From Social Media Engagement to Voting Decisions: Influence of Social Media on Local Election

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Abstract:
This study investigates the impact of social media engagement on voting behaviors during the 2022 local elections in Sta. Barbara, Pangasinan. With the rise of platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, social media has become an instrument in political campaigns, modifying old techniques and impacting social behavior. This research focuses on how social media in Sta. Barbara influences individual voting decisions based on their characteristics, degree of involvement, and voter turnout. The study utilized quantitative and qualitative methods to collect data. The results show that social engagement in their voting decision was neutral, with an overall mean of 3.07.

Keywords: Social media engagement, voting behavior, voting decisions, voter turnout

I. Background of the Study
Social media has been a powerful platform, influencing voting behavior and election outcomes, focusing on the local elections in Sta. Barbara, Pangasinan, by exploring the majority of the resident's interaction with the content of political online to the extent of uncovering which social media shapes their electoral choice. The new era of technology being incorporated into the media has enabled the voter to access any information about the candidates and electoral issues that might make them feel uncertain about the election, as formed by Hardison (2022). However, this accessibility to information has brought some consequences, such as fake news, which spread with the help of social networks and calls (Ong et al., 2019).

As the technology evolved through the years, it carried significant progress that brought the rapid development of social media and changed the view of political communications, which changed the strategies of politicians, news media, and the public in how they handle campaigns (Oparaugo, 2021). Rodrigo Duterte, the former president, quoted, “This type of technology is becoming an indispensable part of the contemporary electoral ‘political machine’.” However Mendoza (2023) pointed out that social media has been capitalized by social media influencers to build an electoral brand or to sow divineness in service of political interest. Therefore, in the May 2022 presidential elections, political campaigning strategies have expanded beyond the spread of false information to include the establishment of a battle between Marcos and Robredo.
The influence of social media on voter behavior has garnered attention in the realm of local elections. Based on Salic’s (2023) research, the 2016 local elections in Lanao Del Sur were influenced by social media, with noticeable effects of emotion on the voting choices of the participants. Similarly, a survey done in the Philippines indicated that 70% of participants recognized that Facebook impacted their voting decisions (Arugay, 2022). The increasing popularity of social media platforms, including Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, has affected politics in the Philippines (Arugay, 2022). Social media is currently believed to play a significant role in politics, which concludes that social media campaigns are inexpensive, and that social media can help the netizens’ voters by allowing them to choose their votes wisely.

The Municipality of Sta. Barbara, Pangasinan, is no exception to this trend. The municipality’s 2022 local elections saw a significant increase in social media usage among the voters (Arugay, 2022). However, this is mainly unexplored in terms of the extent to which social media campaigns influenced the voter’s decision. It also fits well with the proposal that messages and interactions through social media can be powerful determinants of voter turnout (Fujiwara et al., 2020; Teresi & Michelson, 2015). Likewise, getting to know the degree to which social communication structures have dictated voters in Sta. Barbara, Pangasinan’s influence on the election’s respect and transparency may be profoundly purposeful based on the explanation done by Ong and colleagues in 2019 (Hardison, 2022).

II. Conceptual Framework

Social media platforms have emerged as critical instruments for political communication and the electorate, as seen from various theoretical perspectives. According to the Uses and Gratifications Theory, people actively select media to satisfy certain needs, including the search for information and social communication (Katz et al., 1973). Thus, employing the model of political information and engagement needs, the following needs are met by the users of Twitter and Facebook regarding political content: users need information, they discuss the content, and they strengthen their identities. According to the Agenda-Setting Theory developed by McCombs and Shaw (1972), one way in which social media affects the salience of issues is by promoting the visibility of particular issues over others. This is well illustrated through the political hashtags that tend to trend all over social media and the escalation or advancement of definite political stories on the virtual platform (Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2013). Also, it is important to note that the Two-Step Flow Model asserts that opinion leaders and change agents act as intermediaries in the processes of political sharing of information on social networks (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). Celebrities, activists, or other influential users are often thought to significantly influence the voters’ choices since they translate and spread political messages (Wang et al., 2018). Altogether, the above-stated theories depict how social media is a vibrant forum for the dissemination and exchange of political information, and the extension of the political agenda-setting and opinions among its users. The study investigates the relationships between the engagement of social media and the voter’s decision in the local elections of Sta. Barbara, Pangasinan. As social media changes the dynamics of the election, post tweets and viral videos have polarized the nation (Buenaobra, 2016), the phenomenon is expected to continue with candidates preparing their social media campaigns. The increasing social media influence in the media and voting participation have been significant parts of the research.
A) Social Media Engagement: Social Media Engagement defines social media as a part of the political campaign as assessing the political information and shaping the knowledge and information that influences the voter’s decision. (Raine and Smith 2012) social media engagement is fundamental for any campaign that the politicians run when the voters’ decision is crucial to who they would vote for in their decision-making process. The activities are likely affected by the youth social media users compared to users who are aged 50 years old and above.

