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American Voters' Use of Social Media and Their Support for the 2016 Presidential Candidates

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Abstract

This retrospective study used American National Election Study (ANES) 2016 Time Series dataset. The study sample included 867 voters between the ages of 18 and 55 to establish an impact of social media on voting for the 2016 presidential candidates. The study used sociodemographic characteristics and social media usage as predictor variables, which could affect the study's two dependent variables, probability of voting for presidential candidate, Trump or Clinton. The likelihood that those who sent a message on Twitter/Facebook about political issues would vote for Clinton was 50.1% higher than for nonusers. Those who followed politics in media were less likely to vote for Clinton than those who did not follow politics in media. The likelihood that those who used social media to follow the 2016 presidential election would vote Trump was 55.2% higher than for non-users. The findings have implications for future as campaign organizers can target subgroups who tend to vote for the Republican or Democratic candidates. Future studies should elucidate on pathways associating the importance of various forms of online political behaviors that can affect voting behaviors to shed more light on using social media wisely.

Introduction and Prior Research

Social media users are growing in astronomical level in recent years due to their role in day-to-day activities. In 2018, 214 million Americans used Facebook (Statista, 2018a), and 68 million Americans used Twitter (Statista, 2018b). Each day, over 500 million tweets are sent using Twitter (InternetLiveStats, 2018). This explosive usage of major social networking sites significantly affects how we think and behave. Furthermore, this trend demonstrates a growing need to understand the role played by these Internet media in American politics.

Social media is an important tool that impacts the personal, social, and political lives of people (Bond et al., 2012; de Zúñiga, Copeland, & Bimber, 2014; Francia, 2018; Johnson et al., 2010; Smith & Raine, 2008; Vatrapu, Robertson, & Dissanayake, 2008; Williams & Gulati, 2008). Social networking websites have been used to pursue political engagement (Francia, 2018; Johnson et al., 2010; Ott, 2017; Robertson, Vatrapu, & Medina, 2010a; Williams & Gulati, 2008), and the noninteractive social media such as websites are used for sharing views, spreading information, and disseminating political agenda (Robertson, Vatrapu, & Medina, 2010b). Social media has become an important tool in influencing the political participation of people since the 2006 election (Boxell, Gentzkow, & Shapiro, 2018; de Zúñiga, Copeland, & Bimber, 2014; Francia, 2018; Groshek & Koc-Michalska, 2017; Johnson et al., 2010; Ott, 2017; Robertson, Vatrapu, & Medina, 2010b; Smith & Raine, 2008; Taylor, 2011), and nearly half of American voters received campaign information from social networking sites in 2008 alone (Vatrapu, Robertson, & Dissanayake, 2008).

Both voters and candidates, including presidents, senators, and house representatives, have used social networking sites such as Facebook successfully for communicating with voters, fundraising, and organizing political events (Francia, 2018; Johnson et al., 2010; Ott, 2017; Williams & Gulati, 2008).

These discourses delivered through online media are crucial for political engagement and deliberative democracy (de Zúñiga, Copeland, & Bimber, 2014; Francia, 2018; Johnson et al., 2010; Ott, 2017; Robertson, Vatrapu, & Medina, 2010a). Several researchers have explored the use of Facebook (Borah, 2016; Bossetta, 2018; Johnson et al., 2010; Page & Duffy, 2018; Robertson et al., 2013; Robertson, Vatrapu, & Medina, 2010a; Williams & Gulati, 2008) and Twitter (Bossetta, 2018; Francia, 2018; Ott, 2017; Page & Duffy, 2018; Perez-Martinez, Rodriguez Gonzalez, & Tobajas Gracia, 2017) in presidential primaries and nomination campaigns. Since 2008, presidential candidates have used Facebook posts frequently for political advertising, emotional appeals, and social endorsements (Borah, 2016; Bossetta, 2018; Groshek & Koc-Michalska, 2017; Page & Duffy, 2018). Studies found that rational, thoughtful comments were initially more predominant than fake and affective comments were in two presidential candidates' Facebook sites (Robertson et al., 2013). However, positive comments decreased over time. Differences between the candidates from Republican and Democratic parties were noted, the Republican candidates used fearful appeal and attacked more, while Barrack Obama used humor and passion via social media platforms during the election (Borah, 2016). Page and Duffy (2018) found that Republican candidates used images during political campaigns to communicate credibility.

