

Antecedents and Consequences of Online Campaign Engagement of Greek College Students

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Abstract. This study measured college students' engagement with official online campaign tools of political parties and politicians during the pre-election period in Greek Parliamentary elections in May 2012. Furthermore, the antecedents and consequences of voters' online campaign engagement were examined. Findings indicate that Greek college students are not digitally mature in using various online platforms for political information and engagement. The engagement with official campaign tools is affected by the interest of young voters in politics as well as their level of political cynicism. Based on the findings, only Facebook interaction of Greek college students with the profile of political party/politicians can influence their voting intentions.

Keywords: online campaign engagement, young voters, Greek Parliamentary Elections 2012, political interest, distrust in politics, political cynicism, voting intention.

1 Introduction

The increased use of Internet as a means of political campaigning along with the high levels of young voters' apathy and political cynicism are the most important challenges that political parties and politicians are currently facing. Until now, candidates had come to the realization that web tools could be a cost-effective way of mobilizing voters. The aim of this paper is two-fold: to measure Greek college students' engagement with official web tools and social media used by political parties/politicians; and through a series of hypotheses testing, to investigate the antecedents (i.e. interest in politics, political cynicism) as well as the consequences (i.e. voting intention) of Greek youth engagement with the official web tools of political parties/politicians during the pre-election period of Greek Parliamentary Elections in May 2012.

2 Literature Review

Few studies have tried to measure in a reliable and valid way the level of voters' engagement in online campaign activities of candidates. For example, Gil de Zúñiga

et al. (2009) measured the level of online political engagement of citizens by constructing three scales: online political discussion, online political campaign and online participation. Online political discussion scale estimated citizens' participation in online political discussions and chat rooms whereas the online political campaign construct captured online activities of citizens to promote candidates and persuade others to vote for them by sending e-mails. In addition, the online participation scale measured the level of citizens' participation in activities such as reading a post of discussion forums, signing online petitions and making online donations.

Using factor analysis, Kushin and Yamamoto (2010) constructed a multi-dimensional scale to capture online political activity of voters in the 2008 US elections. Their scale was comprised of three factors: attention to social media, attention to traditional internet sources, and online expression. The factor named attention to social media captured voters' activities regarding personal blogs, online forums and social networking sites. Attention to traditional internet sources scales comprised of items that measured voters' involvement with political parties/candidates' websites and other news sites, whereas the online expression factor reflected more active types of online political involvement such as creating content sharing and exchanging information via emails and social networking sites.

Gibson et al. (2010b), conducting exploratory as well as confirmatory factor analysis, developed and validated a four-dimensional scale for measuring online participation of UK voters to official and unofficial campaign activities. The four dimensions of this scale were e-communication, e-targeted involvement, e-formal campaigning and e-informal campaigning. E-communication consisted of items that estimated voters' visits to online news sites and official websites of political parties as well as views of unofficial video content. The e-targeted involvement factor consisted of items that reflected the active online engagement of voters through activities such as making online donations, signing e-petitions and communicating online with government. The e-formal campaigning factor referred to the proclivity of voters to join official social networking sites of politicians/parties. Furthermore, the e-informal campaigning dimension measured the level of forwarding and posting unofficial campaign content.

Finally, Dimitrova et al. (2011) using exploratory factor analysis measured online campaign involvement in the Swedish elections in 2010. Their measurement consisted of three factors, namely: online news, party websites and social media. Online news measured the frequency of visiting online news pages. The party websites scale estimated the frequency of visiting a number of official websites of political parties while the social media construct measured the level of engagement with activities like reading and writing on a blog, following politicians or political party's profiles on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube.

Yannas et al. (2013) investigating college engagement revealed that online official campaign engagement is a multi-dimensional concept consisting of six factors, namely: Twitter engagement, Facebook interaction, e-negative content generation, e-deliberating, e-voluntary expression of interest, and e-visiting. The above factors could be positioned along a continuum based upon the negative or positive valence of the activity as well as the level of the engagement (see Figure 1).



Fig. 1. Continuum of Online Official Campaign Engagement

Based on the preceding review it can be argued that a common element in the instruments developed for the measurement of online campaign engagement is citizens' involvement with social media. The present study aims to (a) measure in a valid and reliable way young voters' negative as well as positive online official campaign involvement and (b) investigate the antecedents and consequences of this engagement.

