

The Role of Political Activism on Twitter

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Abstract

This paper has investigated the role of political activism on Twitter to deepen the knowledge and understanding of the topic. Social media in general and Twitter in particular are effective social media platforms to perform political activities. Twitter has the ability to engage people to interact with each other and participate in political campaigns. Twitter can predict the elections outcomes to some extent and if big data from twitter is used with right mix of tools, then more valid results can be derived through analyzing Twitter data. The findings of this review of literature suggest that Twitter is playing a positive role in political activism, and this role can be increased in future by bringing more focus to utility of Twitter. If researchers would give more specialized attention to the topic to get more insights, the Twitter can open new horizons for future research as well as political landscape of the world.

Keywords. Social media, Twitter, Facebook, Political activism, Political campaigns

Introduction

It is a fact that usage of social media does not go back deep in history as phenomena has taken new twists and turns in most recent times. The social media was being used by public to seek and distribute information as well as communicating with family and friends. But the

increasing use of social media platforms like Twitter is opening new research discussion in terms of political activism. The people are using social media networks such as Twitter and Facebook to involve in political activities, political discussions and political campaigns. The social media platform such as Twitter is great tools for political activism as they have the versatility and range, which no other tool may be able to achieve (Williams, C. 2017). Mass media does have an influence on public, but widespread use of social media networks is connecting people around the world, and it has the interactive ability. It means that flow of information is not one sides like other traditional media, rather social media is more engaging, interactive and attractive for users. Social media can become a meaningful and healthy platform for political leaders and parties to bring in political activism, which were not possible without social media (hqanon, 2014)

Among social media networks, Twitter has its own distinctive position as it is mostly used by famous stars, sportsmen and political leaders. They use it to engage their followers and interact with them. A 140 characters tweet from a political leader or celebrity seems to be a great way of expressing opinions. The Twitter is also popular among users because of its hash tag trends worldwide. One can easily check on Twitter that which trends are on the top not only in their region, but around the globe as well. The Twitter also has many other features to perform well with regards to political activism (Murse, T. 2017). This research article is also trying to figure out that what role Twitter has played or can play in future in relevance to political activism. Taking this specific topic in view, this article would review literature from different sources to analyze that how researchers have found the Twitter as a tool for political activism, and what future scope of research is waiting for researchers to find out.

Literature Review

Online Political Activities and Motivational Aspects

Why people behave in a certain pattern towards anything and what motivates them; this is what has been the subject for researchers and scholars for years to find out. It is an important question to answer that what motivates people to engage in any social or political activity. Certainly, there are different motivational aspects which forces people to act in a certain manner (Emeran, C. 2017). The increasing role of social media has been a critical factor

in relation to political activism as individuals are getting involved in political activities with the passage of time. According to Safranek (2012) the role of social media is emerging in the modern age and this trend seems to have more attention in future as young people are vastly motivated by social media like Facebook and Twitter to participate in social as well as political movements.

Online political activities are motivated by various aspects, as Følstad and Luders (2017) described in the results of their research study that people tend to participate in political activities and debate because sometimes the topics are so engaging that they want to contribute in the discussion. The study also revealed that frustration as well as reciprocal learning is the other motivational aspects which force them to engage in political debate. Similarly, Riaz (2007) throws light on the importance of new media technologies and their effects on the political communication. He asserted that digital media is playing a big role in connecting people around the world on political terms. Likewise, Dezelan and Vobic (2016) also made a point in the book *“(R)evolutionizing Political Communication through Social Media”* that how social media is revolutionizing the political communication in the modern era.

On the other hand, A report issued in (2016) by “THE DIGITAL PUBLIC SQUARE” makes a different case, which states that there is very little research evidence available to say that people do something because of motivational factors, rather the report points out that people do not give much attention to their motivation and their variables to do something include their personal choice, behavior, sense of belonging and reasonability. However, it is also a fact that political participation by people through online platforms like Twitter is increasing because people want to engage in political discussion as well as seeking political information and contribution. A report issued by Pew Research Center (2012) depicted that in United States 66% adult social media users out of total users have been engaged in some sort of political activities through Twitter, Facebook etc.