B) Voting Decision: Voting decisions plays a role, in democracy shaping the government and shaping the regulations that govern our lives. The choices made by individuals are influenced by numerous factors that have an impact on their decision-making process (Kulachai et al, 2023).

The candidate’s traits, the government’s performance, and short-term influences are among the various factors that impact their voting. Therefore, assessments and social factors are related to their voting behavior, which may alter their individual voting decisions.

C) Social Media Engagement in Voting Decisions: Sharma and Parma (2017) carried out research exploring how social media impacts the engagement of individuals both online and offline. They investigated how social media influenced voting. Social media has become a promotional tool during elections, allowing candidates to establish connections, exert influence, and generate momentum to express their mission and objectives to secure the majority (Kumar et al., 2021). The data can be gathered to assess how active people are, on media and how it affects their voting choices. By examining what grabs the respondents’ attention, on platforms their usual online hangouts and delving into the opinions and perspectives of those surveyed it could aid in fostering governance and leadership to advance the progress of Sta. Barbara, Pangasinan.

III. Objective

1. To determine the extent to which social media influences the voting decisions of the respondents.
   a. Awareness and information
   b. Influence on perception
   c. Engagement and interaction
   d. Trust and credibility
   e. Comparative influence
   f. Overall influence

IV. Methodology

This study uses quantitative and qualitative approaches. The research was conducted at the Municipality of Santa Barbara, Pangasinan. The respondents of this study are residents of Barangays Cablong, Tuliao, and Ventinilla. The respondents were classified into age, gender, and educational attainment, and based on the number of retrieved questionnaires, there were 50 respondents in this study. In terms of residence, 40% of the population came from Barangay Cablong, 34% came from Barangay Ventinilla, and 26% of the population came from Barangay Tuliao. The researcher relied on an online survey questionnaire using Google Forms to collect the respondents’ information and opinions of the respondents through social media. Google Form is a web-based survey collection and data application that
is an unconventional formative tool that provides real-time feedback (Haddad & Kalaani, 2014).

All the data gathered was tallied, tabulated, analyzed using the weighted mean, and interpreted accordingly. The study used a 5-point Likert scale. The 5-point Likert scale is useful in political surveys for the following reasons: a) the possibility to determine less definite attitudes. Opinions may be divided over current political views, and such a diverse scale as a 5-point Likert scale will allow for capturing all the distinctions. It accommodates the middle-point, which is vital in situations where respondents are split down the middle and not expressly extreme politically. b) The other benefit is found in the area of central tendency bias. The middle response also reduces the respondent’s reluctance to select an extreme view, which results in improved candor and variance in the answers. This is crucial in establishing the degree of consensus or otherwise on political issues. c) Also, the 5-point scale’s options are more balanced and symmetric.

Table 1
5-point Likert Scale

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Point Value</th>
<th>Statistical Limit</th>
<th>Descriptive Equivalent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>4.3-5</td>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>3.26-4.2</td>
<td>Agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.51-3.25</td>
<td>Neutral</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.8-2.50</td>
<td>Disagree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.0-1.7</td>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1 depicts the demographic profile of the participants. Concerning the age of the respondents, 46% are in the age bracket of 18-24 years, another group of 25-34 years, which make up 28% of the individuals in this study, and the remaining 14% of individuals aged 45 years and above. The least representative population group is the 35 – 45 years age bracket. Another significant portion, 28%, falls within the 25-34 age range. Respondents aged 45 and above account for 14%, while the least number of respondents are aged between 35-45 years. Regarding gender, 52% of the respondents are male, 44% are female, and the least represented are those identifying as LGBTQ+. In terms of educational attainment, 50% of the respondents have bachelor's degrees. High school graduates make up 44% of the population surveyed, 2% are elementary graduates, and 1% hold master's degrees. Examining professional and employment status, the majority of respondents, 56%, are self-employed. Government employees constitute 32% of the total population surveyed, and private employees are the least represented group. For monthly income, 70% of respondents earn 10,000 PHP or less per month. Those with a monthly income between 10,000 PHP and 20,000 PHP make up 20%, while a small percentage have an income above 20,000 PHP. The time spent on social media by respondents indicates that they are sufficiently engaged to be exposed to political advertisements and content. This level of engagement underscores the relevance of social media as a medium for political communication. The findings on the
gadgets used for social media show that mobile phones are the primary devices respondents use to access the internet. This is due to their ease of communication, such as messaging and calls, and their user-friendly nature with internet access. Among social media apps, Facebook is the most commonly used platform by the respondents. This suggests that Facebook plays a significant role in how respondents consume political content and engage with political campaigns online. The respondents’ demographic profile of provides valuable insights into the characteristics of the population involved in the local elections in Sta. Barbara, Pangasinan. The data indicates a youthful, predominantly male audience with varying levels of educational attainment and income. Mobile phones and Facebook are the primary tools for social media engagement, highlighting their importance in political communication strategies. This demographic information is crucial for understanding the impact and reach of social media campaigns on voting decisions.