3 Conceptual Framework

Researchers have tried to identify the impact of citizen's political interest on their internet behavior regarding politics. For instance, the early study of Kaye and Johnson (2002) found that voters were likely to visit sites of politicians or political parties if they were politically interested. Moreover, in the case of Taiwanese citizens, Wang (2007) found that higher levels of political interest resulted in higher use of Internet for obtaining political information and expressing one's political opinion. Gibson et al. (2010b) investigating UK voters behavior during the 2010 elections found that political interest significantly impacted voters' engagement in official online campaigns of politicians. Hence, the following hypotheses could be developed:

H1: Higher levels of political interest will result in higher levels of (a) Twitter Engagement, (b) Facebook Interaction, (c) e-negative content generation, (d) e-deliberation, (e) e-voluntary expression of interest, (f) e-visitation.

Political cynicism reflects the level of mistrust citizens exhibit towards politics and politicians. Hanson et al. (2010) is one study that examined the association of political cynicism with the use of social networking sites and blogs for political purposes. The findings of the study indicate that political cynicism impacts significantly and in a negative manner on online political engagement of voters with blogs and social media. Hence, the following hypotheses could be developed:

H2: Higher levels of political cynicism will result in lower levels of (a) Twitter Engagement, (b) Facebook Interaction, (c) e-negative content generation, (d) e-deliberation, (e) e-voluntary expression of interest, (f) e-visitation.

A number of researchers have focused on the impact of Internet use on voting behavior. Pointing out that exposure of voters to online information about political campaigns affects their level of political participation (Kenski and Stroud, 2006). Gibson et al. (2010a) found a direct relationship between online political campaign

engagement (official – unofficial) and voting behavior of UK voters. Investigating the role of Facebook in electoral participation, Feezell et al. (2009) revealed that Facebook membership of voters in political groups had a significant positive effect on voting behavior. Based on the above findings the following hypotheses could be developed:

H3: Higher levels of (a) Twitter Engagement, (b) Facebook Interaction, (c) e-negative content generation, (d) e-deliberation, (e) e-voluntary expression of interest, (f) e-visitation will increase the probability of voting intention.

Figure 2 illustrates the conceptual model that will be tested empirically.



Fig. 2. Conceptual Framework

4 Method and Measures

In order to measure engagement of college students with the official web tools of political parties/politicians and empirically test our conceptual model a survey was conducted among students of a Technological Institute in a Northwestern city of Greece. Respondents were prompted to remember how frequently they had engaged in a 19-item scale of online activities during a six month period preceding the elections of May 2012. To measure the online official campaign engagement of respondents the scale developed by Yannas et al. (2013) was used. Responses to the items were elicited on a five-point scale ranging from “5=very frequently” to “1=never”. A number of questionnaires were eliminated due to incomplete responses. The final data set consisted of 491 respondents, 16.9% made up of males and 83.1% females.

4.1 Online Official Campaign Engagement Scale

Table 1 shows the mean values and standard deviations of items that comprise the multi-dimensional scale of online official campaign engagement. Most of the items of

the six factors had low mean values indicating that college students in Greece are not involved with the official web tools of political parties/politicians. Moreover, by comparing the mean values across the six factors it can be argued that visiting official YouTube channels, websites and blogs of political parties/politicians is the most preferred e-activity of Greek college students followed by Facebook interaction and negative content generation.

The 19-item model showed good model fit [$\chi^2(134)=413.903$, $p=0.000$, Comparative Fit Index (CFI): 0.943, Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI): 0.927, Incremental Fit Index (IFI): 0.943, Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA): 0.065]. Table 1 shows the validity and reliability measures and the standardized regression weights of the model. The internal reliability of the scale was considered more than adequate as Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the six factors ranged from 0.78 to 0.85, exceeding the 0.70 criterion. All the standardized coefficients of the 19 indicators were significant (critical ratios > 1.96, p value: 0.000) and exceeded the 0.50 threshold (Janssens et al., 2008) (Table 1). The Average Variance Extracted (AVE) for the six factors ranged from 0.56 to 0.70 exceeding Fornell and Larcker's (1981) critical value of 0.50. Furthermore, composite reliabilities of all factors exceeded the 0.70 accepted value criterion (Hair et al., 1998). Hence, it can be argued that the proposed scale showed acceptable levels of convergent validity.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics, Validity and Reliability Measures and Standardized Regression Weights of Online Official Campaign Engagement Factors

