, there is a need to look at the ethical implications of how social media is used to influence and persuade participants. It can then be asked if the ethics of social media allows for persuasion of its participants. Thomas Nilsen (1974) argues that persuasive speech is ethical if it maximizes the expression of free choice. In addition, since many religious, commercial and political messages are designed to bypass a listener’s rational faculties, the value of a significant critical choice is nurtured by our speaking. Further, having a significant choice is the test of ethical influence because without a significant choice, there is no morality. Therefore, if social media participation is simply telling participants what they want to hear, and with users echoing the rallying cry in response, the use of social media to persuade may lack the proper ethical component (Nielsen, 1974).

Aristotle’s Golden Mean (as cited in Griffin, 1994) is a precursor to this ethical position. By adopting the middle way, the Golden Mean asks for temperance and moderation in all things, including altering messages to make them more acceptable for certain audiences. This ethical position would not pander to the masses, nor would tell people only what they want to hear. Furthermore, Aristotle states that speech should not be timid or without conviction, reminding us that cowardice is a character flaw, as are lies and recklessness.

These ethical positions would dictate that social media, because of the influence it has on its participants, bears a responsibility for clarity, balance and integrity as its influence continues to grow. This is particularly true as social media becomes a major source of information for political systems around the world.
Theoretical Basis

**Theory of Media Ecology.**

The theoretical basis for this study on the influence of social media on voting is approached on two fronts. First, there are the theoretical aspects of the technology that allow such communication to occur. Marshall McLuhan (1964), in his theory of media ecology, envisioned many of the characteristics of global communication that have come from the creation of the World Wide Web. The Internet, with its social media offshoots, is fully embraced as part of the Electronic Age, one of four epochs McLuhan and Fiore (as cited in Griffin, 2009) expound upon in their description of the evolution of media and communication. Dividing history into four periods – The Tribal Age, The Literacy Age, The Print Age, and The Electronic Age – McLuhan and Fiore (as cited in Griffin, 2009) show how the medium of communication has evolved over the millennium. Social media platforms, as a form of electronic media, are examples of what McLuhan (1964) means when he wrote of electric media abolishing spatial dimension, allowing for the creation of “person-to-person relationships as if on the smallest village scale” (p. 341). What McLuhan (1964) refers to as the “global village” is not one of proximity, but rather the ability to act with common focus, attitudes, and responses as if residing in the same village.

Additionally, McLuhan (1964) thinks of media as an extension of the human body or mind, just as clothing would be an extension of human skin. Continuing along this thread, he sees the electronic age translating us into a form of information that moves toward the technological extension of consciousness. As humans put their physical bodies inside this electronic nervous system by means of electronic media, all such extensions of our bodies will be translated into information systems. The evolving nature of media technology, therefore, is
ecological in nature. While McLuhan proposes this idea of media ecology, it is Neil Postman (1985) who develops the concept.

Postman (1985) views technology as part of a Faustian bargain, simultaneously giving to and taking away from society attributes such as freedom, independence, skill, and culture. In other words, there is always a price to be paid for technological development. While technology is being oversold and envisioned as a panacea for the ills of society (Postman, 1995), it becomes ecological in society, not becoming just something added, but changing society itself. A major precept of media ecology, therefore, is that the medium must be appropriate to the message it is carrying. Whereas smoke signals may be a poor medium for a philosophical discussion (Postman, 1995), Twitter seems to be more than adequate to relay succinct and impactful statements. However, technology is neither evenly distributed nor equally exploited. It favors some and harms others (Postman, 1995), and can have both a benevolent and a dark side. This is where the form and meaning of content, or the agenda and purpose of what is being said, can have important theoretical basis in the study of social media.

**Critical Theory of Communication.**

It is not irrational to say that, for reasons other than political, a purpose for setting an agenda is to achieve or maintain a level of control and power. Business decisions are often made to determine what actions can be taken to achieve economic gain, and the language of communication becomes an instrument for accomplishing this objective. Although Stanley Deetz (1995) studied business organizations to form his critical theory of communication by examining the choice of words and language used to advance organizational objectives, his theory has applications for the political exploitation of power. For example, Deetz (1992) observes that the focus on election-day politics gives legitimacy to arrangements and conflicts becoming forms of
resolutions that enable certain choices and suppresses others. Suppression, however, is not the same as stifling and eliminating conflicting speech. On the contrary, power differences in the creation of meaning, identity, and access to information is considered more important than the fear of censorship and the right of self-expression. Deetz (1992) asserts that the right of self-expression is more central than the right to be informed.

In terms of our governance, through participation in elections, people feel secure and protected by the state whose policing action is thought to be legitimate. While the state provides a protection for the less advantaged segments of society, it generally provides the necessary regulation for corporate development and successful commerce (Deetz, 1992). Yet democracy is more than the promotion of capitalism. In terms of organizational influence, there is also an ethical component. Deetz (1992) sees “representation, communication, and morality” as mutually defining terms, seeing the desire for a stronger, practical democracy being deeply shared in our society.

Democracy is primarily tied to state political processes, with communication creating the “informed public” necessary to foster the marketplace of ideas (Deetz, 1992). Voting, then, gives the tally of who is winning in that marketplace, and arguably, the concept of democracy is historically linked more to election day than to everyday life (Deetz, 1992). Election day politics give legitimacy to the arguments and provide a resolution to political choices, enabling some, and suppressing others. Unfortunately, communication leading to the vote is sometimes little more than the representation of private interests rather than a narrative of choices to improve public options. Media sometimes reduces the choices of democracy to the interest of capitalism. Deetz (1992) echoes the concern of communication theorists such as Stuart Hall (1980) whose cultural studies theory of communication warns that media messages, even mediated through
active and aware listeners, are strongly affected by the media influences of the prevailing culture and business interest.

**Cultural Studies.**

According to Hall (1980), cultural studies emerged from a moment in the mid-1950s as a complex articulation between thinking and historical realities, reflected in social categories of thought and the continuous dialectic between knowledge and power. Crediting Hoggart’s *Uses of Literacy* and Williams’s *Culture And Society* as two works that stimulated this theory, these works referenced the cultural debate that had long occurred around British ‘mass society’, and the reactions to changes in British social, economic and political life. Referencing Raymond Williams’s *Long Revolution*, culture, as one of many ways Hall comes to describe it, is the “sum of the available descriptions through which societies make sense of and reflect their common experiences” (p. 59). Part of the basis for capitalist society is that it was founded upon forms of exploitation (for profit) that are simultaneously economic, moral, and cultural.

Hall (1980) conceives culture as interwoven with all social practices, as a common form of human activity. It is the inseparable dialect between social being and social consciousness:

It defines ‘culture’ as both the meaning and values which arise amongst distinctive social groups and classes, on the basis of their given historical conditions and relationships, through which they ‘handle’ and respond to the conditions of existence; and as the lived traditions and practices through which those ‘understandings’ are expressed and in which they are embodied. (Hall, 1980, p. 63)

This struggle over the control and regulation of culture, therefore, presumes no one can practice political activity without becoming conscious of their conditions as framed by capitalism and cultural hegemony.
Agenda-Setting Theory.

It is argued that mass media is a willing and active driver perpetuating control of capital by selectively deciding what we see and hear, and what we should consider important. McCombs and Shaw (1972) state that in choosing and displaying news, the media itself plays an important part in shaping political reality. This process, articulated in agenda-setting theory, suggests that consumers of media news learn what is important by the amount of information given in a news story, as well as its position in relation to other stories. Further, the hypothesis declares that mass media sets the agenda for political campaigns and influences the salience of attitudes toward political issues. The research that forms the basis of this theory is from the 1968 US presidential campaign. Investigating the media in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, McCombs and Shaw (1972) discover that campaign news devoted more discussion to analysis of the campaign itself than to the major issues affecting voters. The researchers also discover that the basic characteristics of various media differed, and that news media do have a point of view that is sometimes extreme.

The Literature

The Expansion of Social Media.

