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Political Social Networking: The New Town Hall

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Introduction

On April 22, 2013, a member of the President's communications staff posted a photo to The White House's Facebook timeline. The words "Young people like these have to make you hopeful about the future of our country" are superimposed over a seemingly candid photo of President Barack Obama conversing with three young African American boys dressed in school uniforms. The photo also links to a website where readers can learn more information about the annual White House Science Fair. The photo is captioned "Like and share this if you agree we need to keep making investments in science and innovation." In twenty minutes, the post had over 2,000 likes, over 300 comments and had been shared almost 500 times by some of the almost two million people who had already publically "liked" the page (Obama, The White House Profile, 2013).

Just a few days earlier, John Boehner, the Speaker of the House of Representatives, tweeted, "It's #TaxFreedomDay. Check out my column on the need 4 a fairer, simpler tax code to create jobs & increase wages." (Boehner, 2013). Again, users shared and favorited the post to show their support, passing the message on to their friends. The tweet included a link to a recent column Speaker Boehner had written for the Daily Advocate, a small new-media news outlet. Public responses appear below the article, as commenters pick apart and build up his argument. A third party moderator monitors the discussion to hold the commenters accountable and promote civility on the online platform. Both Barack Obama and John Boehner understand the simple power of online communication in civic engagement.

The relationship between policy makers and the people they represent has changed over the past few decades as the United States has embraced the globalized, online world of constant communication. No longer can elected officials rely on public hearings and conventional town hall assemblies to connect with their constituents. When they are planned, these meeting are minimally attended. Those that do show up are the politically charged few, not representative of the general public (Lukensmeyer & Brigham, 2003). Online communication is an intriguing strategy for gathering input and sustaining citizen interest for decision makers. It ensures that citizens have an impact on the policy decisions and government processes that affect them. Social media sites like Facebook and Twitter allow policy makers to incorporate themselves and their message into their constituent's ordinary lives, effectively making politicking as normal as checking one's email.

San Francisco Mayor and California Lieutenant Governor Gavin Newsom writes, "…the changing expectations of new generations, weaned on smartphones and the Internet, guarantee that we can't just continue with business as usual." (2013). Today, social media is a necessary tool of any political engagement – from campaign to constituent relations. Policy makers and candidates tweet bits of speeches, invite their Facebook "friends" to events, encourage their supporters to check-in on Foursquare and upload campaign ads and vlogs to the video-sharing site, YouTube. These technologies allow elected officials to deliver "crafted, unfiltered messages to voters and nonvoters alike" (Solop, 2010).

Acclaimed Political Scientist Morris Fiorina claims the "townhall is the ideal of democracy" (2009). In town hall meetings, citizens speak with one another and their

elected officials to communicate their wants and needs and put pressure on their government to take action. Though meetings of this style were possible in colonial America, the practice has become less realistic and effective throughout history. However, the onset of the Internet and the power of social networking present the public sector with an opportunity for massive-scale town hall style conversation in which opinions and needs are communicated directly between government and individual, and between peers.

"Friend" the President: Barack Obama and Online Political Engagement

In 2008, Barack Obama revolutionized the campaign process through his multi-modal approach at voter engagement. Many political analysts believe Obama's use of social media was one of many factors that led to his 2008 and subsequent 2012 wins. Helped along by the digital marketing consultant group Blue State Digital, Barack Obama became the first major candidate to effectively harness the incredible power of the Internet and social networking, allowing him to spread his message and fundraise in an inexpensive and yet massively encompassing way. Campaign expert, Mark Pack writes "the logic was to fish where the fishes are, that is, to take the campaign to where people are located" (2010). The campaign realized that, today, the people are located online.

By Election Day on November 4, 2008, Internet users had spent more than 14 million hours watching over 1,800 Obama-related campaign videos. Rapper Will.i.am's "Yes We Can" video had garnered over 20 million views and hundreds of thousands of comments on the then fairly unknown website, YouTube. He had 830,000 MySpace

"friends" and 2.4 million Facebook "supporters", each four times more than Senator McCain had accumulated (Baumgartner & Morris, 2010). Between his first tweet on April 29, 2007 and November 5, 2008, Obama and his staff had posted 262 tweets to share the location of campaign events and to direct followers to the campaign website (Solop, 2010). Further emphasizing, their dedication to the online voter-base, the Obama campaign chose to text the name of the vice presidential nominee to his database of over one million phone numbers rather than the more traditional approach of releasing the name to the conventional media (Nagourney, 2008).