Factors/Items	M	S.D.	S.L.	Cr. R
Twitter Engagement (AVE=0.70, CR=0.87, a=0.85)				
Subscribed to an official Twitter profile of a political party/politician	1.12	0.54	0.95	
Followed an official Twitter profile of a political party/politician	1.14	0.57	0.86	17.54*
Replied with <i>positive comments</i> on a Tweet you viewed on an official Twitter profile of a political party/politician.	1.07	0.36	0.69	17.92*
Facebook Interaction (AVE=0.56, CR=0.83, a=0.85)				
Sent a friend request on the official Facebook profile of a political party/politician	1.40	0.84	0.75	
Accepted a friend request from an official Facebook profile of a political party/politician.	1.56	0.97	0.76	18.47*
Clicked the Like button on the official Facebook profile of a political party/politician.	1.37	0.79	0.76	13.10*
Clicked the Like button on a post you viewed on an official Facebook profile of a political party/politician.	1.38	0.79	0.73	13.67*

Table 1. (continued)

E-Negative Content Generation (AVE=0.62, CR=0.83, a=0.82)				
Posted <i>negative comments</i> on videos you viewed on the official YouTube channel of a political party/politician.	1.41	0.91	0.786	
Posted <i>negative comments</i> on a post you viewed on an official Facebook profile of a political party/politician.	1.33	0.79	0.798	16.71*
Posted <i>negative comments</i> on a post you viewed on an official blog of a political party/politician.	1.26	0.69	0.784	16.54*
E-Deliberating (AVE=0.59, CR=0.81, a=0.78)				
Participated and discussed in an online forum through the official website of a political party/politician.	1.19	0.61	0.815	
Participated in an online deliberation through the official website of a political party/politician.	1.16	0.51	0.781	15.14*
Expressed your opinion online though a political party's/politician official website.	1.34	0.76	0.708	15.57*
E-Voluntary Expression of Interest (AVE=0.57, CR=0.79, a=0.79)				
Signed up (subscribed) in an official website of a political party/politician.	1.12	0.53	0.757	
Signed up (subscribed) to receive a newsletter from a political party/politician.	1.16	0.56	0.849	14.19*
Signed up for RSS feeds to stay informed about the news of a political party/politician.	1.14	0.49	0.651	13.55*
E-Visiting (AVE=0.58, CR=0.80, a=0.81)				
Visited an official website of a political party/politician.	1.81	0.97	0.746	
Visited an official YouTube channel of a political party/politician.	1.82	1.05	0.771	16.38*
Visited an official blog of a political party/politician.	1.76	1.01	0.780	15.89*

Abbreviations: AVE, average variance extracted; CR, composite reliability; a, Cronbach's alpha; M, Mean; S.D., Standard Deviation; S.L., Standardized Loadings; Cr. R., Critical Ratio Note: * Significant at the $p=0.05$ level.

Finally, discriminant validity of the online official campaign engagement scale was established since the AVE of each factor was larger than the square of the correlation between the examined factor and the rest of the factors in the scale.

4.2 Interest in Politics, Political Cynicism and Voting Intention

The 491 respondents were also asked to answer a series of statements regarding their interest in politics, their cynicism towards politicians as well as their voting intention. Responses to the items regarding political interest and cynicism were elicited on five-point scales ranging from “5=strongly agree” to “1=strongly disagree”. Intention to vote was measured on a five-point scale ranging from “5=definitely yes” to “1=definitely no”.

Table 2 shows the mean and standard deviations of the items used to measure interest in politics and political cynicism as well as the validity and reliability measures. As Table 2 indicates, Greek young voters showed moderate levels of political interest while they scored high on all of the items that comprise the construct of political cynicism. In addition, both constructs showed acceptable levels of internal reliability and convergent validity.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics, Validity and Reliability Measures and Standardized Regression Weights of Interest in Politics and Political Cynicism