Does Twitter Motivate People for Political Activism?

The increased use of social media is changing patterns of today’s society, where people do engage in social and political activism through social media platforms, a thing which was not so common in the past. The social media is playing its part in changing public opinion,

shaping public policy, mobilizing social and political activists (MOYER, J. 2017). So, the major question for researchers to look at is the role of social media in motivating people for political activism. An article in Forbes stated that as per a study, the political engagement and involvement of Millennial is shaped by the social media. This study was conducted by the *American Press Institute* and it found out that millennial voters are influenced by social media in two ways; first is participatory politics, and second is real time, ongoing conversation. The study also described the role of Twitter more specifically that how it has changed the overall political landscape. The millennial are using Twitter for ongoing as well as real time news management and self-expression (Fromm, J. 2016)

The results of above mentioned study is clearly indicating that Twitter does play its part in motivating people for involvement in politics. But more research studies are needed to authenticate this assumption. According to Park (2013), the opinion leadership on social media specifically on Twitter has a great role to play in motivating and mobilizing the social/political expression of people. The use of Twitter and its frequency have been positively related with public expression and mobilization. The study also found out that opinion leadership working on Twitter has a significant impact on individuals in terms of political activism. The researchers around the world have also been trying to analyze whether Twitter has brought any revolution with regards to social and political activism. The incidents around the globe have confirmed the role of Twitter revolution, especially in social protest like it played its part in Arab Spring (McMullan, T. 2016).

The researchers have also found out that there are different kind of motivation due to which people use Twitter for political activities and participation. The people follow their political leaders on Twitter and this following is motivated by several aspects like self-expression, social utility, information seeking, and entertainment. Moreover, the people think that Twitter is a valuable platform, which helps them to communicate with others. The people also consider twitter a valuable social media platform because it helps them to get information and news with insights, which was not possible earlier (Parmelee, J. & Bichard, S. 2012). These facts from the literature are suggesting in many ways that twitter does play its role in motivating people to indulge in political participation. This Twitter role can be increased by engaging more people into political activities and campaigns. The use of Twitter is changing

the dynamics of politics and political activism is on the rise through opinion leaders (Halpern, D. & Valenzuela, S. 2017)

Use of Twitter for Political Campaigns and Discussion

The use of Twitter and other social networking sites have been getting bigger in numbers with the passage of time. Things are changing quickly on the landscape of technology as social networking sites are play their vital part in political and civic activism. A report issues in 2010 revealed that use of Twitter for political activity was much on the rise during the 2010 elections in United States. The overall online community said to be involved in political activities through social media and Twitter. Out of total online American users, 22% were engaged in political activities through using twitter as well as other social networking sites. The report told that to get results of the 2010 elections, Twitter was used by 1% online users in United States. The other major thing revealed in this report was regarding the demographics of these online social media & Twitter users. The report clearly concluded that the number of users participating in political discussion on Twitter and other sites are more educated as well as younger. 42% users were under the age of 30 and 41% users were possessing a college degree, which clearly shows the trend of users involved in political campaigns during the 2010 midterm U.S elections (SMITH, A. 2011)

Please see *figure 1* below for detailed age group stats of online users during 2010 U.S elections: *Figure 1:*

Political social networking activities by age group

% within each age group who...

	18-29	30-49	50+
Use a social networking site	74%	54%	24%
% of SNS users who used the sites to...			
Discover which candidates your friends voted for	23	17	12
Post political content	17	9	12
Get candidate or campaign info	16	11	18
Friend a candidate or cause	12	10	12
Join a political group/cause	12	9	10
Start a political group/cause	2	2	2

Source: <http://www.pewinternet.org/2011/01/27/22-of-online-americans-used-social-networking-or-twitter-for-politics-in-2010-campaign/>

