

Application for Patricia Witherspoon Research Award

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Department: Radio-Television-Film

College: Communication

Area of Study: Political participation on digital media

Research Prospectus:

The emergence and rapid adoption of digital media provides a new terrain on which to engage in ongoing debates about political participation. Digital media has transformed political participation through its easing of engagement, lowering of barriers, and enabling of exposure to ideological difference. However, research on the relationship between digital media and political participation has provided conflicting answers to date. Theoretical, survey, and experimental research have demonstrated that digital media can facilitate greater political participation in all of its forms – *and* that it can cause a drop in voter turnout, the end of interpersonal relationships, or a refusal to participate in deliberative discussion. Greater clarity on the nature of the relationship between digital media and political participation is needed.

My dissertation will examine political participation on digital media from two perspectives. First, I will examine the relationships between online networks on Facebook to determine the extent to which individuals are exposed to ideological difference and political debate, and how that impacts political participation, both online and off. Second, I will use a variety of experimental methodologies to determine if digital media can be used to increase voter turnout, particularly among lower-probability voters who can effectively be targeted using these low-cost technologies.

This research agenda pulls together work in political science, political communication, and political psychology to demonstrate how digital media is impacting political participation in a variety of confounding ways. Social media is credited with enabling the maintenance of weak ties, which provide the greatest opportunity for exposure to ideological difference (Brundidge 2010, Granovetter 1973). However, exposure to ideological difference – defined as individuals who disagree with the subject's political position – has been demonstrated to be associated with decreased political participation in various forms (Mutz 2006, Nir 2005). Meanwhile, political science research has found that personal messages from peers can have a significant impact on turnout, as can messages coupled with a "social pressure" component (Gerber & Green 2013, Gerber, Green & Larimore 2008, Gerber, Green & Larimore 2010, Panagopoulous 2013).

Through the implementation of survey and experimental techniques, I will examine this relationship in-depth, in order to provide more concrete answers about the relationship between political participation and digital media. Research modules are described below.

Facebook Network Heterogeneity: Through the use of survey data, I will examine the relationship between exposure to ideological difference on Facebook and political participation on the platform and in the voting booth. This research will provide evidence of whether deliberative democracy on digital media has an ameliorative effect on participation or not.

GOTV Experiments on Facebook and via Email: Using confederates and publicly available data, I will conduct several GOTV experiments using Facebook and mass-email programs to see if digital media can increase voter turnout. I will also implement "social pressure" language that has been shown to increase voter turnout when employed in offline contexts.

Lab Experiment on Social Pressure: Using a convenience sample of UT undergraduate students, I will expose subjects to a variety of social pressure stimuli to see which result in the highest rate of signing up for a voting reminder email and actual voter participation. Moving social pressure into the lab ensures exposure to the stimuli, and may provide a greater experimental effect than field experiments.

This research will build on several pilot studies I conducted in 2013 as part of my coursework. These studies demonstrated that increased Facebook network heterogeneity is associated with decreased political participation on the platform, and that social pressure messaging applied via Facebook and through mass-email increased voter turnout in the 2013 Constitutional Amendment election by statistically significant amounts. These findings are fascinating and require replication with larger sample sizes in a high-profile election. By replicating these investigative techniques during the 2014 election here in Texas with larger sample sizes, I will produce more generalizable results that can be broadly applied to use digital media in pursuit of increased voter participation.

Expected Results:

Based on my pilot studies and other research in this area, I anticipate the following results:

Facebook Network Heterogeneity: Based on my own past research, which confirms Mutz (2006) and Nir (2005), I anticipate that increased ideological heterogeneity in one's Facebook network will be associated with decreased political participation on the platform, as well as in the voting booth. I expect Facebook friend network size to moderate this finding by mitigating the negative relationship.

Facebook GOTV Experiment: Taking into account my own preliminary studies and past research on social pressure, I anticipate that subjects in the treatment groups will have a turnout rate higher than that of control, with "Pride" subjects performing better than "Shame" subjects. I expect past voter participation to be a crucial moderating variable in turnout, with low propensity voters (based on their rate of turnout to date) demonstrating an increased effect over higher propensity voters.

Email GOTV Experiment: Based on my own past experimental results as well as academic literature, I anticipate that treated subjects who are subjected to a "social pressure" component will voter at a higher rate than control subjects, thus providing heretofore-unproven results that email can be used to increase voter participation.

Social Pressure Lab Experiment: This experiment will focus on a convenience sample of students, and as such my expected results stem from an expectation that students want to conform to social norms, especially when their peer groups can evaluate their behavior. I anticipate that exposure to threats to publish voter abstentions will result in higher rates of turnout than exposure to threats to publish voter participation, as well as higher sign-up rates for reminders.

Anticipated Research Timeline:

Because this research agenda focuses on voter turnout, the survey and experimental components will be in the field in the two months leading up to the November 4th 2014 general election.

- The Facebook survey will be in the field between September 1 and November 4.
- The GOTV field experiments using social media and email will be in the field between October 20 and November 4, which spans the entirety of early voting and Election Day.
- The lab experiment on social pressure will be conducted on the UT Campus between September 15 and October 15.

Data collection from county clerks across Texas will be completed by December 1, 2014. Data analysis will begin at that time and be finished by early spring. I intend to graduate in May of 2015.

Works Cited

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