Does Social Media Impact Political Campaigns?
Volatility and Salience in Political Discourse

Dr Dimitris Christopoulos
Department of Public Governance
Modul University Vienna

www.dimitriscc.wordpress.com
Questions

- Does social media increase electoral contest volatility?

- Can the social networks of voters impact the outcome of electoral campaigns?

- Are we witnessing the dawn of twitter politics?
  - short message
  - shallow impact
  - rapid communications
Volatility in political contest

- In one of the best documented US Presidential elections it was observed that:
  - a good 1/4 of the electorate made up their mind the last week of the election campaign
  - while 1/5 of voters changed their mind at the ballot box, from a declared voting intention, only 3 days before the election!

- Electoral volatility and new media
  - Contest volatility exacerbates the need for a targeted use of resources in political campaigns
  - And there is anecdotal evidence that social media is effective in mobilising voters
Social media with political relevance

- **Blogs**: wordpress, HuffingtonPost ...
- **Microbloggs**: Twitter, Google Buzz ...
- **Social networking**: facebook, Myspace ...
- **Professional networks**: Linkedin, Viadeo ...
- **Social news**: Newsvine, Reddit ...
- **Video**: Youtube, Vimeo ...
- **Live streaming**: Livestream, Justin.tv ...
What is new about social media?

- Powerful politicians are visible through directed media (print, radio, tv) but the nature of such media means they are not reciprocally accessible
  - Social media effectiveness depends on the illusion of a personal connection
- We always knew that what a voter’s friends say impacts how they vote
  - Influencing what is communicated directly between voters is an effective strategy of impacting the political discourse.
  - Seeking ‘opinion leaders’ at the community level is now facilitated online
- Measuring diffusion (borrowed from innovation studies) and contagion (borrowed from epidemiology) allow for fair predictions on the adoption thresholds to new political messages
1a. Illusion of reciprocity

Joe typically receives texts from his friends and then Barack Obama lets him know that “he just got a puppy for his daughters”!

Social media can appear 'apolitical' because it seems personal
1b: The mechanics of social media reciprocity

- Reciprocity can be seen as an 'honest signal' and is considered one of the foundations of social trust.

- Receiving what appears to be a personal message creates the false presumption that a choice to associate to Barack was reciprocated by his choice to “reciprocate” by offering information.

- This is then replicated (re-tweeted) to ‘fb-friends’ since information contains value and the bearer of important information is socially significant.

- The same social mechanisms that we use to convey information of low value (say gossip) piggybacks on the social media technological platforms.
1c: Limitations on the mechanism of Influence through Twitter

- A recent experiment by Myers, Zhu, Leskovec (2012) indicates that only 71% of twitter information diffusion is due to direct contagion the rest being the result of alternative mechanisms of influence.
2a. Mobilising: Protest

- We need to distinguish between:
  - Activism that depends on **strong social ties** vs
  - Supporting campaigns that are **weak tie events**.

- Twitter can influence someone in making a decision to go to a demonstration
  - but it is the strength of their social ties to other protesters that will determine if they will camp-out overnight on Wall Street.

- In other words you may be targeted for a tweet through your membership of an anti-capitalist blog
  - but it is the strength of your social ties with other activists that will determine if you will take actions that entail costs.

→ Political marketing can utilise the viral nature of social media to ride a wave of activism or public concern but would require a major resource investment to engineer it on its own.
2b. Mobilising: Protest & the Arab Spring

- A recent study by the Dubai School of Government indicates that only 0.2% of the Arab population are active on Twitter.
2c. Mobilising: Protest

The same study by DGS indicates that Facebook has a penetration of around 8%
3a. Mobilising Voters: Targeting voter & community cohorts

- One of the great success stories for the use of social media are **targeted political campaigns**
- It is often possible to purchase (or often freely obtain) quality sociodemographics and opinions of those highly embedded in social media platforms
  - It is therefore possible to sell ideas the same way we sell products
- There are four main targeting strategies:
  - profile based targeting (Labour voters, 24-30, F)
  - opinion leader targeting (network Opinion Leader or broker)
  - propagation targeting (endorse and re-send)
  - geo-locator targeting of any of the above
3b. Mobilising Voters

- **Voter segmentation** can be highly sophisticated
  - The 2012 Obama campaign was reported to tailor its message to 26 different voter segments

- Reenforcement effects however vary and there is wide discord among analysts on what constitutes an effective ‘viral’ strategy
  - Volume, resilience and “earned” impressions

![Barack Obama: Total Paid Ad Impressions (000) vs. Earned Media Impressions (000) on Facebook](source)

![Selected Republican Presidential Candidates: Total Paid Ad Impressions (000) vs. Earned Media Impressions (000) on Facebook](source)
Does social media affect political campaigns?