There is an increasing interest in understanding the impact of social media on American politics since the literature has noted that online campaign activity is becoming an additional factor to fund raising and media coverage, and in determining a candidate's electoral success and political trust (Bossetta, 2018; Painter, 2015; Smith & Raine, 2008; Williams & Gulati, 2008). Some researchers have studied the role of social networks in influencing political processes and election outcomes (Bossetta, 2018; Boxell, Gentzkow, & Shapiro, 2018; Groshek & Koc-Michalska, 2017; Painter, 2015; Perez-Martinez, Rodriguez Gonzalez, & Tobajas Gracia, 2017; Smith & Raine, 2008; Williams & Gulati, 2007; Williams & Gulati, 2008). For example, Facebook shares were positively correlated with final vote shares of candidates during the 2006 elections (Williams & Gulati, 2008). Robertson, Vatrapu, and Medina (2010b) found effective use of YouTube links in social networking dialogs from the Facebook "walls" of three major candidates during the 2008 U.S. presidential election. President Obama has effectively used social networking sites including Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, MySpace, YouTube, and many other tools to reach and mobilize voters (Robertson, Vatrapu, & Medina, 2010a). Visiting President Obama's website provided various opportunities for voters to interact with him, thus promoting political participation and a sense of ownership (Robertson, Vatrapu, & Medina, 2010a; barrackobama.com). His social media campaign won the hearts of several million voters and helped him to succeed in the 2008 and 2012 presidential elections.

Some studies have explored the difference between parties in their social media use and outcome (Boxell, Gentzkow, & Shapiro, 2018; Groshek & Koc-Michalska, 2017). Groshek and Koc-Michalska (2017) found that passive social media use was associated with success for Trump, while active use of social media had a negative effect on his success. Likewise, Boxell, Gentzkow, and Shapiro (2018) found that voters who were less active on the Internet supported Trump. Passive social media use was a deterrent for Sanders (Groshek & Koc-Michalska, 2017).

Some studies did not find a consistent positive association between social media use and political participation across elections over a period of 12 years (Bimber & Copeland, 2013). However, one study found that online campaigning communication and interactivity using Facebook was more effective than the use of websites during the 2012 presidential election and presidential nominations (Painter, 2015). The impact of Twitter on politics has gained attention in recent years (Bossetta, 2018; Francia, 2018; Ott, 2017; Perez-Martinez, Rodriguez Gonzalez, & Tobajas Gracia, 2017). President Trump's win is attributed to his unique Twitter use to reach millions of voters directly (Johnson et al., 2010; Ott, 2017). In a content analysis of SuperTuesday tweets, researchers found that 24.6% of the tweets were about Trump (out of 134), a highly referenced candidate (Perez-Martinez, Rodriguez Gonzalez, & Tobajas Gracia, 2017). Some of these interpretations are based on media analyses without establishing a causal relationship between Twitter usages and voting behavior (Perez-Martinez, Rodriguez Gonzalez, & Tobajas Gracia, 2017).

Some studies established an association between sociodemographic characteristics such as the gender, race, and age of the voters and their support for the presidential candidates (Smith & Raine, 2008; Taylor, 2011; Wallace, 2012). For example, Wallace (2012) conducted an opinion poll of Latino and White voters and, found that the Latinos supported the 2012 Democratic presidential candidate and the White voters did not (Taylor, 2011).

This study builds on prior research and uses a representative sample of the 2016 presidential election voters and examined how social media usage and sociodemographic characteristics are associated with the voting behaviors of Americans during the 2016 presidential election. This study addressed the following research questions: How did social media usage predict the likelihood of voting for Trump? How did social media usage predict the likelihood of voting for Clinton?

Methods and Data

The data for this study was retrieved from a national survey, American National Election Study (ANES) 2016 Time Series dataset (ANES, 2016a). In this national survey, face-to-face interviews are conducted in 2016 and 2017 before and after the 2016 presidential election (ANES, 2016b). The survey collected data on various types of variables including voting behavior, social media use, and demographic characteristics of potential voters and voters above the age of 18.

Measures

Voting Behaviors. Voting behavior was the dependent variable in this study. Voting behavior is determined as who the voter voted for during the 2016 presidential election. The question related to the dependent variable include, "For whom did R vote for President" (ANES, 2016c). Two dichotomous variables were created using this question: Voted for Trump (1) and those who did not (0). Next, voted for Clinton (1) and those who did not (0). These dichotomous questions acted as indicators for support for the presidential candidates. It is important to note that the group coded as "0" included voters who voted for independent presidential candidates as well. The purpose of the study is to understand the impact of social media usage in determining voting behavior. The study did not compare how the voters who voted for Trump differed from those who voted for Clinton. The main intent of the study is to provide insights for campaign organizers and policy advocates on how to use social media effectively to identify and target subgroups of voters formed by their social media usage and sociodemographic characteristics.