The researchers around the world have tried their best to figure out the impact and role of Twitter in political activism. The political activists have realized the importance of social media such as Twitter and Facebook to involve people into political discussion and get more activity from voters and followers of political leaders (Lawrence, D. 2010). A study was held to check the role of Twitter in political discourse during the 2013 General Elections of Malaysia. During this election, #PRU13 was the most prominent trend on Twitter in Malaysia. The study was revolving around this trend from 1st of May to 6th of May, 2013. The results were to confirm that political communication, persuasion and activity was enhanced by Twitter usage, and users were also involved in interactive communication (Kasmania, M. Sabrana, R. & Ramlea, N. 2014)

It is a fact that no one can deny the emerging role of social media including Twitter to motivate people to engage in political discussion and campaigns. The political parties and internet users in Pakistan do involve in political activities through social media networking sites like Twitter and Facebook. The perceptions of people are quickly changing due to these social media platforms, and this trend is likely to continue in future as well (Karamat, A. & Farooq, A. 2016). The use of social media platforms like Twitter is on the rise for voters to interact with fellow voters as well as politicians. They are using such platforms to express their political viewpoints and participate in online political activities. The political participation from citizens is an integral part of established democracy, and a study conducted in Italy for 2013 elections showed that people are participating in politics through Twitter. The citizens of Italy were found to express their political feelings, interacting with political leaders and motivating others to vote through the results of this study, which reaffirms that Twitter role is increasing in political campaigns and discussions (Vaccari, et al., 2015)

A survey based research study was conducted to see the participation in U.S election 2012 from the college students. This study was to find out that how young college students use social media platform such as Twitter and Facebook for their participation in online political activities. The number of college students used in this study was 4,556. The study found out that college students played an active role on Facebook and Twitter to show their political participation. However, it was also concluded from the study that general political use proved to be a positive predictor, whereas excessive use was linked with negative predictor for the

political participation by these college students all around United States (Yang, H. & DeHart, J. 2016)

Twitter for Political Sentiment's Reflection

The use of Twitter is increasing among educated and younger population around the world, and political participation through such platforms is also quite evident to see (MITCHELL, A. & GUSKIN, E. 2013). In most recent terms, the 2016 Presidential U.S election was one of the biggest examples of social media role in political discussion and campaigns to show sentiment of the voters as well as candidates. The researchers have found out that 2016 U.S election was the most social and most mobile in American presidential election history. The data analyzed from Twitter to see that what sentiments and expression have been made by the people for Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton. The 30 days data was analyzed comprising of 5,368 tweets of total 3,028 users. The findings were very interesting to show the sentiment of people about these two presidential candidates. 3,233 negative and 2,777 positive terms were used for Hillary, and 1,574 negative as well as 1,258 positive terms were used for Trump (Patterson, 2016)

The research has also found out that sentiment analysis of Twitter is predictive regarding the election's outcomes. Twitter can be effective in predicting future outcomes through analysis of sentiments of people (O'Connor, Balasubramanyan, Routledge, & Smith, 2010). A study conducted on Irish General Election to monitor sentiment analysis with regards to politics, and then predicting the results as per this analysis. Different observations were made to analyze the sentiment of public towards election. The study concluded after political sentiment analysis that Twitter has the predictive quality in Irish General Elections (Bermingham, A & Smeaton, A. 2012). The scholars have also tried to predict election results through public sentiment expressed on Twitter. A study was conducted by Sharma & Moh (2016) in India to monitor sentiments of Hindi twitter users to predict the outcomes of Indian State Elections. The study included 42,235 tweets for the data mining included for five mainstream political parties of India. The study predicted through Twitter sentiment analysis that chances of BJP to win was around 78.4%. The prediction made by this analysis was later proved by the actual election results as out of total 126 seats, BJP was able to win 60 seats, and this number was far better than any other mainstream political party.