In taking advantage of new communication platforms during the 2008 presidential election, Barack Obama proved the benefit of using social media for political campaigns (Learmonth, 2009). Nearly every aspect of that campaign used social media to advance its message to supporters including advertising, advance work, organizing in all 50 states, and fundraising. Learmonth reports that $500 million was raised from 3 million online donors. Speech does not occur in a vacuum, and social media expands the reach and speed of electronic speech to participants. Using social media to persuade users is not what many had envisioned. In
late 2006 when Twitter was launched, its creators stated that the purpose of “tweets” was to tell your followers what you were doing (Jackson & Lilleker, 2011). It has evolved beyond that innocent beginning.

Tumasjan et al. (2012) researched the use of social media, particularly Twitter, in the 2009 German federal election. The study was done to discover if microblogging messages can inform us about public opinion and political landscape in the off-line world. Their work indicates that the growth of Twitter has drawn the attention of researchers who investigate its role in areas such as marketing and project management, discovering that it is not a one-way form of communication, but often is the platform used for political conversations (Tumasjan et al., 2012). The researchers’ objective was to look at Twitter in the same way as real-world political media that serves as a watchdog for political acts would.

As a predictor of the accuracy of their findings, the researchers made comparisons to the Iowa Electronic Market (IEM), a pseudo market run by the University of Iowa since 1988, for trading in the results of state and federal elections. While there have been suggestions that Twitter messages are “pointless babble,” the researchers discovered that social media networks allowed forum users to weigh information and make accurate predictions, even though they are not representative of the general population. By examining 104,003 political tweets that matched criteria established using LIWC (Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count, Tausezik & Pennebaker, 2010) which has been used extensively in psychological, linguistic, and topics related to political science, the results show that messages, while brief at 140 characters or less, relay a large amount of relevant information. Despite this, the study found that less than 3% of all users were responsible for almost 33% of all postings. This means that although users are discussing
political issues online, it does not mean that the exchange can generate meaningful debate (Tumasjan et al., 2012).

**Engaging the Voter.**

One challenge in encouraging online participants in political discussions to vote is keeping them engaged. Dale and Strauss (2009) state that for some elections, turnout strategy can be successful simply by making sure voters pay attention to the message that will persuade them to vote. Their 2006 field experiment found that text messaging was effective in mobilizing voters. However, three areas were important to consider. First and most obvious, registered voters already signaled their willingness to participate in the election process. Second, as a consequence of their registration, some voters needed less persuasion than others to vote. Third, personal and impersonal reminders can be effective, but only if the recipient does not ignore the message.

Text messages can create a sense of social connectedness, feeding pressure to pay attention to the text, thereby making these messages less likely to be ignored. Research by Dale and Strauss (2009) reveals that text messages were effective in turning citizens who think of themselves as “nonvoters” into thinking of themselves as “voters.” While the signing up to vote and voting may seem similar to the individual, voter registration and the decision to vote come from different personal areas. Social occasion theory, for example, would argue that social connectedness increases the likelihood of voting. Therefore, in elections that are perceived to be less important, i.e., non-presidential, an increase in social connectedness can increase the likelihood of voting. Consequently, for a political message to be effective it must break through the clutter of messages competing for attention (Dale & Strauss, 2009).
Aside from campaigning, politicians have found social media useful for connecting with their constituency. UK Members of Parliament (MPs) have been using Twitter to enhance communication with their constituency since 2007 (Jackson & Lilleker, 2011). Minister Alan Johnson claims to be the first UK politician to use Twitter as part of his campaign. While he did not win the leadership post he was running for, Jackson and Lilleker report that his use of Twitter gained British Media coverage both for him and this new microblogging tool. The question then posed by UK politicians was whether Twitter was something they needed to jump on as a way of reaching audiences efficiently and effectively.

However, Jackson and Lilleker (2011) found that for MPs, the adoption of online tools was a more complex process. Members were unsure of what applications would be successful from using online services such as e-newsletters, weblogs, and social networking sites such as Twitter to enhance their ability to perform their representative role. Although these MP’s may be among the first sitting representatives to use Twitter widely, it took off only when Barack Obama and John Edwards used it effectively in the 2007 Democratic Party primaries (Jackson & Lilleker, 2011).

Assessing the use of Twitter was underpinned by two interrelated theories. Jackson and Lilleker (2011) saw the use of impression management theory for the MP’s use of Twitter for self-promotion, and constituency service frameworks by using the social media to form a link between tweeting MPs and their constituency. The researchers conclude that Twitter can meet both objectives simultaneously, and that there is clear evidence that for MPs the use of Twitter is a tool of impression management. It is noteworthy that Twitter appears to be adding to the enhanced strengths of constituents, causing some to move slowly away from traditional parties (Jackson & Lilleker, 2011). Research on this trend could be valuable for US political parties.
Making the Message Important.

Much of social media is not only centered on discussions within the online group itself, but on forwarding news stories that are considered relevant to other members of the group. Lerman and Ghosh (2010) examined the dynamics of information spread over Digg (a social networking site designed specifically for collecting news stories) and Twitter to track how news stories spread among these networks. The importance of social networks as a tool for spreading information has long been recognized by social scientists (Granovetter as cited in Lerman & Ghosh, 2010). Social networks have also given researchers access to large quantities of empirical analysis to study the structure of these social networks (Lerman & Ghosh, 2010). Specifically, they collected data about popular stories that included information about who “voted,” who “retweeted,” and when it was done. These platforms were often the first to break important news, such as the Christmas 2009 attempt to explode a bomb in a commercial airliner over Detroit, and the street protests over the outcome of Iran’s 2009 election (Lerman & Ghosh, 2010).

An advantage of Digg and Twitter is that both sites allow users to actively create their social networks, which is easily expanded by active followers. Whereas Twitter’s main goal is to spread a particular message, Digg encourages active voting by bringing news stories to the front of the page. In both cases, however, the spreading of information is a de facto vote for liking what the viewer sees as site contributors set their agenda for what is important. This is a contrast to how we think of traditional media action, especially how prominent news stories are selected.

Revisiting Agenda-setting Theory.

From the time of the 1972 creation of agenda-setting theory, its validity has been debated. Dalton and Beck (1998) set out to test the theory by examining newspaper content in the 1992
presidential election between George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton. Starting with the conviction that the core of an election is the competition to define the flow of information to voters, successful candidates often are the ones who can convince voters that their priorities reflect either the nation’s needs or respond best to the wishes of the public (Dalton & Beck, 1992). The researchers see this correlation as coming from either a media-centered model, where the media are autonomous actors setting the agenda for both public and political elites, or from a transactional model, where multiple players construct shared meaning from the interaction of social actors and the flow of political events. In both models, the degree of media control is the critical issue.

The methodology for this study was to survey the influence of newspaper stories on public opinion and to analyze newspaper coverage of the 1992 presidential election. “Our findings suggested that the media-centered explanation for agreement between newspaper content and public interest during election campaigns has been overstated” (Dalton & Beck, p. 476). However, two reasons are given why the research’s conclusion differs from other findings on the effect of media on political opinions. First, the setting of presidential elections is different from the general process of forming opinions. Second, the researchers state that they have not accepted “correlation as equal to causation,” but rather the study asked about the source of the correlation.

Obviously, agenda-setting theory continues to be studied and expanded. Chernov, Valenzuela & McCombs (2011) looked at two comparative investigations of “need for orientation” (NFO), a key component of agenda-setting theory, introduced by David Weaver (as cited in Chernov et al., 2011) in the 1972 Charlotte study (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). The first was to revisit Weaver’s (as cited in Chernov et al., 2011) initial findings and the use of an NFO
scale to create a single NFO score. The second was a more recent and expanded concept of NFO and the use of the scale introduced by Jorge Matthes (as cited in Chernov et al., 2011).

In the 1972 Charlotte study, an individual’s need for orientation was defined in terms of two lower-order concepts: relevance and uncertainty. In situations where relevance is low, there is little need for orientation. However, where relevance and uncertainty are high, there is a greater need for orientation. One way to express the correlation was to establish a NFO range that could be computed to create a single score (Chernov et al., 2011). This research prompted Matthes (as cited in Chernov et al., 2011) to conclude that agenda-setting fulfilled a need for orientation toward an issue under consideration. Additionally, agenda-setting can satisfy a need for orientation regarding a specific aspect of an issue. Finally, Matthes (as cited in Chernov et al., 2011) conclude that agenda-setting can satisfy the need for orientation regarding journalistic evaluations.