Enabling Factors: Social Media Usage. Two types of social media usage indictors were used: interactive and noninteractive social media usage (Table 1). The following question was relevant to measure the interactive social media usage, "Sent a message on Facebook/ Twitter about political issues" (1=Yes; 0=No) (ANES, 2016c). The noninteractive social media usage variables include, "Number of days in week respondent uses social media to learn presidential election" (1=One or more days per week; 0=Never); How many times respondent "follow politics in media"? (1= One or more times; 0=Never); Did respondent "visit website of the candidate"? (1=Yes; 0=No);

Predisposing Factors: Sociodemographic Characteristics. Sociodemographic factors, including education, race, family size, age, place of resident, and gender, were considered determinants on how voters voted during the 2016 presidential election (ANES, 2016c). Age and family size were measured as continuous variables. Education (1=having a college degree; 0 = no college degree), race (1=White; 0=nonWhites), and place of residence (1=CA), and gender (1=female) were converted into dummy, binary variables (Table 1).

Table 1: Independent Variable Codes

Independent variables	Codes and Attributes	Independent variables	Codes and Attributes
Sent a message on Twitter/Facebook about political issues	1 (yes), 0 (no)	Family size	continuous
Used social media to learn about presidential election one or more times per week	1 (yes), 0 (no)	Age	continuous
Voter followed politics in media	1 (yes), 0 (no)	Race	1 = Whites 0 = nonwhites
Visited website of a presidential candidate	1 (yes), 0 (no)	Gender	1 = female 0 = male
Place of residence	1 (CA), 0 (other states)	Education	1 = college degree 0 = no college

Study Sample

This retrospective study chose American voters who voted during the 2016 presidential election. The following question was used as a filter variable to select the study sample, "Did respondent vote for President?" (ANES, 2016c). This process yielded 867 voters, a noninstitutionalized sample exclusively from ANES Time Series survey, aged 18 years and older. Since prior studies have noted increased use of social media among young Americans (Smith & Raine, 2008), this study chose voters between the ages of 18 and 55 to establish an impact of social media on voting for the 2016 presidential candidates. Table 2 presents sociodemographic characteristics of the study sample.

Half of the respondents (52.6%) were married, 33.7% were never married, and 13.7% were divorced/widowed/separated. Over half (59.6%) had college degree including bachelor's degree and above and 40.4% did not have a college degree including some college (24.2%) and AA degree (7.3%). The majority (84.4%) was working at the time of survey and others include students (3.2%), homemakers (5.8%), and unemployed and others (6.4%). Three fourths (76.6%) of them were Whites, non-Hispanic and others include Blacks (9.6%), Asians (8.0%), and Native Americans (5.9%). One third of the respondents (31.8%) made less than $50,000, another one-third (36%) made less than $100,000 and the rest (32.2%) made over $100,000. More than half (55.4%) were homeowners and the rest (44.6%) were tenants or had other housing arrangements. Only 10.1% of the study subjects lived in CA. The subjects represented all fifty states. The average age of the respondents was 37.26 years (sd=9.834) and the average family size of the respondent was 1.94 (sd=1.57).

Table 2: Sociodemographic Characteristics, N=867

Sociodemographic Characteristics	f	%	Sociodemographic Characteristics	f	%
Gender			***Residence***		
Male	337	38.9%	**CA**	88	10.1%
Female	530	61.1%	**Other State**	779	89.9%
Marital Status			***Income***		
Married	456	52.5%	**<50,000**	206	31.8%
Never married	292	33.7%	**>100000**	312	36.0%
Divorced/widowed/separated	119	13.7%	**Over 100,000**	349	32.2%
Education			***Home Ownership***		
College Degree	517	59.6%	**Homeowner**	480	55.4%
AA Degree	140	16.2%	**Tenant**	387	44.6%
Some College	210	24.2%			
Employment Status			**Average Age = 37.26 years**		
Employed	732	84.4%			
Unemployed	135	15.6%			
Race			**Family Size = 1.94 people**		
Whites, non-Hispanic	664	76.6%			
Blacks	83	9.6%			
Asians	69	8.0%			
Native Americans	51	5.9%			

Data Analysis

Logistic regressions were used to estimate the influence of social media usage on voter choice of the presidential candidates. Statistical significance of social media uses was noted if they yielded $p<.05$. Then, the influences of social media usage and sociodemographic characteristics on voter choice for Trump or Clintron, were tested using two separate logistic regressions. Odds ratios of the corresponding variables from regressions were tested using a Wald test.