Factors/Items	M	S.D.	S.L.	Cr. R
Interest in Politics (AVE=0.51, CR=0.76, a=0.76)				
I am interested in politics.	2.60	1.14	0.716	
I frequently discuss politics with my friends and relatives.	3.09	1.20	0.692	11.64*
I pay attention to political information.	3.20	1.21	0.751	11.66*
Political Cynicism (AVE=0.52, CR=0.84, a=0.84)				
Politicians are only interested in people's vote, not in their opinion.	4.35	0.96	0.556	
Politicians pay too much attention to the interests of a few powerful groups (i.e. big firms).	3.98	1.11	0.721	11.35*
Politicians do not care about the interests of people because they are corrupt.	3.87	1.17	0.767	11.74*
Once elected, politicians lose track with people quickly.	4.01	1.16	0.823	12.13*
I am frustrated with the politicians of this country.	4.28	1.06	0.737	11.50*

Abbreviations: AVE, average variance extracted; CR, composite reliability; a, cronbach's alpha; M, Mean; S.D., Standard Deviation; S.L., Standardized Loadings; Cr. R., Critical Ratio
Note: * Significant at the p=0.05 level.

5 Hypotheses Testing

A structural equation analysis was conducted for testing the hypothesized relationships of the proposed model shown in Figure 2. The overall chi-square

statistic of the model was significant [$\chi^2(328)=885.98$, $p=0.000$] which is accepted for large samples (Byrne, 2010). The values goodness-of-fit indices of the model exceeded the 0.90 criterion [Comparative-Fit Index (CFI) = 0.913, Incremental-Fit Index (IFI) = 0.914, Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI) = 0.900]. Moreover, the Root Mean Square of Approximation (RMSEA) value was smaller than the 0.07 threshold (RMSEA=0.059). Based on the above results it can be suggested that the hypothesized model showed a reasonably good fit to the data. Support of the hypotheses was examined based on the significance of the standardized estimates of the path coefficients as shown in Table 3.

Our hypothesis testing concluded that the interest in politics is an important and strong predictor of online official campaign engagement of young citizens. Specifically, interest in politics is positively and significantly related to Twitter engagement (H1a= standardized estimate: 0.452, $p<0.01$), Facebook Interaction (H1b= standardized estimate: 0.747, $p<0.01$), e-negative context generation (H1c= standardized estimate: 0.531, $p<0.01$), e-deliberation (H1d= standardized estimate: 0.719 $p<0.01$), e-voluntary expression of interest (H1e: standardized estimate: 0.709, $p<0.01$) and e-visitation (H1f: standardized estimate= 0.916, $p<0.01$). These findings support H1a, H1b, H1c, H1d, H1e and H1f. Moreover, based on the values of the standardized path coefficients it can be concluded that the contribution of political interest is greater on the e-visitation factor compared to the other online official campaign engagement factors.

Regarding the impact of political cynicism on the online official campaign engagement of Greek young citizens, results indicate that political cynicism affected significantly but in a negative manner Twitter engagement (H2a: standardized estimate=-0.157, $p<0.05$), Facebook interaction (H2b: standardized estimate=-0.104, $p<0.05$), e-deliberation (H2d: standardized estimate=-0.184, $p<0.01$), and e-voluntary expression of interest (H2e: standardized estimate=-0.141, $p<0.01$). Hence, hypotheses 2a, 2b, 2d and 2e were supported. It should be noted that the above found significant associations were low. In addition, political cynicism of young citizens does not impact on their e-negative content generation (H2c: standardized estimate=-0.078, $p>0.05$) and their visits on parties/politicians websites, YouTube channels and blogs (H2f: standardized estimate=-0.094, $p>0.05$). These findings do not support hypotheses H2c and H2f.

Referring to the third hypothesis, results show that Facebook interaction of young citizens with political parties/politicians impacted significantly and in a positive manner their intention to participate in the Greek Parliamentary elections of May 2012 (H3b: standardized estimate=0.189, $p<0.01$). Thus, H3b could not be rejected. On the contrary, all the other online official campaign engagement factors were not significantly related to voting intention. Specifically, no significant associations were found between voting intentions and Twitter interaction (H3a: standardized estimate=-0.010, $p>0.05$), e-negative content generation (H3c: standardized estimate=-0.089, $p>0.05$), e-deliberation (H3d: standardized estimate=0.057, $p>0.05$), e-voluntary expression of interest (H3e: standardized estimate=0.051, $p>0.05$), and e-visitation (H3f: standardized estimate=0.062, $p>0.05$). Hence, hypotheses 3a, 3c, 3d, 3e, and 3f were rejected.