- Online political advertising
  - narrow message segmentation & tailored messages
  - use of mobile devices
  - endorsement through social acquaintance
- ‘Sharing’ your friends
  - Joining a campaign through facebook allows the campaign managers access to you AND your contacts sociodemographics as well as information on your social structure (ego network)
- This has further allowed integrating data bases on voters and creates concerns on data protection
So has political communication changed?

- Social media have the capacity to convey information that could have higher impact, if transmitted from 'friends we trust'
- It can have unanticipated reach
  - But its effectiveness depends on accurate dissemination targeting
- This implies a substantive understanding of the structure of virtual and real social networks
- But fundamentally, an understanding of the value and salience of specific political messages
Is this new politics?

- The Obama campaigns of 2008 and 2012 are the best studied examples of the use of new media.
- The first Obama campaign generated about 500m US$ and the second raised over 1bn$ in donations
  - only a small fraction of that went towards social media, the current estimate being 35m$
- The bulk of advertising goes to traditional broadcast media for all political candidates
- Social media advertising is typically aimed at
  - Display adds (Yahoo!, Facebook, AOL, Google, Fox News, etc)
  - Video adds (targeted via search history)
  - Paid search (through search engines)
So what?

★ Social Media supplement rather than supplant traditional methods of political campaigning
★ The art of constructing messages of high political salience and successfully introducing them to the political debate has not been altered by the new media
★ Political parties, campaigns and political actors sometimes appear drowned in a cacophony of political messages but the fundamentals of political debates during the democratic contest have not changed
The new media can facilitate political messages entering the political debate sidestepping traditional media routes

Political actors adjust (often by mirroring opponents):
- inputting (spinning) political signals continuously
- personalising the political message
- integrating different data sources on voters
- developing direct marketing strategies to different political segments
And what am I doing to test my cynicism?

- Two research projects at an early stage
Research Strategy I: Content, sentiment & social network analysis with Arno Scharl, @ MODUL U Vienna

★ Research Questions:

★ How widespread is content redundancy, and what influences content replication within and across information networks?

★ Do influential opinion leaders drive this process and what are their social network attributes?
  ★ OPINION LEADER ANALYSIS, IMPACT MEASURES, VIRAL MARKETING STRATEGIES

★ How can we detect, describe and potentially predict patterns in online coverage of media events (compare resonance patterns)?
  ★ TREND SCOUTING

★ How do macroscopic information flows shape public opinion? What metrics beyond sentiment could measure the success of campaigns?
  ★ POLITICAL CAMPAIGNS & COMMUNICATION CAMPAIGNS

www.weblyzard.com/interface

see appendix III
weblyzard
Research Strategy 2: field experiment with Juergen Pfeffer, @Carnegie Mellon

A. Identify a campaign

B. Track the emergence of an item/issue on social media until it enters the political agenda. Trace it as it gains traction on the political debate until it enters Parliament/Congress.

C. Compare Social Media and traditional news as well as press releases from political parties to demonstrate dynamic effects.

D. Compare activity pre-issue and post issue. Distinguish between “permanent activists” tweet on politics all the time and the “activated” those that engage after an issue gains traction. Compare their behaviour. Compare differences in location.

Collection tool: [http://www.twitter.at/](http://www.twitter.at/)

See appendix I
Thank you for your attention.

dimitriscc@gmail.com
appendix I

twitter tags of the Wendy Davis filibuster

Data collection and visualisations Juergen Pfeffer @ Carnegie Mellon
Wendy Davis - Filibuster 2013

★In June 25, 2013, Wendy Davis began a filibuster to block Senate Bill 5 (that bans abortions after 20 weeks of pregnancy)

★“Democratic state Senator Wendy Davis spoke for more than 10 hours, in a stalling speech known as a filibuster, at the state capitol in Austin.”
   ★Source: BBC News

★06/25 – 07/09: 5,037 US Geo-tagged Tweets
Hashtag Networks

Min 2, delete isolates. Main hashtag: #StandWithWendy
Hashtag Networks

After deleting #StandWithWendy
so is there a lesson for political campaigns?

