The Personalized Policy and the Engagement of the Online Political Citizens in E-Government Era

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Abstract: The decisive role of Social Media on citizens proved especially by increasing the proximity and accessibility of online public and political life not only contributed to the extension of political information, especially on the participation and involvement of citizens in political life. Moreover, Social Media has differentiated itself from other media through the possibility of personalizing political communication, technology that allows a large number of ordinary people to be connected and recognized by a large number of people. Also, there is an unprecedented correlation in any existing political communication system between social network mobilization process and personalization of communication. Thus, the more diverse the mobilization, the more personalized become the manifestations of the users, usually involving communication technologies that allow people to activate their fragile connections in the social networks. In the context in which politicians understand the user's psychology in social networks and behave accordingly, active presence in a social network can help in influencing the public, as a social network can be a very good channel for the propagation of messages, and through it it can interact more effectively with opinion leaders of online communities. However, these benefits only come if the candidate is personally involved in the network, without artificial messages written by campaign organizers.

Keywords: Politics 2.0; E-Government; Online Political Citizens; Personalized Policy; Social Media

1. Introduction

When we talk about Social Media, we do not only relate to the most used social network - Facebook, but also to other social media components like Youtube, blogs, Twitter, Flickr and so on. The beginning of 2009 was also the first year when it was highlighted the "power" that these Social Media have. Thus, Facebook recorded at that time 175 million active users, that is, twice as many users as the population of Germany (80 million inhabitants), the country with the largest population in the

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European Union. Moreover, according to a study by Forrester Research, three quarters of Internet users used Social Media components in mid-2008, which represented an increase of 56 time compared to 2007. Since that year, the political communication through Social Media has captured an increasing interest and among scholars from all over the world: from the United States, Europe to the Asian and African countries.

2. Social Media Involvement in Political Communication Strategies

2.1. Beginning of Social Media Use in Campaigning: Barack Obama's 2008 campaign

Social Media's most prominent involvement in political and electoral communication strategies was noted in the 2008 US presidential election campaign. As Maria Magdalena Jianu says, "no channels like CNN or ABC have brought him Obama's decisive advantage, but social networking sites such as Facebook, Myspace, forums, blogs, generally attended by students (the current US president had 320,000 online supporters, compared to 5300 as Hillary Clinton had)" (Jianu, 2009).

Thus, we find that the supremacy of television in political communication, as we know it from the incipient phase of development of the 3rd age of development of political communication systems, has come to an end, being replaced by social networks that offer the unprecedented opportunity to exploit a previously neglected public by other media: young people.

Moreover, Barack Obama's sample of votes has achieved an unprecedented performance among 18-29-year-olds, the generation of Internet users and "experts in new communication technologies." Barack Obama's communicators have succeeded, thanks to the implementation of effective communication strategies through Social Media and without replacing traditional communication environments, to stimulate and mobilize the social category of young people, otherwise viewed from the electoral point of view, a critical, enthusiastic and skeptical group about the effectiveness of any proposed political program.

The method by which Obama's strategists managed to revive the youth was to meet the need for interaction, specific to this category in the electorate, to constantly update information and diversify the online media channels. In this sense, Obama's strategies have used all of the Social Media components: from Facebook, Youtube,

Flickr, Twitter, to LinkedIn, to stimulate including professional categories. Because of this strategy, Obama's 2008 election campaign has been considered a real success, and "The Net Generation requires government leadership to enable citizens to contribute to decision-making, and to participate in new solutions to society's problems" (Cismaru, 2012).

Barack Obama's 2008 election success has mobilized many political actors to use online social networking to present and promote the platform and the electoral message, and have greatly relied on meeting the needs of social media users to debate. Even in Germany, a country where, according to studies conducted in 2008, "most German politicians do not support political communication through social media," Obama's social networking success ranged between 2010 and 2012, according to a study by three researchers, Stefan Stieglitz, Tobias Brockmann, Linh Dang Xuan, a significant increase (5-8 times higher in 2012 than in 2010) of the interest of German citizens, implicitly of political parties, on this new way to convey the political message and to interact with the electorate (Stieglitz, Brockmann, Xuan, 2012).

2.2. Social Media Role in Political Participation of the Online Citizen

The decisive role of Social Media on citizens proved especially by increasing the proximity and accessibility of online public and political life not only contributed to the extension of political information, especially on the participation and involvement of citizens in political life.

The political participation, as a result of the whole process of political communication, was defined as "the action of ordinary citizens directly influencing some political outcomes" (Brady, 1999). Gustanfsson (2012) specifies that these actions are organized by private individuals or by public opinion. Political participation is closely related to its access to information and, by logical deduction, to the degree of knowledge of political reality (the particularities of the political scene in a political system, the current events communicated through the mass media).

However, even if the Internet gives the citizen access to information on the political context, this does not mean a greater interest in politics and participation in the political act or the debate about politics, but these elements - access and knowledge - may be the premises of a more good political socialization of the electorate.

The main elements, which have been debated in the literature on the mechanisms that influence the degree of political participation in social networking, are the links they make between all members of the network.

Thus, a group of researchers (Valenzuela, Kim & Gil de Zuniga, 2012) talk about strong links and weak links that are created in the structure of online social networks. They note that strong ties relate to discussions between friends and family members, links characterized by "intimacy, trust, respect, access and mutual respect, and weak connections are made in discussions with temporary visitors, friends of friends and strangers, that is, the group of people with whom a person does not share intimate matters."

Recent studies have shown that strong ties are a key source for recruitment and political participation, but in Social Media, weak links play a very important role in creating policy debates and developing participatory behavior by members.