Results

Social Media Usage & Voting Behavior

Table 3 presents social media usage and voting behaviors of American voters. More than half (56.7%) of the study subjects sent message on Facebook/Twitter about political issues, 80.0% of them followed politics very closely, 34.5% of the study subjects visited websites of the candidates. The subjects were active users of social media to learn about the 2016 presidential election. On an average, voters used social media 5.92 (sd=1.828) days per week to learn about the 2016 presidential election. Half of the study participants (53.2%) voted for Clinton, 35.9% voted for Trump and 11% voted for an independent presidential candidate.

Table 3: Social Media Usage & Voting Behavior, N=867

Social Media Usage	f	%
Sent a message on Facebook/Twitter about political issues	492	56.7%
Followed politics very closely in media	694	80.0%
Visited websites of the candidates.	299	34.5%
Number of days in week R uses social media to learn Presidential election = 5.92 days		
Voting Behavior		
Voted for presidential candidate, Clinton	461	53.2%
Voted for presidential candidate, Trump	311	35.9%
Voted for an independent presidential candidate	95	11.0%

Results of Logistic Regression

Table 4 presents the multivariate logistic regression analyses for likelihood of voting for Trump and Clinton during the 2016 presidential election. After controlling for sociodemographic variables, those who sent a message on Twitter/Facebook about political issues (odds ratio = 1.501) were more likely to vote for Clinton than those who did not send a message on Twitter/Facebook about political issues. The likelihood that those who sent a message on Twitter/Facebook about political issues would vote for Clinton was 50.1% higher than for nonusers. However, those who followed politics in media were less likely to vote for Clinton (odds ratio = .565) than those who did not follow politics in media. In addition, women (odds ratio =1.889) and people with bachelor's degree or higher (odds ratio =1.764) were more likely to vote for Clinton than male voters and voters with less than bachelor's degree. The likelihood that women would vote for Clinton was 88.9% higher than for men. The likelihood that people with bachelor's degree or higher would vote for Clinton was 76.4% higher than for voters with less than bachelor's degree. Being a White voter (odds ratio =.226), family size (odds ratio =.859), and age (odds ratio = .982) were a deterrent to vote for Clinton than nonwhites, voters from smaller families, and younger voters.

Table 4: Results of Logistic Regression 1 & 2, N=867

	DV1: Supporting Presidential Candidate, Trump					DV2: Supporting Presidential Candidate, Clinton				
		95% C.I. for EXP (B)					95% C.I. for EXP (B)			
	OR	Lower	Upper	Wald	p	OR	Lower	Upper	Wald	p
Education: College degree Vs Not having a college degree	1.764	1.304	2.386	13.531	0.005	0.679	0.500	0.923	6.103	0.013
Race: White Vs Non-White	0.226	0.155	0.331	58.625	0.005	6.031	3.898	9.331	65.102	0.005
Family size (cont.)	0.859	0.784	0.942	10.433	0.001	1.157	1.053	1.271	9.227	0.002
Age (cont.)	0.982	0.967	0.997	5.606	0.018	1.023	1.007	1.039	8.193	0.004
State of Resident: CA Vs Other States	1.130	0.692	1.844	0.239	0.625	0.835	0.498	1.399	0.469	0.494
Gender: Male Vs. Female	1.889	1.389	2.568	16.448	0.005	0.502	0.367	0.687	18.611	0.005
Used social media to learn about presidential election one or more times per week Vs Nonusers	0.982	0.905	1.066	0.191	0.662	1.033	0.950	1.123	0.568	0.451
Visited website of candidate Vs Nonusers	1.059	0.774	1.448	0.129	0.720	0.792	0.574	1.091	2.038	0.153
Sent a message on Facebook/Twitter about political issues Vs Nonusers	1.501	1.105	2.040	6.734	0.009	0.797	0.583	1.090	2.016	0.156
Followed politics in media Vs Nonusers	0.565	0.385	0.828	8.558	0.003	1.552	1.047	2.299	4.797	0.029
Model $\chi 2$ (10) = 121.421; p<.005						**Model $\chi 2$ (10) = 130.703; p<.005**				

After controlling for sociodemographic variables, those who used social media to follow the 2016 presidential election are more likely to vote for Trump than those who did not use social media to follow the 2016 presidential election (odds ratio = 1.552). The likelihood that those who used social media to follow the 2016 presidential election would vote Trump was 55.2% higher than for non-users. Being a White voter (odds ratio =6.031), family size (odds ratio =1.157), and age (odds ratio = 1.023) were positively associated with voting for Trump. The likelihood that a White voter would vote for Trump was 503.1% higher than nonwhite voters. As the family size of the voter increases, the likelihood of them voting for Trump increases by 15.7%. As the age of the voters increases, the likelihood of them voting for Trump increases by 2.3%.

