Proposal for American National Election Study 2016 Pilot Study: Social Media Questions

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Importance of Social Media in Election Campaigns:

Social networking sites are undeniably popular. Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter are among the top ten most popular sites globally (Alexa, 2015). Facebook celebrated its tenth birthday with over one billion active users worldwide (Sedghi, 2014). In the United States, 72% of Internet users are on Facebook (Duggan, 2015).

The impact of social media on political campaigns has been the focus of several recent books (Gainous & Wagner, 2014; Stromer-Galley, 2014) and articles (e.g., Hargittai & Shaw, 2013; Towner, 2013). The publications are critical for illuminating campaign's use of social media in the United States. The books employ personal interviews, content analysis, and survey data to examine the role of social media in election campaigns. At the 2015 APSA meeting, six presentations illustrated the use of social media in election campaigns in the United States and globally (see presentations by Sarah Pickard, Rosalyn Southern, Michael J. Jensen, Shannon McGregor, Rachel Gibson, Cristian Vaccari). None of these studies mention the American National Election Study as a source of information about social media use during election campaigns. I would like to propose questions for inclusion in the 2016 Pilot Study. These questions would establish the prevalence of social media use for creating connections between citizens and the variety of political actors in election campaigns.

Recently, I completed a meta-analysis of approximately 40 studies about social media use and civic and political participation (Boulianne, 2015). Over 80% of the correlations between social media use and political participation were positive (Boulianne, 2015), but the effect sizes were wide-ranging (see Ekström et al., 2014 versus Zhang & Lin, 2014). Using insights from this

meta-analysis, I would like to propose a series of questions for inclusion in the American National Election Study 2016 Pilot Study. The proposed series of questions will be useful to other ANES scholars who wish to examine how social media may shape public opinion and affect electoral preferences.

Proposed Measures:

The question series will begin with a screening question to establish whether respondents use social media. The second question asks about frequency of use. Both questions are from well-established surveys (Canadian Internet Use Survey and Pew Research Center study). In 2012, 67% of online Canadians used social networking sites as measured by this question (Statistics Canada, 2013). While the Pew Research Center asks about the frequency of use for each social networking site, I suggest modifying the question to include all sites. Existing research tends to focus on a particular social networking site, especially Facebook (e.g., Conroy et al., 2012; Tang & Lee, 2013; Vitak et al., 2011). This approach is becoming less relevant as 52% of Internet users employ multiple social networking sites (Duggan et al., 2015). Furthermore, applications such as Hootsuite allow simultaneous posts to Facebook and Twitter. Given the seamless use of multiple social networking sites, it is difficult to distinguish the use of specific tools. I propose asking about social networking sites in general (also see: Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012 and ANES 2012). In 2013, PEW reported that 40% of Facebook users logged on several times a day, 24% once a day, 10% 3-5 times per week, 13% 1-3 times per week, 6% every few weeks, and 8% less often (Duggan & Smith, 2013).

Q1. During the past 12 months, have you used the Internet to use social networking sites? For example, Facebook, Twitter.
    Yes
    No (skip social media question series)
Source of Question: http://www23.statcan.gc.ca/imdb-bmdi/instrument/4432_Q2_V1-eng.pdf.

Q2. Thinking about the social networking sites you use, about how often do you visit or use social networking sites?
    Several times a day
    About once a day
    3 to 5 days a week
    1 to 2 days a week
    Less often
Source of Question: http://www.pewinternet.org/files/2013/12/PIP_Social-Networking-2013.pdf

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My meta-analysis revealed hundreds of different ways to measure social media use (Boulianne, 2015). For example, in the 2012 ANES, respondents were asked about the use of Facebook or Twitter for learning about the presidential election and for sending messages about political issues. While social media plays an important role in information acquisition and distribution, social media true distinctiveness lies in the formation of social connections. Of the four largest estimates of social media and participation, which are all .40 or above, all studies included a measure of friending or following a public figure on social media (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2014; Macafee & De Simone, 2012; Tang & Lee, 2013; Wicks et al., 2013). For example, Tang and Lee (2013) report a .45 standardized effect for engagement and following various political actors (councillors, social movement activists, media commentators, academics, and government officials). Other studies have used some variation of this question, but typically focus on political candidates or government officials (Bode et al., 2014; Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012, 2014; Valenzuela et al., 2009). I propose using a more expansive list of political actors, which recognizes the broad set of political actors engaged in electoral campaigns.