Fig. 1 Demographic profile of respondents
V. Results

Table 2 presents the influence of social media on the voting decisions of the respondents. On awareness and information, the result revealed that the respondents became aware of political candidates through social media, with a weighted average of 3.64. This means that social media campaigns played a huge role in making them aware of candidates from their locality. Moreover, they depended on social media to get information on the candidates’ policies and agendas, with a WMP of 3.36. These studies’ conclusions resonate with the existing literature showing social media as a primary source of political information to strengthen voters’ existing knowledge and awareness of candidates and issues (Boulianne, 2015).

A. On the influence on perception: As to how the content present in social media affects the perception of the voters, the impact was discovered to have a weighted mean of 3.22, thus being considered neutral. Likewise, the approval or pointing out of significant issues by social media campaigns was also recognized neutrally with a mean of 3.04, interpreted as neutral. These results indicate that therefore, social media increases awareness yet does not significantly change the voters’ perceptions, which corroborates the research that shows that the influence of social media on voters’ attitudes in a given context might not be very much and might be contextually dependent (Enli & Moe, 2013).  

B. On the engagement and interaction: The weighted mean of the respondents’ interaction with social media posts related to local elections, including liking, sharing, and commenting on the posts, also registered a neutral impact with a value of 3.02. Additionally, the extent to which these interacted with an individual’s voting settlement was neutral, with a mean of 3.04. Such equal involvement and participation portray social media activism among voters, which does not translate into alterations in voters’ behavior (Hampton et al., 2011).

C. On trust and credibility: The types of information from the social media campaigns were also assessed for credibility and trustworthiness; the global mean attained was 2.66, which is neutral. The results also further showed that endorsements and testimonials on social media also had a mean of 2.76 which was considered as a neutral influence.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statements</th>
<th>Weighted Mean</th>
<th>Descriptive Equivalent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Awareness and Information</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Social media campaigns helped me become aware of the local candidates in Sta. Barbara, Pangasinan.</td>
<td>3.64</td>
<td>Agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. I relied on social media to get information about the candidates' platforms and policies in the Sta. Barbara, Pangasinan local elections.</td>
<td>3.36</td>
<td>Agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Influence on Perception:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. The content of social media campaigns positively influenced my perception of certain candidates in the Sta. Barbara, Pangasinan local elections.</td>
<td>3.22</td>
<td>Neutral</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Social media campaigns highlighted important issues that influenced my</td>
<td>3.04</td>
<td>Neutral</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This neutrality raises further questions about the accuracy of political information shared on social media networks and the problems of fake news (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017).

**D. On comparative influence:** The question dealing with the comparison of social media campaigning to traditional campaign strategies was rated as neutral, with a mean of 2.98. The degree of relatedness to the impact of the content discussed by the relative and close friend in the social media campaign was neutral with a mean of 2.86. Thus, the influence of social media on voters’ decisions, while present, can be countered by the effects of traditional media and face-to-face communication (Owen, 2017). Meanwhile, the perception of the respondents on the overall impact of social media on their voting decisions garnered a weighted mean of 3.2, which was interpreted as neutral.

**E. Overall influence:** The total average of all the responses combined with the General Weighted Average (GWA) is 3.07 means that social media causes a moderate shift in the voters’ decision and does not have a very strong or a very weak effect on the voters’ choice. This is corroborated by the findings of Gil de Zúñiga et al. (2012) that such neutrality...
reveals the multifaceted nature of political communication in the context of the new media environment that affects numerous factors regarding voters’ behavior.

VI. Conclusions

A. The respondents used social media for candidate information and platforms.
B. Although social media informs the voters, it does significantly alter their perception.
C. Social media interactions tend not to hugely affect how people vote.
D. There is some level of sensationalism among the respondents as far as the credibility of the content shared on social media platforms is concerned.
E. Respondents’ interactions with relatives and friends concerning the content of social media campaigns also had a neutral influence on the voting decisions.
F. Although informative about certain aspects, the influence of social media is moderate as far as people’s voting decisions are concerned.
G. Overall, there is a moderate level of change in voters’ decisions as a result of social media campaigns.

VII. Recommendations

A. Incorporate citizens’ awareness campaigns on how to distinguish truth from lies when going through social media content. This, in turn, will help educate the voters to distinguish between credible news sources and fake news feeds and be in a position to make informed decisions.
B. Comelec may set and implement rules that check individuals or groups who post political commercially-related statements on social media. This concept entails proper labeling of paid advertisements and a declaration of the sponsor’s funding sources, so that voters can distinguish and assess sponsored content.
C. Community participation: call for the creation of organizations that would cover political information on social media to ensure it is true. It is also important to engage the aforementioned organizations and the popular social media platforms to report and edit incorrect information often.
D. Establish a government-assisted online fora for political discourse and the sourcing of reliable information that inspires positive political discourse among the population. They can act as a hub for sharing opinions and engaging in essential discussions that are welcome and safe from fake news interference.
E. Incorporating media literacy and critical thinking skills into the educational curriculum at the basic education levels is recommended. By showing the learners how to work through digital information responsibly, future voters will be in a better position to be more active in political activities.
References