The study by Chernov et al. (2011) was designed to create basic agenda-setting effects and capitalize on the ability to test the constructs that underlie the theoretical basis of agenda setting and the NFO scale. The researchers used Canadian-originated newspaper stories, edited to 400 words or fewer, that centered on global warming and the need for its reduction, drug abuse among high school students, and crime in major cities. While results were obtained only for the drug abuse issue, the study concludes that there was overwhelming empirical evidence for the validity of the traditional NFO scale and the issue-orientation portion of Mattes’ scale. The research shows that the media’s agenda-setting did have an influence on reader’s opinions on specific topics.

Simply put, what agenda-setting is attempting – and often achieves – is to create bias. Entman (2007) gives the term “bias” three major meanings. The first meaning is distortion bias,
where the news falsifies or distorts reality. Next is content bias, where one side is favored over the other. Finally, there is decision-making bias, which exposes the motivations and mindsets of journalists who produce this content. Entman (2007) states that current research makes it difficult to determine whether there is a persistent, constant and decisive pattern of politically relevant agenda-setting by the media, noting that studies exploring such bias have satisfied neither liberals nor conservatives. However, there is evidence to support that linkage can be established between the three previously stated elements of bias - the connections referred to as framing.

Framing can be defined as “the process of culling a few elements of perceived reality and assembling a narrative that highlights connections among them to promote a particular interpretation” (Entman, 2007, p. 164). By shaping and altering audience member interpretation and preferences through priming, it raises the salience of certain ideas and feelings, encouraging target audiences to think, feel and decide in a specific way. The class of persons and institutions we call elites - holding all manner of financial, political, and moral interests - care about what people think if for no other reason than to have their activities supported and tolerated. Framing, therefore, shapes the texts that influence or prime the agenda, and forms considerations that people think about (Entman, 2007).

Much of the discussion of framing has to do with one-sided framing, which is a definition of bias. From the standpoint of politics, the media may be helping - by agenda-setting and framing - to distribute political power to particular groups, causes, or individuals (Entman, 2007) sometimes irrespective of facts, as would be the case with content bias. While research shows that facts play only a partial role in shaping the framing words and images that the media sometimes produces, facts rarely speak for themselves, requiring strategic actors with charisma, intimidation, and rhetorical proficiency to promote favored framing.
The Revolution Will be Tweeted.

Although there is much talk about the beneficial use of Twitter, especially in its ability to spread news among radicals and revolutionaries - or reformists, depending on your political position - in the Middle East, Evgeny Morzov (2009) warns that there was a downside to the “Twitter Revolution” in Iran. Morzov sees the role of the Internet in this 2009 uprising against election results as both unexpected and unfavorable to the revolutionary process. Even if it was hard to find a US editorial that did not extoll the role of Twitter in widening the protests after the Iranian election, Morzov presents a different perspective on the use of Twitter as a critical tool for organizing the resistance, seeing it as only adding to the noise, and using what he calls an impossible task of packing meaningful content into 140 characters. Further, Marzov regards the protests as not being spontaneous nor propagated by Twitter, but as carefully planned and executed by the opposition camp, concluding that a “Twitter Revolution” is possible only if the state regime is ignorant of the Internet and would have no counter message of its own. In fact, the use of social media gave Iran’s secret service the means to gather intelligence about future activities of the revolutionaries, as tweets and messages are open sources and are shared voluntarily (Marzov, 2009). In a final evaluation, Morzov suggests that a study needs to be done on what role the Internet did not play in the success of the Iranian protest.

Golkar (2011) continues to chronicle the darker side of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in the Iranian protest after the 2009 election. His article centers on the activities of the Green Movement. Golkar explains how the very technology that gave such optimism in what was called “liberation technology” - for its use to empower individuals and facilitate independence and communication - had become co-opted by the authorities. The
government ultimately held the power to the technology, controlled the spread, speed and cost of using the Internet, and used direct and covert means to identify, harass, and arrest bloggers, protesters and enemies of the government.

Political favorability is not simply a function of Internet and social media usage. There are also primal indicators of psychology and affinity that form political opinions among citizens. It is not surprising that people are more likely to vote for candidates who are members of their own shared identity of being similar in age, gender, or race (Lyer, Graham, Kokeva, Ditto & Haidt, 2010). However, in a research conducted to look at the attitudes of voters who, while in the same party, had to select between two attractive and dynamic primary candidates, Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama, the results show that other factors were at play in the decision. Lyer et al. (2010) considers this view oversimplified when applied to women and African-Americans. Their research identifies moral motives as a predictor of political identification, with values being a better predictor of political choice than personality factors. Further, emotional reactions play a role in drawing people to candidates, implying that candidate preference may be driven by personality, character, or style. For some voters, policy positions took a back seat in selecting politicians whose traits matched their own. Ultimately, the moral and personality traits of candidates are a better predictor of voter favorability; being a better predictor even when controlling for age, gender, education and political ideology (Lyle et al., 2010).

Nevertheless, while Americans continue to show an interest in political discussion by expanding their dialogue to social networking - not to mention the many print, broadcast and Internet news sites - there continues to be a decline of turnout in presidential elections. Voter turnout continues to be scrutinized using socio-demographic variables such as age, gender, education, and income (Han, 2008). Education, however, has been found to be the most
influential social characteristic related to voter turnout (Han, 2008), followed by income. Higher levels of both characteristics produce a higher likelihood of voter turnout. This study concludes that active online information-seeking behavior, particularly political information-seeking, when linked to voters’ education and income levels, raised the turnout in the 2000 election. Online political information-seeking was the strongest predictor among all independent variables, suggesting that those who seek political information online may be interested in politics, further stimulating political engagement (Han, 2008). However, this study confirms that general Internet exposure did not increase voter turnout. The more time a voter spent on the Internet, the less likely they were to go out and cast a ballot. This may seem to support the argument for a limited role of the Internet in mobilizing political participation, as well as concerns about negative political implication of the new media. However, Han states that it is too early to make such conclusions.

The Medium and the Message.

Jan van Dijk (as cited in Piechota, 2011) states that there is no agreement among researchers that claim being active in social media is reflected in the level of a person’s political involvement. Additionally, research continues to point out that just searching for political information is more popular than participating in the discussion. Getting information and being active in politics are used more by well-educated people (Piechota, 2011). Social media tend to reach concerned people directly. Piechota points out that during the last 20 years, the democratic potential of the new media should have strengthened citizen’s involvement by letting them participate in direct democracy. Subsequently, social media can address people’s concerns directly. In many ways, this self-selection of Internet sites, social media, and blogs increases the need for traditional media to be used to cross over to the undecided, or the still swayable. Joe
Trippi, campaign manager for the 2004 presidential candidate John Kerry (as cited in Piechota, 2011), warns of the difference between “push” media (where the consumer is delivered content whether they want it or not) and “pull” media (where the consumer actively looks for a given subject) saying that the Internet reaches the most committed, but television reaches the undecided.

Consequently, there might be a perception that the Internet, as a medium, drives a candidate’s campaign toward negativity. Druckman, Kifer, & Perkin (2010) explores this question by researching congressional campaigns over three election cycles, 2002, 2004, and 2006. Using the premise that voters pay little attention to campaign rhetoric and base their decisions on a subset of considerations, they found that in congressional elections, incumbency is a highly accessible basis for voter choice. Further, if all other factors were equal, voters favor incumbents, with research showing that while candidates frequently go negative online, it is similar to their negativity on television ads. However, the results show that candidates see their Web sites as targeting the general voting population. The researchers found it intriguing that behavior on the Web mimics that found on television “given the tremendous amount of speculation about how the Web will change politics” (p. 98).

While the Web has not changed the entire process of political processing, it has made significant inroads. Researchers Vergeer, Heermans and Sams (2009) explored if microblogging can increase the visibility and interactivity between politicians and citizens, and, more specifically, to what extent it is effective in gaining votes. Exploring this, among other questions, during the 2009 European parliament election in the Netherlands, the conclusion was mixed. Candidates who increased their Twitter blogging close to election day received more votes. At the same time, candidates from unsuccessful parties used microblogging more extensively. This
supported the hypothesis that microblogging on Twitter was a defective campaign tool. Further, the study shows that only the number of people following the candidate related positively to the number of votes. The results show positive relations with microblogging use and the number of votes measured over the entire population of candidates. Further, while the study supports that creating online social networks could be worthwhile in expanding existing offline networks, the finding suggests that online networks do not lead to more votes (Vergeer et al., 2009).

