

Politics and perceptions: Social media, politics collide in focus of research

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(Phys.org) —It bothered Lindsay Hoffman and colleagues to see other researchers making broad yet vague claims about the role social media plays in political participation. So they decided to study it.

In a paper to be published in November ([available online now](#)) in the journal *Computers in Human Behavior*, the University of Delaware associate professor in the departments of Communication and of Political Science and International Relations and her co-authors explored how people perceive their own political behaviors [online](#). It is part of a larger goal to better understand why people engage in politics both on- and offline.

The study is titled "Does My Comment Count? Perceptions of Political Participation in an Online Environment." Dannagal Young, associate professor of communication, and Philip Jones, associate professor of [political science](#) and [international relations](#), teamed up with Hoffman for the study.

It was built around the question of whether, when people engage in political behavior online—"liking" a candidate's Facebook page, tweeting their thoughts about a political platform, signing a virtual petition—they see their activities as having influence on the functions of government (participation) or as communication with others.

"A lot of people in the 2008 elections were participating on Facebook and on blogs," Hoffman said (Twitter didn't play as strong a role then).

"... We were interested in which is participatory and which is seen as communication."

Hoffman said many claims had been made about the substantial role [social media](#) has played in mobilizing people to become more politically active. Some also believe online political engagement is replacing traditional, offline forms of political behavior, prompting people to play a less active role when it comes to activities like voting.

But without a way to define how people perceived what they were doing when they engaged in politics online, Hoffman and her co-authors were skeptical.

The UD researchers relied on a survey of roughly 1,000 randomly selected American adults to assess what people were doing politically on- and offline, what they had done in the past, to what extent they thought their activities were a good way to influence the government and to what extent they thought their actions were a good way to communicate with others.

The survey, which was completed in the summer of 2010, focused on 11 political behaviors, including voting in an election, communicating online about politics, signing up for online political information, friending or "liking" a candidate or politician and putting up a yard sign or wearing a political shirt.

The work led the researchers to conclude people have a realistic notion of what they are doing when they engage in politics online.

"People are more savvy than we think they are," Hoffman said. "They viewed every type of behavior mentioned except voting as communication."

People in the study perceived their on- and offline behaviors as playing different political roles. They seemed not to be replacing traditional, offline [political engagement](#) with online behaviors, Hoffman and her co-authors found.

"They are not duped into thinking they can influence government or take a hands-off approach" just by being involved online, she said.

Those in the study who reported being more confident in government and their ability to have an impact were even more motivated to engage in online political activities when they perceived it as communication, the study also found.

"If people see it as [communication](#), they are more likely to participate," Hoffman said. "Communication is a key cornerstone in political involvement."

This study was one of the first funded through a \$50,000 Innovations through Collaborations Grant awarded by the College of Arts and Sciences' Interdisciplinary Humanities Research Center, which supports cross-disciplinary work.

Hoffman first met Jones in 2009, when he joined the University. They discovered they shared academic interests, and the grant helped bring their ideas together. The collaboration between the three researchers also resulted in a second publication examining the impact of candidate emotion on [political participation](#). That study was published online in the journal *New Media and Society* in December 2012.

"It was the summer of 2010 when we did the online survey asking about how people participate in politics online," said Hoffman. "There were a lot of high emotions, the tea party was forming, and we wondered how that might impact certain types of political behaviors."

The study worked toward filling a void in the literature, where few have looked at the effect a candidate's emotions—like anger, anxiety and hopefulness—have on how people engage in politics. It also challenged the notion that emotional candidates sway voters, particularly those least involved or least knowledgeable about [politics](#).

The researchers found that the online emotional appeal of a candidate did not influence a person's likelihood of participating on that candidate's behalf, unless that person was already highly engaged and knowledgeable. The particular emotion expressed was unimportant.

Hoffman is pleased the collaboration with Young and Jones proved so fruitful.

"You hope for the best: to have good data and results that are interesting and compelling," said Hoffman. "I am really proud of our collaborations."

Provided by University of Delaware

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