Q3. Have you ever used a social networking site to friend, follow, or like:	Other surveys
a) elected officials, candidates for office or other political figures yes/no	• 8% of Swedish 18-33 year olds in Holt et al. (2013); • 9% of their college students reported becoming a fan of a political candidate in Conroy et al. (2011); • 25% of 18-29 year olds and 20% of all ages follow candidates as reported by Rainie et al. (2012); • 26% of Hong Kong students have friended a political representative on Facebook in Tang & Lee (2013); • 25-40% of students followed or became a fan of a political candidate on a SNS as reported in Towner (2013).
b) a political party yes/no	• 13% of students at a Canadian university based on the author's own survey (Boulianne, Forthcoming).
c) a political group that is not affiliated with a party, such as an environmental organization or a human rights organization yes/no	• 31% of students at a Canadian university based on the author's own survey (Boulianne, Forthcoming); • 38% of Hong Kong students have friended a social movement activist on Facebook in Tang & Lee (2013).
d) a community organization, such as charity or non-profit organization that raises funds or provides services to the needy yes/no	• 66% of students at a Canadian university based on the author's own survey (Boulianne, Forthcoming).
e) a news organization, such the *New York Times* or CNN yes/no	Not available

Most of these questions have been used by other studies. However, the researchers do not

always report on the descriptive statistics for these individual items. The most popular item is a

survey question about connections to elected officials, candidates or other political figures (see

Table 1). Based on other surveys, there is a good deal of variation in prevalence of this activity.

Based on PEW Research, approximately 20% of all online users have made connections to political candidates and 25% of young people have made connections to political candidates.

Analysis Plan:

My key research question is whether social media effects differ in magnitude for different groups of people. Specifically, do social media effects differ in magnitude for youth (18 to 30 year olds) who are intense users of social media versus non-youth who have more varied media consumption patterns (Dimitrova et al., 2014; Ekström et al., 2014; Wicks et al., 2013; Xenos et al., 2014)? Do social media effects differ in magnitude for women who tend to report less engaged in politics than men (Bode, 2012; Dimitrova et al., 2014; Holt et al., 2013; Xenos et al., 2014; Zhang et al., 2013; Zhang & Lin, 2014)? Finally, do social media effects differ in magnitude by country? I have proposed similar questions on the Canadian Election Study and I plan to engage in a cross-national comparison to examine whether social media effects on engagement differ cross-nationally. My meta-analysis suggests that the effects are somewhat consistent across different countries, but there is little research on cross-national effects (exceptions: Xenos et al., 2014 and Zhang & Lin, 2014).

Some of the mechanisms through which social media might affect engagement are through building sizable social networks (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012; Tang & Lee, 2013), forming online groups (Conroy et al., 2012; Valenzuela et al., 2009), increasing political interest (Holt et al., 2013), engaging in online discussion (Bode et al., 2014), and providing information to build political knowledge (Baumgartner & Morris, 2010; Conroy et al., 2012). I plan to use the

proposed social media questions and pre-existing ANES questions for my analysis. As such, I would hope that the following questions are retained and asked during the pilot study:

1) political interest: How interested are you in information about what's going on in government and politics?

2) discussion of election/politics: During a typical week, how many days do you talk about politics with family and friends?

Summary:

I have proposed questions on social media use for inclusion in the American National Election Study 2016 Pilot Study. Recently, I completed a meta-analysis of approximately 40 studies about social media use and civic and political participation (Boulianne, 2015). The meta-data suggest that social connections to political actors have the largest effect size, compared to other measures of social media use, on participation in civic and political life. As such, the proposed questions will establish the prevalence of social media use for creating connections between citizens and the variety of political actors in election campaigns. The proposed series of questions will be useful to other ANES scholars who wish to examine how social media use may shape public opinion and affect electoral preferences. These social media questions will be critical for assessing the effects of social media on participation in election campaigns and for evaluating how the effects of social media may differ for different populations.

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