Therefore, using social media, and especially Twitter, as a predictor of election results has its drawbacks and risks. As of December 2011, 11% of the US adults online were using Twitter and analogous services (Gayo-Avello, 2011). Although this is a significant number, it is clear that the vast majority of people do not use Twitter, therefore, its users represent a sample of the electorate, and perhaps a biased one. Gayo-Avello’s research was not to compare Twitter data with pre-election polls or with the popular vote, but to obtain a prediction using its internal metrics on a state-by-state basis.

**Tweeter as a Predictor of Results.**

The research shows that the results of the 2008 presidential election could not have been predicted from Twitter data alone through commonly applied methods. The conclusion was that, because of the inherent biases of Twitter users (young, more liberal), social media is not representative of the overall population simply because it contains a large amount of data. Additionally, Gayo-Ayello (2011) warns that nonresponses often play a more important role than collected data. If, for example, the lack of information affects one group, the results might differ considerably from reality if that group were included. Finally, Gayo-Avello states that researchers should carefully evaluate positive reports from social media before assuming that the reported methods are applicable to any similar scenario with identical results. Researchers should
also identify the various users based on age, income, gender and race to properly weigh their opinions according to the percentage of the population to assure the integrity of the results.

The 2010 Romania presidential election provides a different example where there was a limited use of social media and Twitter. The presence of blogging and Internet usage is relatively new in this small country. The 2010 European Digital Competitiveness Report (cited in Aparaschive, 2011) states that over 60% of Romanians do not have any kind of knowledge or skill to participate in the digital era. With such a low penetration of voters being able to be reached by social media, it would be worth noting if those few who did use social media were influenced by the most recent player in our media ecology.

Twitter, however, could become more useful as a means of measuring political activity by analyzing the flow of data. The size and availability of data on Twitter can be used to spot trends in attitudes and perceptions before it appears in almost any other medium. Researchers are finding that Twitter can measure public sentiment, track political activity, and monitor events in the population at large (Savage, 2011). For example, in 2009 and 2010, tracking flu-related keywords allowed a Southeastern Louisiana University researcher to predict future flu outbreaks. Conversely, it can take up to two weeks for the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to collect data on influenza and disseminate the information. While Twitter reports are less precise, they are available in real time and cost less to collect. Another emerging trend is to examine how Twitter can gauge sentiments and supplement traditional polling (Savage, 2011). Researchers admit, however, that Twitter data is noisy, not always consistent as to the meaning of words used in messages (the differences between sick for illness and “sick” meaning good), and has sample bias, as it is established that certain segments of the population use Twitter more than others.
There is also the use of Twitter for unfiltered information that is abusive, especially in politics. Two researchers at Wellesley University found that during a special U.S. Senate election in Massachusetts, the democratic candidate, Martha Coakley, was the subject of a “Twitter bomb” attack. A conservative group sent out 929 tweets in just over two hours linking to a Web site that attacked Coakley. With retweets, the potential audience could have been seen by more than 60,000 people (Savage, 2011). This type of message propagation can be either natural or pushed by artificial means to manipulate the system.

Ultimately, the winner in a political contest, no matter what means are used to sway opinion, is decided by the number of votes cast. Getting a registered voter to participate in voting is the final payoff to the campaign. The fact that many citizens fail to vote is often cited as a way to motivate others to vote. However, Gerber and Rogers (2009) provide research that indicates the contrary. Citing growing literature on social norm perception shows that a person’s behavior conforms to their beliefs about what a person actually does in a given situation. These beliefs have been shown to exert powerful influences across a range of behaviors. Using this theory in relation to voter participation, the message to get out the vote should be a “high turnout” message that millions are voting, rather than a “low turnout” message that people are staying home.

Calling participants in a 2005 New Jersey election and a 2006 California election, randomly sampled registered voters heard one of two scripts conveying voter turnout in the upcoming election. One was written to say that you should vote because there was going to be a high turnout (HTO); the other stated that you should vote because there was going to be a low voter turnout (LTO). The results in follow up surveys showed that HTO clearly outperformed the LTO, with over 7% in the New Jersey survey, and 5% in the California survey (Gerber and
Rogers, 2009). The researchers concluded that there are theoretical implications to be considered if citizens are encouraged to vote when others participate, producing a change in the political environment.

**Rationale**

The literature indicates that while the use of social media shows promise for encouraging participating in voting, the evidence that could support a consistent trend in that direction is mixed. It is clear that Twitter messages and YouTube postings can move people to protest in the streets, but it is not known if the use of these same media tools can consistently draw voters to the polls. Theories indicate that the Internet and social media influence opinion in ways similar to print and broadcast media, advancing from an ecological position by virtue of the technology that communicates messages that are designed to influence participants. These influences are not always beneficial to citizens at large, but sometimes serve the interest of power, stability, and cultural status quo.

In addition, the use of social media in political campaigns for message control, fundraising, organizing, and the promotion of one candidate while denigrating the opponent, is well documented. Today, Twitter is an essential instrument of a political campaign’s arsenal. However, there remains a lack of broad research on the effect of Twitter on voter turnout. For the registered voter, as the final act of campaign moxie, casting a ballot can be stopped for reasons ranging from congested traffic to bad weather, sleeping late or hostility at the polls. Consequently, the act of voting has only one critical meaning: to make your political voice as a citizen be heard. Voter turnout in US presidential elections from 1928 to 2004 averaged 58% (Heckelman, 2008). Therefore, it is important to determine if the use of social media, particularly Twitter, can increase voter participation in future elections.
Research Question

The literature shows that social media is extensively used in political campaigns, and that platforms such as Twitter provide short messages that can be quickly distributed, responded to, and redistributed - or retweeted - to additional followers. Twitter is shown to be effective in spreading issue-related messages to politically aware citizens, but the platform’s effectiveness in increasing the number of votes requires additional research. Further, as each Twitter message has a specific purpose – to inform, incite, question, or comment – its success in instructing voters to cast their ballot for an expressed candidate remains subject to additional investigation. Therefore, this paper asked two specific research questions:

RQ1: Can Twitter messages be used to increase voter participation in presidential elections?

RQ2: If a Twitter message generates a vote in a presidential election, is the vote cast as directed by the message?

The research was designed to not only answer these questions, but provide insight into what are the characteristics of Twitter users that allowed such influences to occur.
Chapter 3: Scope and Methodology

Scope of the Study

In our democracy, elections finalize political decisions. US political contests range from local races involving a few thousand people, to presidential elections that encompass nearly two hundred million registered voters. Elections are obviously important to the political campaigns and candidates who are running with the objective of attaining victory, i.e. getting a majority of the votes cast. To achieve this seemingly simple numerical advantage, candidates must have their supporters both cast a ballot, and cast it in the candidate’s favor. This study, therefore, examines what influence Twitter has on voters when, as a social media platform, it was used to send specific messages asking registered voters to vote.

Research has shown that presidential campaigns use Twitter in their political communication. Therefore, this study limited its scope to registered voters who also use Twitter as a social media tool. The scope did not include registered voters who do not use Twitter, as the research specifically targeted the influence of this platform and messages transmitted on it to influence voter participation at the polls.

Additionally, the scope did not include a discussion of political campaigns, campaign strategy or style, political party positions on issues, or specific rhetoric relating to candidates and issues. These topics, while clearly influential in both the decision to vote and who to vote for, are beyond the scope of this study. By restricting the research to one form of social media – Twitter – and one aspect of the political process – voting – specific and valuable results were revealed that could have applications for political communication in the future.
Methodology of the Study

This study employs survey research as the method to answer the questions. Survey methodology is behavior-oriented research that focuses on the actions of people using, among other tools, survey questionnaires to describe behavior, such as voting (Rubin, Rubin & Piele, 2005). Survey research also produces information that is inherently statistical in nature (Groves as cited in Neuman, 2006), supporting the quantitative nature of the results. In addition to answering the research questions, the statistical nature of survey research provides data identifying the type of user who is influenced by Twitter messages to vote, which could be valuable in later research.