Table 3. Results of Hypotheses Testing

Path	S.L.	Cr. R.	Results
H1a: Interest in Politics → Twitter Engagement	0.45	6.63*	√
H1b: Interest in Politics → Facebook Interaction	0.75	8.17*	√
H1c: Interest in Politics → E-Negative Content Generation	0.53	7.17*	√
H1d: Interest in Politics → E-Deliberating	0.72	8.09*	√
H1e: Interest in Politics → E-Voluntary Expression of Interest	0.71	7.79*	√
H1f: Interest in Politics → E-Visiting	0.92	8.87*	√
H2a: Political Cynicism → Twitter Engagement	-0.16	-3.15**	√
H2b: Political Cynicism → Facebook Interaction	-0.11	-2.06**	√
H2c: Political Cynicism → E-Negative Content Generation	-0.08	-1.51	X
H2d: Political Cynicism → E-Deliberating	-0.18	-3.57*	√
H2e: Political Cynicism → E-Voluntary Expression of Interest	-0.14	-2.79*	√
H2f: Political Cynicism → E-Visiting	-0.10	-1.96	X
H3a: Twitter Engagement → Voting Intention	-0.01	-0.19	X
H3b: Facebook Interaction → Voting Intention	0.19	2.68*	√
H3c: E-Negative Content Generation → Voting Intention	-0.09	-1.29	X
H3d: E-Deliberating → Voting Intention	0.06	0.68	X
H3e: E-Voluntary Expression of Interest → Voting Intention	0.05	0.76	X
H3f: E-Visiting → Voting Intention	0.062	1.25	X

Abbreviations: S.L., standardized loadings; Cr. R., critical ratio; √, supported; X, not supported. Note: * Significant at the $p=0.05$ level.

6 Conclusion

In this study, the online official campaign engagement of Greek college students was measured. Moreover, the relationships among interest in politics, political cynicism, voting intention and online official campaign engagement were examined. To this end, a survey was conducted during the pre-election period of the Greek Parliamentary Election in May 2012.

In general, Greek youth seems to be disinterested in official online campaign activities. Whilst almost ninety percent of young Greeks are active Internet users, findings of the present survey indicate that Greek young students are not digitally mature in using various online platforms for political information and engagement. Greek college students during pre-election period preferred to obtain campaign information by visiting official websites of political parties/politicians, or by interacting with parties and politicians through Facebook. Interestingly, the third preferred online campaign activity of young voters was the generation of negative content through social media.

In times of deep economic recession, respondents evaluated politicians as distrustful. The students of the sample seem to be frustrated with the established political personalities present in the political scene. A possible explanation for this finding is the fact that students might blame politicians for the current state of the Greek economy. There is a marked decrease in the level of engagement as the level of political cynicism increases (i.e. Twitter engagement, Facebook interaction, e-voluntary expression of interest, and e-deliberation). Political cynicism however, does not influence online activities like visits to political parties/politicians' websites, blogs and YouTube profiles as well as generation of negative content via social media. It seems that Greek college students will continue to obtain information from official online campaign tools and criticize negatively politicians regardless of their level of political cynicism. On the contrary, all online official campaign engagement factors were influenced by the political interest of young voters. Thus, political marketers should concentrate in increasing both Greek young students' interest in politics and their trust in politicians respectively.

Last, the majority of online campaign engagement factors do not impact the voting intention of Greek youngsters. This finding is consistent with Gibson et al. (2010b) and Baumgartner and Morris (2010) findings regarding the insignificant influence of digital media use on voting intention. The present study's findings are also consistent with the results of Feezell et al. (2009), making Facebook interaction to be a significant predictor of voting intention. It can therefore be argued, that Facebook plays an important role in the voting behavior of Greek college students. The above findings highlight the importance of carefully choosing the campaign channels for the dissemination of political messages. Political marketers should incorporate Facebook in the online campaigns they develop in order to lure voters.

A basic limitation of the present study concerns the representativeness of the sample. The survey employed a convenience sample as respondents were students of a Technological Institute in a Northwestern city of Greece. Future research should be directed towards the measurement of online campaign engagement of representative samples of voters as well as the investigation of the impact of more antecedents (i.e. personal characteristics of voters) on online campaign engagement.

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