However, women (odds ratio =.502) and people with a bachelor's degree or higher (odds ratio =.679) were less likely to vote for Trump than men and people without a bachelor's degree were.

Discussion

Summary of Findings

Separate logistic regression results indicated that each variable had a different impact on voting for Trump and Clinton. One relevant enabling factor, the interactive use of social media (sending a message on Twitter/Facebook about political issues) influenced voting for Clinton; however, it was not relevant in the logistic regression using voting for Trump as a dependent variable. One relevant enabling factor, the noninteractive use of social media (the voter following politics in the media) influenced voting for Trump; however, it was a deterrent to voting for Clinton. Two factors (having used social media to learn about the 2016 presidential election one or more times and visiting the website of the presidential candidates) did not emerge as significant factors in predicting voting for Trump or Clinton. Three factors (being White, family size, and age) that were positively related to voting for Trump were negatively related to voting for Clinton. On the other hand, two other factors (being female and having a college degree) that were positively related to voting for Clinton were negatively related to voting for Trump.

Implications

The study examined the voting behaviors of Americans aged 18 to 55 years using data from the 2016 ANES Time Series (ANES, 2016a). This study focused on the impact of social media usage on the likelihood of Americans voting for the 2016 presidential candidates. The findings lead to the conclusion that sending a message on Facebook/Twitter on political issues was an enabling factor when voting for Clinton. This finding is new and is based on a representative sample of American voters. On the other hand, using the noninteractive media (following politics in the media) was an enabling factor when voting for Trump. Other researchers have reported similar findings on passive media usage (Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2018; Groshek & Koc-Michalska, 2017).

Since interactive social media is positively associated with voting for Clinton, campaigners and policy advocates can use these interactive media actively to reach and influence constituents who tend to vote for the Democratic presidential candidate(s) or to influence these subgroups to make policy changes or introduce policy agenda that might interest them. On the other hand, use of non-interactive media is positively associated with voting for Trump. Campaigners and policy advocates can use the noninteractive media effectively to reach and influence these constituents to make policy changes or influence their voting behavior.

Sociodemographic factors were associated with voting for the 2016 presidential candidates. The present study's findings suggest that there are subpopulations who are likely to vote for Trump or Clinton. Some of these subpopulations identified in this study are supported by prior research (Taylor, 2011; Wallace, 2012). The findings have implications for future policy advocates and campaign organizers in targeting subgroups who tend to vote for the Republican or Democratic candidates. The findings suggest women voted for Clinton more than men did. Such knowledge could benefit campaign organizers who work and advocate for Democratic candidates to mobilize male voters to vote in the upcoming elections. Second, the findings suggest that interactive media use was not significantly associated in predicting voting for Trump. Future research should delve more deeply into users of interactive social media, a growing subpopulation, to understand their voting behaviors and how and why interactive media can act as an enabling factor. Such research could benefit campaign organizers who advocate for Republican candidates. These findings necessitate future research on these subgroups to understand the underlying factors associated with social media and political usage. With these studies, political campaigns can be structured effectively and voting behavior can be understood much better.

When compared to prior research, the strengths of this research include a more comprehensive adjustment for sociodemographic characteristics to understand the impact of the use of both interactive and noninteractive social media usage in predicting the likelihood of voting for Trump and Clinton using two separate logistic regression analyses. However, the following limitations of the study merit caution against generalizing the findings beyond the study population. First, this study did not take into consideration information about minority groups. Future research on voting behavior must attempt to oversample zip codes with large minorities to obtain a representative sample of minorities to examine voting behaviors of minority groups. Second, the study did not have elaborate information on social media usage statistics.

Since social media usage is growing each day, ANES and other election surveys must consider adding valuable questions on social media usage to understand their impact on voting behaviors. Finally, social media usage is self-reported by voters and this is prone to errors. Future research using a web trend analysis in collaboration with large social networking sites such as Twitter and Facebook would yield objective data and minimize errors associated with self-reporting. In general, more research is needed on social media usage, network structure, and datafication models to understand causal relationships and devise effective political campaign strategies using social media.

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