The survey was conducted electronically, being sent to e-mail addresses using the Internet. The research conformed to Gonzaga University’s Institutional Research Board Policy (IRB), which allowed the study to be conducted meeting the requirements for minimal risk for participants. The respondent’s identity was kept anonymous to the researcher, and survey questions were only quantitative in nature.

Participants.

The population was composed of men and women 18 and over, randomly selected by an online survey company. From this population, a purposive sample was used from those who affirmatively answered qualifying questions about use of Twitter, voter registration, and attendance in college. Those participants were able to move to the primary survey questions. The sample did not include non-registered voters since they cannot vote in the election and their response, for this purpose, would be only as bystanders. A non-college educated population was not included to limit the scope of the research.
Prior to the starting the survey, recipients were notified of the voluntary nature of their participation, were advised that if they participated it would be on an anonymous basis, and were informed that the estimated length of the survey was 5 minutes. Participants were also thanked in advance and also at the completion of the survey.

**Ethical Considerations.**

As is common with any type of social research, conducting a survey must be performed with a consideration to ethical obligations for both participants and the researcher’s discipline. It is obvious to state that researchers need to be accurate, honest, and precise when conducting research (Rubin et al., 2005), as well as in discussing and analyzing the data. Additionally, as survey research involves people, the basic but important rule of *do no harm* should be strictly adhered to, particularly as survey research is an invasion of privacy by asking respondents about intimate actions and personal beliefs (Neuman, 2006). Participants, consequently, are more likely to provide such information honestly when it is asked in a context of mutual trust, with a belief in the legitimacy and integrity of both the researcher and the research’s purpose.

It is, therefore, important that respondents voluntarily participate and give “informed consent.” Researchers also need to ask questions that are sensitive and developed to treat respondents with respect and without exploitation (Neuman, 2006). Attention, then, must be given to possible deception in the research, where the true nature of the research project is withheld to avoid influencing participants’ answers to research questions. Such acts of “omission”, as well as intentional dishonesty (“commission”) must be countered by informing participants about the goals or dishonesty within the project at its conclusion, referred to as *debriefing* (Rubin et al., 2005).
Additionally, the privacy of participants must be protected by promising either anonymity or confidentiality. In using anonymity, no identifying names are taken from respondents. For confidentiality, respondent identities will be known only to the researchers and will be protected and not revealed (Rubin et al., 2005). This survey required participant anonymity.

**Procedure.**

The online survey was administered using SurveyMonkey, a web-based company that creates, distributes, and analyzes online surveys. This company was selected because it is shown to be a user friendly and reliable service employed by Gonzaga University (Hazel, 2012) and by professional and business organizations.

To ensure accuracy of results, the importance of proper survey construction cannot be overstated. Survey research samples many respondents who answer the same question, measuring variables and inferring temporal order from past behavior, experience, or characteristics (Neuman, 2006). Therefore, to present a correlational response, the measurements must be considered *valid*, meaning that what was intended to be measured was measured, and *reliable*, showing dependability, stability, consistence and repeatability in the study (Rubin et al., 2005).

The survey was be divided into three sections. Section I had three qualifying questions, where an affirmative response was required to proceed to Section II. To arrive at answers to the two research questions, Section II had 18 questions relating to Twitter usage and voting. Survey questions addressing each research question were integrated into the design of the survey. Section III contained statistical questions that gathered information for the stratified sample.

Directions were presented at the beginning of the survey. All questions were close-ended with ordered responses. Since the survey was to answer two separate research questions, care
was taken not to require a two-answer response from a single question. A limitation of the survey is that there will be no follow-up questions or the ability to add comments.

The survey questions employed a Likert-type scale to determine the intensity of agreement or disagreement. Scaling allowed for measurement of intensity (Neuman, 2006), considered an important factor in voting decisions. Additionally, the numeric nature of the survey design allowed for statistical analysis of the results.

A draft of the survey was tested on a small audience in advance of its implementation. The test determined if questions needed to be revised due to incorrect interpretation, the appearance of bias, or a lack of clarity. The survey was then released to the population. The survey was out for seven days in the hopes of increasing the response rate.

Validity.

With any research, measurements and analysis need to be both valid and reliable. According to Rubin et al. (2005), measurement validity refers to measuring what is intended to be measured, and suggests truthfulness. If the index, text, or scale were used to measure a particular construct, then the measure should include questions about all aspects of the construct. Referred to as content validity, these measures should sample or represent all ideas or areas in the conceptual space of the definition represented in the measure (Neuman, 2006).

The measure should also relate to similar measures or predict future behavior (Rubin et al., 2005). Such criterion-related validity uses a standard or criterion to indicate a construct accurately. The measure can be broken into two subtypes, concurrent validity, where an indicator must be associated with a preexisting indicator judged to be valid; and predictive validity, where the indicator predicts future events that are logically related to the stated construct. The measures and predictions must be distinct, but are indicated from the same construct (Neuman, 2006).
Reliability.

Reliability in a study represents that its results are dependable and consistent. It indicates that the same thing will occur under identical or similar conditions. “Measurement reliability means that the numerical results produced by an indicator do not vary because of characteristics of the measurement process or measuring instrument itself” (Neuman, 2006, p. 189). Using a measure twice with similar results both times indicates test-retest reliability (Rubin et al. 2005). However, sometimes it is important to show internal consistency by measuring the same thing using multiple indicators. This equivalency reliability applies when a construct is measured with multiple specific measures. If the different indicators point to the same construct, then a reliable measure will give the same results with multiple indicators. Validity and reliability increase the internal validity of a research study and ensure that no one can derive other possible interpretations from the results (Rubin et al. 2005).

Approach to Analysis

Data derived from the survey was analyzed to answer the two research questions. Additionally, analysis was made to break down responses in relation to the stratified samples by age, gender, citizenship origin, and ethnicity. For example, what do the survey results tell us about Twitter’s influence on voting by African-American women 18 to 34 that is different from Asian-American males 41-49? However, the raw data was not subjected to a coding procedure (assigning a number to various attributes) since individual responses were not analyzed. The uses of skip logic for the three qualifying questions ensured that respondents to the survey met the criteria of having a Twitter account, have some college attendance, and were registered voters.

Most of the results from the survey research were reported in numeric tables. Quantitative research is reported this way to allow others to see the evidence collected and learn for
themselves what is in it. The objective is to analyze and collate the raw data and present it in a form that will answer the research questions, presenting it to summarize their features, and give theoretical meaning to the results (Neuman, 2006).

The following chapter not only provides the analysis of the survey research data, but delivers results that answer the two research questions. It also discusses the findings in relation to the previously discussed theories that are the basis for the study, and place it into proper context with previous studies as described in the literature leading up to this thesis.
Chapter 4: The Study

Introduction

This study was designed to answer the questions on the effects of using Twitter messages to encourage voting in presidential elections. Its purpose was not to measure the effectiveness of presidential campaign strategies or other Twitter messages not related to voting, although the survey did ask questions on the number of other kind of campaign messages received by participants. It is clear that if questions are asked about voting in a presidential election year, the participant’s attention also turns to other aspects of that current presidential campaign. The survey tried to deemphasize the effects of other political communication on Twitter by referencing neither candidate nor political party in its questions on presidential tweets and requests to vote.

Nevertheless, the context of the 2012 presidential election between major candidates Barack Obama and Mitt Romney was certainly at play when respondents answered the survey questions. The research questions, however, were written narrowly to address the effect of Twitter messages on the likelihood of casting votes, without consideration to other influences that may affect a decision to vote. While it is obvious that the overall effectiveness of the campaign would provide a strong motivation in a Twitter “vote now” message, the research was about the reaction to the specific plea to vote as communicated on Twitter.

Survey results support prior research that indicates actual Twitter usage may not be as widespread as its prominent name in popular culture might suggest. In addition, the results demonstrate that while Twitter messages from presidential campaigns may serve as a motivator for supporters to maintain a high level of awareness and stay involved with the campaign by
soliciting contributions and organizing volunteers, Twitter messages are not effective in being a motivating factor in prompting followers to vote.