The Obama Campaign went even further than traditional platforms like Facebook and Twitter to create its own social media network, my.barackobama.com (myBO), with the help of Facebook co-founder Chris Hughes. The website allowed users to create personal profiles, write blogs, share information with their neighbors, and to create and promote local events. By the end of the primary season, the site had over 900,000 registered users (Dickenson, 2012). In November 2008, after Obama had won the White House, over two million profiles had been created, 200,000 offline events planned, 35,000 groups formed, and 400,000 blogs posted (Solop, 2010). myBO has since changed its name to "Organizing for America" (OfA), a tagline of his 2012 election campaign.

myBO and OfA were perhaps most significant when it came to fundraising for the election. Obama raised a lot of money from a large number of donors making relatively small contributions. By Election Day in 2008, Barack Obama had raised over half a billion dollars online, most of which had been contributions of $200 or less (Dickenson, 2012) (Smith, 2010).

Some credit Obama's win to his early voting and get out the vote outreach. Not only did he encourage his base to vote early, but he told them to ask their friends to do the same (Kenski, Hardy & Jamieson, 2010). His social networking presence allowed him to "microtarget," or to deliver specific, nuanced messages to a specific group of people in an attempt to shift swing votes (Kenski, Hardy & Jamieson, 2010). As an example, his staff would post blogs and links to articles about student loan debt relief on websites and pages that college students or recent graduates would visit. By the end of the first election, the campaign's email database contained over 13 million different addresses according to David Plouffe, previous campaign manager of Obama For America and current Senior Advisor to the President. "We had essentially created our own television network, only better, because we communicated directly with no filter…and those supporters would share our positive message or response to an attack, whether through orchestrated campaign activity like door knocking or phone calling or just in conversations they had each day with friends, family, and colleagues." (Kenski, Hardy & Jamieson, 2010).

The engagement did not end after the votes were counted. Obama and his staff frequently utilize technology and social networks to bypass the mainstream media and connect with voters. They continue to tweet, upload photos to Instagram, update Facebook statuses, and share articles and links to other websites on a daily basis. Their own social network, BarackObama.com is still going strong as a blog/advocacy hybrid.

Today, the President has almost 31 million followers on Twitter. His staff still uses the site on a daily basis, averaging a several tweets a day as they post original content, retweet other accounts, and participate in conversations with their twitter

followers. Some tweets are seemingly to support his public image, portraying him as a family man. For example, on March 10, 2012, his staff posted an old photograph of Obama playing with one of his daughters in a garden and titled it "Spring Forward" (Organizing for Action, 2012).

The @BarackObama profile is also used in conjunction with his Organizing For Action (OfA) website to support the President's policy initiatives. In 2009, for example, Obama and his staff debuted the "Tweet Your Senator" program. The OfA website and email that takes followers to a page with a precomposed tweet supporting a given policy linked to their senators' twitter accounts (Solop, 2010). In 2011, Obama hosted a "Tweet Up," in which he fielded unscreened questions from Twitter for a period of 70 minutes. The famous 140-character tweet limit was even lifted for the President's answers as he wrote out long verbose responses while being live streamed from his desk in the oval office (Alberts, 2011).

More recently, he hosted a Google Hangout, an online video chat system that multiple people can join simultaneously. He answered questions from ordinary people from gun safety regulation to the lack of transparency around the drone strikes. Some reporters remarked that the questions posed were tougher than anything typically asked in interviews in the mainstream media (Kurtz, 2013).

President Barack Obama's use of the Internet and social networking in his 2008 and 2012 elections were unprecedented. He recognized very early in his candidacy that social media had the power to create a movement, that "a tweet to your 300 followers about the importance of registering to vote is just as vital as knocking on doors" (Parham, 2013). It has created an environment of transparency never before experienced in

American politics, changing the way that policy makers will need to engage with their constituents in the future.

After the President's successful reelection campaign ended in 2012, Republican strategists attempted to understand where they went wrong. Repeatedly, they returned to the Democrats' effective use of social networking to engage and mobilize their base and swing voters. Polls showed that individuals were 103% more likely to vote for Obama over Senator McCain if they had seen political campaign information over the Internet within the week of being polled (Kenski, Hardy, & Jamieson, 2010).

The first weekend following the 2013 inauguration, Tennessee Representative Marsha Blackburn blamed the lack of maximization of social media networks as the reason for the republican loss in a segment on CBS's *Face the Nation*. Another guest, Newt Gingrich, went on to agree with her saying "We have to learn to communicate in the world of young people on their terms." (Gingrich & Blackburn, 2013).

Communication and Representation in American Politics

In representative democracy, elections reflect the general will and determine the policies that will govern the nation in the future. Through elections, the public issues their consent to political leaders to represent and execute the public will at local, state and national levels. Representation is a social relationship between elected official and individual, regardless of whether or not the person voted for the politician (Castiglione & Warren, 2006).