- Can detect the structure of issues connected to her after removing the core hashtag
  - a response in support or against the core strategy can be based on such an analysis
- Three clusters of messages detected:
  - originating &/or referencing other US states
  - two clusters of ‘social movement’ rhetoric
- Location matters in politics
  - “globalising” a local debate may (or may not) have an impact on the final outcome
- People engage primarily with local issues but a polarising message of high political salience is likely to engage a much wider audience
appendix II

- Social media reach & effectiveness
  - some myths and the reality of the impact of social media on political campaigns
Social media reach

Donors active in social media are younger than other donors but contribute less to campaigns (18 vs 28$)

Barack Obama Online Donors: Demographic Composition of Facebook Fans & Friends vs. Non-Fans

Consumption rates of digital content

Digital Consumption

For many Chinese digital consumers, the Internet is becoming a fixture in their lives. What’s more? They are enthusiastically embracing social applications, and prefer instant messaging over e-mail.

Top online activities by percentage of digital consumers in each country (2009)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Instant Messaging</th>
<th>Online Music</th>
<th>Reading News</th>
<th>Online Video</th>
<th>Search Engine</th>
<th>Online Gaming</th>
<th>Email</th>
<th>Blogging</th>
<th>Social Networking</th>
<th>E-Commerce</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CHINA</td>
<td>87%</td>
<td>83%</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>89%</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INDIA</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td></td>
<td>95%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BRAZIL</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>83%</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td></td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RUSSIA</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td></td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U.S.A</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>89%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td></td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JAPAN</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>92%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td></td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Data gathered from the Boston Consulting Group report, “China’s Digital Generations 2.0.”*
Obama online campaign
Effectiveness of Facebook campaign

Barack Obama:
- 26.1 million Facebook fans
- 2.4 million site visitors

Mitt Romney:
- 1.6 million Facebook fans
- 281,000 site visitors

Source: comScore Media Metrix, U.S., Mar-2012, and Facebook, Apr-2012
appendix III: Content analysis of social media content

- work of award winning team led by Professor Arno Scharl @ MODUL University Vienna
  - under contract to the US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration to monitor media content
  - contracts with a number of other US and European agencies
- www.weblyzard.com

- demo login: http://www.ecoresearch.net/climate/
Targets of Content Analysis

- Identify **major topics associated** with political issues by different stakeholder groups: news media, NGOs, Fortune 1000 companies, social media (Twitter, Facebook, Google+, etc.)

- Compute **attention** and **sentiment** (positive vs. negative) towards political issues.

- Visualize **semantic** and **geographic trends** by stakeholder group, and investigate the drivers and impacts of these trends.

- Create **shared meaning** and improve **understanding** of how others perceive political issues (campaigns, policy decisions, etc.).
Crowdsourcing via Social Media

We are headed down a path that is certain to end in the destruction of our experiment in democracy.
Will Barack Obama seize the moment on climate change?

http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2012/nov/12/barack-obama-seize-moment-climate-change

"William Becker for Yale Environment 360 , part of the Guardian Environment Network. Barack Obama mentioned the threat of a warming planet in his victory speech in Chicago. ... President Obama sent an encouraging signal in his victory speech in Chicago when he said, "We want our children to live in an America that isn't burdened by debt. ... More from Guardian Environment Network on ... The Guardian Environment Network brings together the world's best websites focusing on green topics.»
Would Obama climate plan create 14,000 jobs in Florida? - Orlando Business Journal

A national environmental group says President Barack Obama's climate action plan would create 14,000 jobs in Florida. Staff Orlando Business Journal. A national environmental group says President Barack Obama's climate action plan would create 14,000 jobs in Florida -- and save an average of 31 cents per month on electric bills, a news release from the Natural Resources Defense Council said. The South Florida Business Journal reports. The NRDC announced a study Tuesday saying the fight against global warming can and should be viewed in context of job creation and energy efficiency.
Historic cold records fall in Southern Plains

www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/capital-weather-gang/?p=3558

News: US • Dallas • 2013-04-24

"The Southern Plains are shivering this morning after one of the coldest mornings this deep into April on record. Oklahoma City plummeted to 31 degrees, its coldest reading on record so late in the spring. ... Temperatures were generally 20 to 30 degrees below normal this morning throughout the Plains. Temperature difference from normal at 8 a.m. EDT this morning as indicated by GFS model (WeatherBell.com). Here are some other notable record lows: * Lubbock, Texas tanked to 25, its coldest temperature so late in the spring (records date back to 1911)."
Editorial slant of climate change coverage across online channels