With the advancement of political communication research, some researchers have focused their studies not only on the process of classical participation of the citizen in the political act, a process that involves public concerns, the needs and values embodied in governmental decision-making but especially on social activity and interaction in networks introducing in the literature new concepts adapted to the social media era called "e-participation" or "politics 2.0".

These concepts are characterized, compared to the classical participation of the citizen in the political sphere, by more efficient exploitation of the low costs of the Internet in general and of the social networks in particular, and by their condition of environments where political information abounds and, both participation, and especially social interaction on political issues, is increasing.

Beyond participation, Social Media speaks more about user engagement, which involves more than simply taking part in a discussion. According to a survey conducted by 4 US researchers, Lee Rainie, Aaron Smith, Kay Lehman Scholzman, Henry Brady and Sidney Verba, on October 19, 2012, "66% of social media users involved platforms to post opinions on civic and political issues, react to other posts, determine your friends to act on a matter, or vote, follow the activities of the candidates, press like or go to other content, and join groups from social networks". (Rainie, Smith, Scholzman, Brady, & Verba, 2012).

2.3. Social Media and Personalized Policy

Social Media has differentiated itself from other media through the possibility of personalizing political communication, technology that allows a large number of ordinary people to be connected and recognized by a large number of people. Also, there is an unprecedented correlation in any existing political communication system between social network mobilization process and personalization of communication.

Thus, the more diverse the mobilization, the more personalized become the manifestations of the users, usually involving communication technologies that allow people to activate their fragile connections in the social networks.

Moreover, a mobilizing message of a political actor issued through social networks will be personalized by each user interested and redistributed to friends in the online environment in a form much closer to their level of understanding and thus put back in the discussion of the role of interpersonal communication in the process of influencing the behavior of the electoral public, a model of communication elaborated by the theoretician Lazarsfelt, in the theory of the flow of communication in two stages.

Thus, every Social Media user can at any time become a communication vector of the political actor, without borders such as editorial policy, as we know them from the time when classical political communication systems were successful over the electorate. At this stage of evolution of political communication systems, the relationship that political leaders create with the Social Media voters and meeting their needs and interests is becoming increasingly important so that the electorate becomes an important communication vector in their social groups.

In this respect, Bennett and Segerberg (2011) proposed a set of mandatory conditions that allow the relationship between the political-electoral actor to develop in the personalized policy process, as follows:

(1) An ethos of diversity and inclusion defined by tolerance for different points of view and even for different issues closely related to vaguely delimited political networks. That is why most politicians in the United States combine public social information and information about their personal lives or non-political events into online social networks;

(2) The increase in mass outsourcing, including the growth of personal action frames (for example, "We are the 99%") are meant to lower the barriers to identification more and more. These easily personalized frames contrasts with multiple collective

and conventional action frameworks (eg "Eat the rich") that may involve greater socialization and mediation for their propagation to a large audience;

(3) Participation is directed through dense social networks where people can share their own vision and concern about a political topic - the increasing use of social technologies allows simple individuals to become major catalysts for collective and widespread action, as if would activate their own social network when they actually access a whole system of social networks, displacing the barrier between "strong links" and "weak links'.

3. Importance of Opinion Leaders in Social Media

3.1. Online Opinion Leaders - How did they Appear in the New Communication Process?

Opinion leaders from the virtual environment were characterized by Diana Cismaru (2012) as "those people who, through constant and pertinent interventions, have won a central position in the virtual group." Unlike traditional opinion leaders who have public reputation, online opinion leaders are individuals but can influence their social groups by presenting issues of public interest in a personal way.

In the context in which politicians understand the user's psychology in social networks and behave accordingly, active presence in a social network can help in influencing the public, as a social network can be a very good channel for the propagation of messages, and through it it can interact more effectively with opinion leaders of online communities. However, these benefits only come if the candidate is personally involved in the network, without artificial messages written by campaign organizers.

The more specific is the online political communication through opinion leaders, the more, according to a study by George Washington University researchers, published by The New York Times in February 2004, "69% of citizens interested in political affairs and who active in the online environment can be categorized as opinion leaders in the social groups they are part of" (Sălcudeanu, Aparaschivei, & Toader, 2009). In this way, we can outline a new community of online citizens characterized as being online and

politically motivated, who support their candidates by accessing their Internet pages, participating in group discussions, reading all online journals on political topics and making political contributions through the Internet.

3.2. Characteristics of Online Opinion Leaders

Joseph Graf (2004) highlighted some basic characteristics that these online opinion leaders have in the political sphere. These are:

- visited the website of a candidate or political party in the last 2-3 months;

- took part in at least 2 of the following political activities - received emails on political topics, subscribed to newsletters of political sites, forwarded emails with political subject, visited and posted comments on politicians or political parties' websites, blogs and/or Facebook pages or participated in political debates in an online discussion group (forums, blogs, Facebook groups, etc.)

The above-mentioned community members have been called the Online Political Citizens (OPC) and play a very important role during an election campaign, not so much in terms of the number of followers, but through the effervescence with which they manifest their spirit civic.

According to the George Washington University study, 44% of the OPCs are not involved in politics, did not work in any election campaign, did not make any donation to the campaign, and did not participate in any campaign event; so their political and social involvement is accomplished by doctrinal or civic beliefs. 87% of the OPCs in the United States receive political emails and 66% redirect them to friends or work colleagues, which again demonstrates the very important role played by them both in the electoral campaign, as well as in the act of government, as active members of civil society. Moreover, based on their influence on the community they belong to, the same study reveals that 69% of the Internet users in the 2004 presidential campaign in the United States had common characteristics specific to political citizens online, 13% of ordinary Internet public and 10% of the general public.

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