Twitter as a Predictor for Elections

This research is looking the role of Twitter with regards to political activism, and its role in prediction of elections looks to be the major reason behind its strong role. Many scholars have tried to analyze Twitter's roles as a predictor for elections to see whether Twitter does indicate anything or not. It is important to mention here that Twitter is a platform, which allows its users to write 140 characters in one Tweet, so whatever sentiment they have and whatever feelings they want to express in relation to politics, they have only 140 characters to play with. A study conducted for elections of German parliament held in 2009 analyzed with 100,000 messages in Twitter feed, and results from this content analysis were amazing to see. The content analysis revealed that political deliberation is expressed by people through twitter. Moreover, the number of messages mentioning one political party was in line with the actual results, which determines that sentiments and feelings expressed on Twitter can be a predictor for elections (Tumasjan, Sprenger, Sandner, & Welpe, 2010)

The role of Twitter can be vital for political activism as it can be a great tool for political leaders as well as political parties. Twitter can provide several insights regarding elections and their predictions. A study analyzed the data for a major political party of Italy in their primary elections in year 2013. The study was to analyze some of the research problems, which can be open for further research to check whether Twitter has any role to play through machine learning, and if other techniques like polls, demographic data, multiple social media networks, and historical data can integrate together to predict elections. The study proved that data taken from twitter can certainly help in developing validity methods (Coletto, Lucchese, Orlando, & Perego, 2015). The researchers are also trying their level best to investigate whether Twitter along with other social media platforms can play any role in political activism. A team of scholars tried to review this role of Twitter by making predictions through a model to predict results of primary U.S elections. They analyzed the previous methods being used to check this relationship among social media and politics, and developed a new prediction model. The focus of the study was to see that if traditional polling methods can be replaced by using social media such as Twitter for elections predictions, and study results revealed that there is concrete feasibility of doing so to predict elections (Shi, Agarwal, Agrawal, Garg, & Spoelstra, 2012).

The great thing about social media including Twitter is that these platforms are really transforming the thinking patterns of developing countries as well. The developing countries may not be as strong in development and economy, but they are catching up in terms of technology and internet. Pakistan is the primary example of that. In 2013 General Elections of Pakistan, the social media was one of the active parts of the political activities. The youth from Pakistan used platforms like Twitter to express their opinions on the elections. The political parties also used the Twitter as a most active social media platform. A study of Twitter revealed that one of the major political parties Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) came out as an underdog in these elections. This thing was also indicated by the analysis of Twitter. The study concluded that PTI was able to use Twitter to motivate voters and earn handsome amount of seat in national as well as provincial parliaments (Ahmed & Skoric, 2015). Following table from this case study tells that how PTI and its leaders Imran Khan had better influence score than any other leaders and parties:

Figure 2:

Table 9.4 Twitter followers and social influence score of parties and their respective leaders

User	Twitter ID	Followers	Klout score
PTI	@PTIofficial	140714	73
Imran Khan	@imrankhanpti	627651	78
PMLN	@pmln_org	17499	63
Nawaz Sharif*	@MaryamNSharif	93592	66
PPP	@MediaCellPPP	2299	60
Bilawal Bhutto	@BBhuttoZardari	51496	61
MQM	@OfficialMqm	11770	64
Altaf Hussain	@allaboutmqm	10389	62

*Nawaz Sharif did not have a Twitter account before the election. However his daughter Maryam Sharif (@MaryamNSharif) regularly used Twitter to post tweets related to Nawaz Sharif, hence, we included her tweets for our analysis

Source: (Ahmed & Skoric, 2015)

It is also important for researchers to analyze big data from Twitter to check that how Twitter has performed in different regions of the world, and what future is waiting for the

platforms like Twitter in terms of enhancing and encouraging political activism. One of the research papers also analyzed the Twitter big data before Pakistan's 2013 General Elections to predict the outcome of overall election results. The predictions made from the study told that PTI is one of the major parties, which going to win the 2013 elections, but in actual terms, PMLN emerged as the winner, and this was not predicted by the Twitter analysis. However, still the prediction made by the Twitter was a valid one, because PTI also emerged as a main stream political party capturing 30 seats in national assembly and was able to form government in one province of the country (Mahmood, Iqbal, Amin, Lohanna, & Mustafa, 2013). These papers and studies clearly indicating that Twitter has been showing some validity in predicting election results, and more deep research in future can dig out more insights from the sue of Twitter for the political landscape all around the world.