**Data Analysis**

The online survey, titled “Twitter/Voting Survey,” (Appendix) was conducted shortly before the 2012 presidential election, launching October 30, 2012 and ending November 5, 2012, one day before the election. The survey, separated into three sections, was conducted using SurveyMonkey, an online research company that distributed the survey nationally. The population was adults 18 and over. Section I employed skip logic, allowing only those responding affirmatively to all three questions to become the purposive sample that would proceed to Section II. This section contained the specific questions on Twitter messages and their influence on voting. Section III of the survey determined age, gender, origin of US citizenship, and self-identified ethnicity. Questions to discover regional breakdowns, income levels or political affiliation were not part of the survey.

In Section II, participants were asked to respond to 18 questions that determined their overall frequency of Twitter usage and their use of Twitter relating to presidential campaigns. Participants were also questioned if they were asked by presidential campaigns to vote and, if so, how effective was the request on the participant’s likelihood to vote. For a time frame reference point, participants were asked to consider the seven-day period prior to taking the survey. All questions were quantitative and were presented in a non-randomized fashion. Questions that required a numeric response were given specific ranges. Questions that required a favorability or likelihood response used a Lakert-type scale.

Section III gathered statistical information on age, education, gender and self-identified ethnicity. Once again, the study was not directed to any specific age, gender or ethnic group, but
education was one of the Section I qualifiers that required a specific response to continue with the survey. This was done to narrow the focus of the study to those who had attended college.

The population of the study was reflective of the US population as stated in the 2010 census. The gender respondents were 49.2% male and 50.8% female – as taken from Section III of the survey – almost mirrors the gender percentage in the US population, with European-American respondents being 76.7%, close to the 72.4% of the population. 9.6% identified themselves as African-American, 4.8% as Middle East-American. Far East-American represented 1.9% of respondents. Pacific Island-American and Hispanic-American both responded at 3.8%. Among the entire population of the respondents, neither Pacific Island-American nor Hispanic-American answered yes to having a Twitter account, therefore, this group was not represented in the survey questions on political messages influencing voting.

Results of the Study

The Qualifying Questions.

![Figure 1. Education level of all participants.](image)
Results from the qualifying questions in Section I reveal a notable relationship between those with Twitter accounts and registered voters. A relatively low 35.5% of survey participants had a Twitter account, but of those, 93% were registered voters and had attended college (Figure 1). The results demonstrate that Twitter account holders, while being educated and partners in the electoral process by being registered voters, represent little more than one third of the over-18 adult population. This discloses that a large segment of the population is not reached by this medium despite having a broad awareness.

**Twitter Message Influence.**

Section II of the survey provides the more comprehensive results on presidential candidates using Twitter to ask people to vote and the effect on voter’s likelihood of casting a ballot. Once again, all respondents were asked to consider only the seven-day period prior to taking the survey in forming their answers. Section II was completed by 30.8% of total respondents who answered the three questions to allow them to become part of the purposive survey. All 18 questions were answered by 93.4% of this group.

Of these, 59.3% of Twitter users either wrote tweets, read or retweeted messages up to 10 times during the seven day period, with 16.2% using Twitter over 40 times. Not unexpectedly, the highest using group was in the 18-24 age range. Interestingly, 90% of this 18-24 demographic indicated receiving presidential political messages on Twitter, but 60% of the same group said that they were not involved in any type of presidential political campaign discussions on Twitter. The study did not explore the reason for this seemingly contradictory position, but as the questions on Twitter usage gave equal weight using Twitter as to either reading, writing and retweeting messages, the presence of a political message on Twitter may not, in some minds, constitute participation in the political discussion. However, 91.9% said that they retweeted
messages sent to them by political campaigns up to seven times during the period. Interestingly, when asked if they retweeted messages asking them to vote, only 37.8% said that they retweeted that specific message in the seven day period.

![Figure 2](image.png)

**Figure 2.** Survey responses showing the effectiveness of a Twitter message on the likelihood of voting when asked by a presidential candidate that the respondent supported.

On the question of receiving Twitter messages from political campaigns, 86.5% said that they had received up to seven messages during the period, with 10.8% receiving more than 14 messages. Significantly, 91.9% also received up to seven messages that directly asked them to vote for a candidate that they supported. However, while 5.4% said that getting the tweet from a candidate that they supported asking for their vote would make them “somewhat more likely” to vote, 27% said it would make them “very likely” to vote for the candidate that they support. Nonetheless, in the largest response to this question, 56.8% said that the Twitter message would have “no effect” on their likelihood to vote for that candidate, and 64.9% said that a message asking to vote today would still have “no effect” on their likelihood of voting that day (Figure 2).

The survey also shows that Twitter users follow the opposing presidential candidates, as 89.2% said that in the last seven days they had read up to seven messages from candidates that
they do not support. But, not surprisingly, these candidates had even less influence on the likelihood of voting than messages from supporting candidates, with 59.5% said that it would make respondents “less likely” to vote for that candidate, and 31.1% said that it would have “no effect” on them.

Finally, 85.7% answered yes to the question if presidential campaigns use Twitter to ask supporters to vote for their candidates. However, 72.2% said that a tweet from any candidate would not make them “more likely” to vote. Additionally, if the message to vote was tweeted by someone other than the candidate or campaign, 81.1% said that it would have “no effect” on their going to vote.

**Answering the Research Questions**

This study sought to answer two research questions that were specific to Twitter messages and their influence on the act of voting. The first question:

RQ1: Can Twitter messages be used to increase voter participation in presidential elections?

The survey shows that the majority of respondents felt that Twitter messages had “no effect” on their likelihood to vote in a presidential campaign, regardless of whether the message came from a candidate that they supported or not. 63.9% said that such a message would have “no effect” on their voting today, and 22.6% responded that a message would make them either “unlikely” or “somewhat unlikely” to vote today for a candidate that they supported. Therefore, it could be stated that Twitter messages cannot be used to increase voter participation in presidential elections.

The second research question:

RQ2: If a Twitter message generates a vote in a presidential election, is the vote
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cast as directed by the message?

Figure 3. Survey responses showing the effectiveness of a Twitter message on the likelihood of voting for a presidential candidate supported by the respondent when that candidate asked them to vote.

The survey presents a less direct answer to this question. Although 91.9% of respondents said that in the seven days prior to taking the survey they had at least seven tweets from presidential candidates that they support asking for their vote, only 13.9% said they were “somewhat likely” or “very likely” to do so. 63.9% said that the message had “no effect” on their voting for the candidate that day, and 56.8% said that any message asking for a vote for that candidate would have “no effect.” The research indicates that if a Twitter message from a presidential candidate does generate a vote, 32.4% would cast their vote for the candidate that sent the tweet if they supported that candidate. However, 56.8% of respondents – the vast majority – said that this message would have “no effect” on their likelihood to vote (Figure 3).

Discussion

When then Senator Barack Obama ran for president in 2008, his campaign helped to establish social media and Twitter as an important and dynamic campaign tool (Tumasjan et al.,
2004). In the 2012 presidential campaign, Twitter was recognized as one of the most widely followed and referenced sites by both major political parties and virtually all mass communication outlets. Twitter, even at its maximum of 140 characters per message, has become a significant forum for political discussion, with the volume of that discussion – measured by the number of tweets – being a predictor of some election results, as in the 2009 German federal election (Tumasjan et al, 2004). However, this study confirms that the use of Twitter as an environment for engaging in political discussion is not as widely used as the amount of noise surrounding its influence might indicate. This study suggests that even if Twitter use can be seen as a predictor of election results, it appears unlikely that it can, by itself, encourage actions to move users to vote.

The findings of this study also indicate that although Twitter may have the potential to promote an ecological change in the media, that change is more of perception and broad social movements rather than specific, more personal actions such as voting. Social media, as the latest and perhaps the most directly personal form of electric communication, does seem to support the abolishment of spatial dimension – as McLuhan (1964) predicted – by creating the “person-to-person” relationship that users have with a medium such as Twitter. But where voting and elections are concerned, this study shows limitations with Twitter in the ability to “close the deal” at the ballot box. As Postman (1995) stated that smoke signals may be a poor medium for a philosophical discussion, this study suggests that Twitter may not be the best medium for encouraging people to vote. This is not to say that Twitter is a poor medium for soliciting campaign volunteers, announcing events or building a candidate’s perception of momentum. However, the survey indicates that Twitter is not as strong a medium for increasing the likelihood of the majority of its users to vote.
It would be correct to state Twitter is a contributor to creating the “informed public” that Deetz (1992) said is necessary to foster the marketplace of ideas. Deetz (1992) also said that voting gives the tally of who is winning in that marketplace. Twitter does that by counting the number of times that ideas are transmitted by tweets and retweets – in the tens of millions – but seems to fall short in delivering the tally that actually counts: the votes. With over 50% of survey respondents stating that Twitter messages asking them to vote have “no effect” on their decision to vote, Twitter messages, while valuable for many other purposes, are shown not to be significant persuaders in moving registered voters to the ballot box.