Political Leaders and Political Campaigns: Influence through Twitter

The political leaders can use social media platforms to form their influence on public especially on their voters and potential voters. Social media platforms are not only great for political candidates to do political campaigns, but they can reach out to millions of users around the country and globe to form their political stature along with powerful influence. The political leaders use social media not only for party gains, but for their personal gains as well. The leaders having personal aims in mind mostly used twitter to communicate with public (Karlsen, R. & Enjolras, B. 2016). The famous and powerful political leaders also use Twitter to interact with people expressing their personal and sometimes policy statements regarding current issues. A study examined how three powerful leaders Barack Obama, the U.S President, David Cameron, the Britain Prime Minister, and Benjamin Netanyahu, the Israel Prime Minister used Twitter. The analysis described that Barack Obama was the one, tweeting more than other two leaders. The findings also revealed that all three leaders use Twitter to make an impact on public for outreach and transparency. They used Twitter to directly communicate with their public bypassing any kind of media filters (Aharony, N. 2012). The similar claim was made by Allington and Peele (2010) that member of Britain Parliament do get the chance to directly communicate with the public through internet, without having any filters of media.

The involvement of Twitter in political campaigns as well as politicians using it for their influence and impact on the general public; it has become one of the key area of research in recent years. The political world is transformed through Twitter and other social media platforms as new research horizons are opening up, and attractive opportunities are also on their way for political leaders as well as political parties (Vergeer, M. 2015) Moreover, it is great to observe that Twitter is becoming a great tool for indications of future political trends. The Twitter use is not limited to just communication, rather it is getting more attention in terms of holding political campaigns along with electoral activities. In current situations, the twitter may not be able to predict the outcomes of elections with valid evidences, but still it has the ability to provide certain indications (McGregor, Mourão, & Molyneux, 2017)

The social media platform like Twitter can also have many other aspects for political activism to look at. The social activism through social media has been observed by various studies and political activism is also gaining the attention from researchers. The social media has the ability of agenda setting through political campaigns, and political leaders can directly interact with their voters to give them special treatment, which can spread positive word of mouth for political leaders and parties (Enli, G. 2017). The researchers and scholars around the world have also tried to figure out that with the help of political campaigns, Twitter has the ability to bring political change or not. It has been observed that Twitter can play a positive role in encouraging political change and things can be brought into perspective through social media platforms. However, more specified research studies are needed to analyze specific relation between Twitter and political change (Conway, Kenski, & Wang, 2015). The literature can focus more on Twitter along with other social media platforms to check the influence of political leaders and political parties, and what insights both can get to use social media to their advantage. The influence of political leaders can be further enhanced in more effective manner if twitter is used in appropriate manner (Hinsliff, G. 2016).

Research Methodology

This research article is trying to figure out the role of Twitter in political activism. The methodology used for this research paper is review of available literature. The scope of the study is not limited to any specific country or region; rather it is the article covering global level discussion. There is huge literature and resources available on the internet to gather the

information to discuss the topic and find out relevant conclusions made by other researchers. To prepare this literature review, 40 resources have been used from primary and secondary resources. The paper has cited information from books, online sources, reports, case studies, international conferences, news, and journal articles. These sources have been collected from Google Scholar, Google Search Engine for online articles, different sources like Research Gate, Emerald Insight for Journal Articles, and Google Books for EBooks. The topic seems to be a significant one for future political activities around the world, review of literature would be provided with best possible insights from the available literature to lay the roadmap for future research.

Conclusion and Future Research

This research article has tied to examine the role of twitter in political activism. After reviewing the range of available literature, it can be concluded that Twitter has played role in political activism to some extent around the world. It means that Twitter also has the potential to become beneficial tool in future political activities to mobilize people for political activism. The research also finds out that Twitter can be an effective replacement for standard opinion polls and surveys with regards to predicting political results. Various studies have observed the positive and valid relationship between predictions made by twitter and actual outcomes of the elections. The Twitter was not able to give majority of predictions correct, but previous studies revealed that Twitter has the potential to do. It also means that role of Twitter in political activism is going to get more attention in future election campaigns in local and global politics. The future research can more specifically look at different aspects of political activism in relation with Twitter to figure out relationship among them. The researchers can certainly conduct more focused studies to review the role of twitter in future landscape of politics.

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