**Twitter and Setting the Agenda.**

One reason for this could be that Twitter messages used in presidential campaigns, while having the feel and content of being uniquely created and personal missives, are known to be written mostly by campaign staffers. Twitter messages could also be perceived as being subject to the same forces as other political media, such as agenda-setting and bias. In fact, Twitter messages can be subject to the same influences that McCombs and Shaw (1992) saw being used by mass media outlets to decide what is important for people to see and hear. Like other forms of presidential campaign messages, Twitter messages tell supporters what is important both by the tweet itself and the number of times it is retweeted. Twitter users, and those who report on Twitter usage, emphasize both the magnitude and dominance of tweets on a topic as a beacon of its value to followers. Over 85% of those surveyed believe that presidential campaigns use Twitter to ask for their vote, illustrating once again that new platforms of communication – no matter how free of agenda influence when they begin – prove to be commandeered and used effectively by private interests to reduce the choices of democracy. Stuart Hall (1980) saw such exploitation as part of the basis for a capitalist society. However, this study indicates that if such
exploitive messages are tweeted about voting, they do not influence the majority of those surveyed.

For presidential campaigns, Twitter is a platform for distributing a vast number of political messages. In addition, since the modern political landscape demands large amounts of money to achieve political objectives, Twitter is used extensively in fundraising. In the 2008 presidential election, the Obama campaign raised over $500 million online (Lerman & Ghosh, 2010). When participants in this study were asked if a presidential campaign tweeted a request to make phone calls, ask a friend to support a candidate, or make a contribution, 75.7% said that they never responded, but 13.5% said that they responded nearly half the time. When consideration is given to the millions of tweets a presidential campaign issues during an election cycle, this response represents a significant number of potential donors. This exemplifies the important two-way aspect of Twitter, one that converts a virtual request into a tangible asset.

This study confirms that Twitter can engage the voter. It has results similar to those discovered from research done by Dale and Strauss (2009), who learned that for some elections, the drive for increased voter turnout can be successful simply by getting voters to pay attention to the message. However, both studies concede that in measuring the level of engagement of registered voters only, the results might be biased since there is already a willingness on those respondents to be engaged in the political process. Unfortunately, neither study investigated what influence political messages on Twitter might have on non-registered voters.

This is an important distinction since this study clearly shows that a majority of respondents did not have a Twitter account (64.8% answered no to that question). For this population, there is no opportunity for a presidential campaign to use Twitter for any type of messaging. This addresses not only the limited Twitter audience that presidential campaigns can
use to engage voters (limited in terms of the size of the overall population), but the audience is
also somewhat stratified by being mostly European-American and college educated. This is not a
small or disadvantaged population to target, but by being unable to reach other segments of the
electorate (non-college educated, non-European-American) presidential campaigns must realize
that a large segment of the population is not being served by this medium.

Also not to be ignored is the timing of this survey. This research was specific to
presidential elections and was taken in an election year at the end of the campaign. In a non-
election year, where the collective attention is not so focused on politics, the finding could be
quite different. Dalton and Beck (1992) discovered that their research on the correlation between
newspaper coverage and public interest during the 1992 presidential election may have been
overstated because the setting of presidential elections is different than non-presidential elections
in forming opinions.

In considering the use of Twitter messages to encourage voting, the presumption might
be that it could energize the voting population in the same way that Iranian radicals were directed
into the streets of Tehran in protests at the results of their 2009 presidential election. Though this
example might seem extreme, the rabid nature of some political partisans indicates that in US
elections voting preferences are taken very seriously.

This study also shows that supporters of one candidate follow the messages from the
opposing candidate. The survey did not ask if this was done to simply know what the other side
was saying or to undermine the rival campaign. During the Iranian unrest, Marzov (2009) states
that postings on social media made government aware of the protestor’s strategy by posting
meetings and events. In US presidential campaigns, all sides posting their views on Twitter give
the opposition a window into their political mind and what that mind think its followers want to
hear. Because of the “opt-in” nature of Twitter— you must actively choose to join – and the selection of who you “follow,” there is the opportunity to either just listen to what you wish to hear or consider messages from the opposition. However, as shown in the low response of those who consider themselves not participating in political discussions but still read presidential campaign tweets, searching for political information is more popular than actual discussions (Piechota, 2011).

Unfortunately, despite the availability of information on political issues and the claimed importance of our system of democracy, turnout in presidential elections continue to decline (Han, 2008). Education, however, has been found to be the most influential social characteristic relating to voter turnout, with higher education levels producing higher voter turnout. This study shows 85.6% of all respondents having attended college, and 24.4% of those who were registered voters and had Twitter account held graduate degrees. While on the one hand this shows an intellectually robust Twitter population, it also reveals one inherent bias of Twitter users discovered by Gayo-Avello (2011): they are more educated than their non-Twitter counterparts. Additionally, this study reveals a similar finding that a vast majority of people do not use Twitter.

This study also supports the claim that seeking political information through online forums such as Twitter can stimulate political engagement (Han, 2008). However, Twitter messages asking registered voters to vote have, for most of them, “no effect” on their likelihood to either vote, or vote for the candidate sending the message.

As with any research, the result of this study has certain conclusions that could have application in other areas of examination. Moreover, this study has certain limitations due to its
focus, structure and other factors. These conclusions and limitations will be discussed in the following chapter.
Chapter 5: Summaries and Conclusions

Limitations of the Study

All research has limitations that are inherent in both their design and execution. This study is no exception. Although the survey was distributed nationwide, the number of respondents taking the survey totaled 118, a small number. Further, since there were three questions that required affirmative answers for a respondent to become part of the purposive sample, only 37 completed the entire survey. Moreover, only respondents with a college education were part of the purposive sample. While this represents a large segment of Twitter account users, they are a minority segment among the population of registered voters. However, this was part of the survey design to limit the focus of this study.

An important element of this survey is that it was conducted at the end of a presidential campaign were vast amounts of money were spent directly by, and on behalf of, both campaigns, making the awareness of voting and the election process more acute than in non-presidential elections years. Furthermore, as with other forms of survey distribution, internet surveys have their limitation. Obviously it can only reach those who have and use an e-mail account, and, in this case, have given permission to the company used by this study (SurveyMonkey) to contact them to participate in such surveys. As those who are registered to vote have a bias to participate in the election process, those who agree to participate in such surveys also have a bias to do so. This is a random survey, but only random among this pre-selected population.

Although this study was designed to measure the likelihood to vote when asked directly to do so using Twitter, it did not address what other factors influence the decision to vote. This would include other political messages on Twitter, as well as political and voting messages on other social media sites such as Facebook and YouTube, and the multitude of
political messages in almost all media that may have a cumulative effect on the decision to vote. Also, conducting this survey so close to election day missed what effect Twitter messaging to encourage voting could have on the early voting turnout. Early voting and absentee balloting represent an increasing percentage of the total vote count. Surveying voters seven days before the election discounted this group entirely. Studies could be done to see what motivates these people to vote early, and if they require the same or different messages to vote.

Finally, this survey was not designed to answer the research question by investigating other defining characteristics of the population such as political affiliation, geographic location, income level, sexual orientation, or marital status, to name just a few. Therefore, the results should not infer opinions of these groups outside the scope of this study. While these are important designations that presidential political campaigns rely on in formulating their message and targeting, focusing to address these characteristics was outside the scope of this study.

**Recommendations for Further Studies**

As the majority of respondents reported that a Twitter message asking them to vote would have “no effect” on their action, further study could investigate why this occurred, and, if Twitter were to be used in future campaigns to encourage voting, can the response be improved? Also, this research could include not only what messages are effective to encourage voting, but what other social media sites are effective. However, it would be important to know the demographic composition of these social media sites, and what the cross-utilization with Twitter is. It would also be important to learn if messages aimed to encourage voting have the same weight on each site.

Conversely, research could be conducted to investigate why Twitter messages on voting had such a high “no effect” response. Knowing the reasons for this “neutral” response rate is
important to ascertain if the medium, the message, the characteristics of the users on Twitter, or other explanations are responsible for this result. If Twitter were to be used extensively in future political campaigns – and there is every indication that it will be used even more extensively – knowing what does not work to move voters to the polls is just as important as knowing what does.

Conclusions

Both McLuhan (1962, 1964) and Postman (1985, 1995) have written extensively on media ecology and the physical aspects of the communication media to change not only how we communicate but the very nature of what it means to effectively communicate within a society. Evidence supports the assertion that social media can have such an influence on a global scale. Internet based messaging has been used to provoke governmental change in the US and abroad. The use of Twitter and Facebook has been directly attributed to fermenting what has been called the “Arab Spring” largely from the Tunisians’ self-publishing and distribution the story of the street vendor who set himself ablaze in protest of government suppression (Thorne, 2011).

The use of social media to advance political agenda and influence voting, however, are shown to be susceptible to many of the same influences of control and power that sometimes subjugate other forms of media. Many of these controlling influences are embedded in our culture. In looking at this from a political perspective, these influences are reflected in the historic cultural debates around the intertwining of our social, economic and political life. Stuart Hall (1980) reminds us that this is not unique to the US as it is a basis for capitalist societies. These cultural debates, Hall (1980) goes on to say, brings meaning and value among distinctive groups and classes. Social media is yet another area where, even though its use is broadly based, individuals further define themselves as a part of distinctive groups and classes. And, while
social media, by its definition, encourages communication within a frame of common focus, attitudes and responses as McLuhan’s (1964) “global village” suggests, the “self-selecting” process of users places them into distinct and separate groups within the larger society. Twitter followers, at least where followers of presidential elections are concerned, show such a distinction by having a high percentage of college educated and European-American users.

Further, social and cultural distinctions tie themselves to our political process. While capitalism may be intertwined in both our social and political practices, Deetz (1992) points out that democracy is more than the promotion of capitalism. It also contains an ethical component as representation, communication and morality are defining terms for our democracy. The attributes of social media (personal, opt-in nature, large participating groups) make it particularly persuasive in promoting democratic ideals and promoting our political choices. Nilsen (1974) tells us that persuasive speech allows us a significant critical choice because without a significant choice, there is no morality. Therefore, the use of Twitter to encourage voting seeks to bolster the choice we wish to make as a final and decisive participatory action in our democratic process.

Perhaps it is the definitive yet personal nature of the decision to vote that justifies a “no effect” answer to the question of having a Twitter message influence participation in what some call a “sacred duty.” The belief that elections have consequences has been acknowledged to be true by the results of the decisions that our elected leaders make that affect our economy, social policies and, of course, the waging of war. In admitting that we can be influenced by something as expendable as a “tweet” from a political campaign, we may seem to trivialize this most important of democratic actions. With the decision to cast a ballot, we still maintain a private,
personal, and satisfying decision to participate in a process that has implications beyond our individual choice as we gather in social groups, both real and virtual.


References


EFFECTS OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON INDIVIDUAL VOTING

Communication, 57(1), 163-173. doi:10.1111/j.1460-2466.206.00336.x


doi:10.1177/016344378000200106


doi:10.1080/15205430701587644


Appendix

Survey

You are invited to participate in a graduate studies survey that seeks to explore the effect of Twitter messages that ask you to vote. Your participation is completely voluntary and your identity will be kept anonymous. There will be no follow-up or additional survey requested from you by this study. Thank you for taking part in this important study.

Section I.

1. Do you have a Twitter account?
   Yes  No

2. What is the highest level of education you have completed?
   Graduated from high school
   Some college education
   Graduated from college
   Some graduate school
   Completed graduate school

3. Are you a registered voter?
   Yes  No

(Use skip logic.) If the response to question 1, 2 or 2 is “No,” then the survey will proceed to Section III.

Section II.

Thank you for your responses. If you chose to continue with this survey, you are not required to respond to each question. However, for the statements that you do respond to, please consider only your own personal experience. This survey has 18 questions and will take about 5 minutes to complete. Thank you again for your participation.

1. In the last seven days, how many tweets have you either read, written, and/or retweeted?
   0-5  6-10  11-15  16-20  21-30  31-40  40+
2. In the last seven days, how many Twitter messages have you received directly from presidential campaigns?

0-7  8-14  14+

3. In the last seven days, how often did you RETWEET messages sent to you from presidential campaigns?

0-7  8-14  14+

4. In the last seven days, how often have you responded to requests tweeted to you by presidential campaigns, such as contribution money, making phone calls, asking a friend to support that campaign, etc.?

Never  Rarely  About half the time I’m asked  Sometimes  Always

5. In the last seven days, how often did you receive tweets from presidential campaigns that directly asked for your vote?

0-7  8-14  14+

6. If you receive a tweet from a presidential campaign that tells you what candidate to vote for, how likely are you to vote for that candidate because of the tweet?

Not Likely  Somewhat Unlikely  No Effect  Somewhat Likely  Very Likely

7. In the last seven days, how many times have you received a Twitter message from a campaign telling you to vote for that campaign’s candidate?

0-7  8-14  15-20  21-30  31+

8. In a seven day period, how often did you read Twitter messages from candidates that you DO NOT support?

0-7  8-14  15-20  21-30  31+

9. If you receive a tweet from a presidential campaign that you DO NOT support asking for your vote, how likely are you to vote for that candidate?

Less Likely  Somewhat Unlikely  No Effect  Somewhat Likely  Very Likely
10. If you receive a tweet from a candidate that you DO support asking for your vote, how likely are you to vote for that candidate?
   Unlikely Somewhat Unlikely No Effect Somewhat Likely Very Likely

11. Are you more or less likely to vote for the presidential candidate you support if you receive a tweet from ANY presidential campaign asking you to vote?
   Not Likely Less Likely No Effect More Likely Extremely Likely

12. Would a Twitter message from a presidential campaign that you support that said “VOTE TODAY” make you more or less likely to vote on that day?
   Unlikely Somewhat Unlikely No Effect Somewhat Likely Very Likely

13. If you receive a message from a presidential campaign asking you to “vote today,” how likely or unlikely are you to RETWEET that message?
   Unlikely Somewhat Unlikely No Effect Somewhat Likely Very Likely

14. If you received a “retweeted” message from a close friend or relative asking you to “VOTE TODAY,” would that make you unlikely or very likely to vote that day?
   Unlikely Somewhat Unlikely No Effect Somewhat Likely Very Likely

15. How involved are you in any type of presidential campaign discussions on Twitter by reading, tweeting or retweeting messages?
   Not involved using Twitter Somewhat involved using Twitter Moderately involved
   (no political activity) (sometimes I read tweets) (read, tweet

   Very involved using Twitter Extremely involved using Twitter
   (sometimes read, tweet & retweet) (often read, tweet & retweet)

16. Do you think that Twitter can increase voter turnout in presidential elections if it is used to ask people to vote?
   Yes Maybe No Opinion No

17. Do presidential campaigns use Twitter to ask supporters to vote for their candidates?
   Yes No
18. If you receive a TWEET from someone other than a presidential campaign (such as a celebrity, spots figure, writer, etc.) asking you to vote, are you unlikely or more likely to cast a vote for any presidential candidate?

Unlikely   Less Unlikely   No Effect   Somewhat Likely   Very Unlikely

Section III.

For statistical purposes, please answer the following questions. Again, we want to thank you for taking part in this anonymous survey. Your participation is greatly appreciated.

1. Age
   18-24   25-32   33-40   41-49   50-55   56-60   60+

2. Gender
   Male    Female

3. Citizenship:
   1   2
   US Born    Naturalized

4. Self-identified Ethnicity:
   Pacific Islander-American   Hispanic-American   Far East-American
   African-American   European-American   Middle East-American

Thank you for completing this survey. The purpose of this survey was to gauge the effect of Twitter messages that encourage you to vote on your action to cast a ballot. Once again, your anonymous participation is valuable and very much appreciated.