The American Constitution mentions "representation" but only as far as to structure the legislative branch and to establish the guidelines that would determine the number of members serving in the House of Representatives. Through this lens, only the legislative branch of politics would be thought of as being a "representative." However, with the growing complexity of American politics, some argue others ought to be included informally within this designation (Castiglione & Warren, 2006). The informal domains of politics, from lobbying to compromises between branches, means policy making occurs at every level in every branch. Therefore, when discussing the concept of representation, this discussion means to include beyond simply the Senate and House of Representatives to any position filled through the electoral process. If elected, a politician would be held accountable through future elections and through the threat of impeachment and removal. Therefore, the elected official is informally and formally a representative of the general public.

As many representatives have become career-politicians, they govern with concern for how their actions will be viewed in the future (Mansbridge, 2003). Jane Mansbridge calls this "anticipatory representation". Policy makers expect they will be held accountable by their constituents on a future date. Others base their decisions on the theory of "promissory representation," or the traditional understanding that representatives ought to keep the promises they made during their campaign. For example, if a Senate candidate declares she will improve federal highways during her race, once elected she ought to vote for bills that would increase the gas tax to fund new infrastructure projects.

Elected officials who make decisions based on "gyroscopic representation" are not as concerned with public perception. When voting or designing a policy, the representative will look to his own background to determine his choice based on past experience, his own interests, and common sense principles (Mansbridge, 2003). Many democratic theorists throughout the history of republican thought value this version of representative democracy. They believe the separation dampens popular passions and brings greater expertise and superior judgment into governing (Fiorina, 2009). Based on the writings of the Federalists and Antifederalists, our founders largely agreed with this concept. They believed that major policy decisions ought to be made on the people's behalf by a more qualified group of men (Wootton, 2003).

Mansbridge also says that some representatives act out of regard for individuals outside of their own constituency. She terms this "surrogate representation" (Mansbridge, 2003). This occurs when officials make decisions to benefit those outside of their own districts, like special interest groups, lobbyists, and other external influences.

Morris Fiorina is concerned with the relationship between official and jurisdiction, and between official and policy when he discusses American political representation. "Didactic" or "microrepresentation" is the correspondence between the positions and actions of an elected official and the jurisdiction that voted for him or her (Fiorina, 2009). A legislator, for example, would have strong didactic representation if he votes for policies that directly reflect the opinion of his constituency.

"Collective" or "macrorepresentation" is the relationship between what policies are produced by the elected government and what the public as a whole prefers (Fiorina, 2009). Rather than the didactic approach of voting out of respect for an individual

jurisdiction, the official will make decisions based on what is good for the common good, regardless of its effect on his district.

Both didactic and collective representation are crucial to the functioning of representative politics. A careful balance between the two allows for compromise, decisions based on expertise rather than emotion or political advantage, and a fulfilled public.

The problem is, representation in American politics is breaking down. There is an ideological gap between representatives and the public. Research shows that today's political sphere is the most polarized it has been since the Civil War (Mann and Ornstein, 2012). However, polling shows that, overall, Americans have centrist policy views. There is a significant disconnect between the public and the people who are supposed to represent them. In his book *Disconnect*, Morris Fiorina says, "those who represent the American public take positions that collectively do not provide an accurate representation of the public" (Fiorina, 2009).

Scholars agree this is a problem. In their recent analysis of the dysfunction in American politics, Thomas E. Mann and Norman J. Ornstein claim that politicians have become more concerned with party politics than the people they represent. Perhaps a more direct line of communication would hold officials more accountable for their actions. If political participation became as normal as checking Facebook, perhaps more people, the moderates, would join the debate.

To reach this ideal level of representation, communication between representative and the public must become more direct, according to Fiorina. Therefore, the ideal form of democracy is the small-group town hall style still practiced in many New England

towns (Fiorina, 2009). Traditional town hall meetings are characterized by face-to-face deliberation, and determination of general will by one big group (Lukensmeyer & Brigham, 2003). They bring together a local community to educate and to gather important information from them. Proponents of town hall style argument value interaction and reciprocity amongst diverse participants.

The town hall style lends itself well to the online world as hundreds of thousands of people interact and debate any topic or event (Herbst, 2010). The "21st Century Town Meeting" ensures that all voices have a spot at the virtual table including both the general public and key decision makers. It also suggests that a substantial segment of the online population will support the results of a forum once they have participated in the discussion because they feel they had a stake in the implementation (Lukensmeyer & Brigham, 2003).

Quite literally, the Internet has been used to host town halls. In 2009, there were a series of online town halls to host and spread the healthcare debate. Like any other town hall, they were covered by conventional journalists and discussed seriously by policy makers. Unlike traditional town halls, these and future online town halls will be available on web archive for years to come.

Communication and Social Networking

A new model of campaigning and engaging is emerging – that of the citizen centered campaign. There is a greater sense of investment in an election when one participates in online discussion and activism (Johnson, 2011). With the introduction of technology into the political sphere, society is moving from "mediated communication" to "electronic communication" and therefore from candidate-centered campaigns to citizen-centered campaigns (Hendricks & Denton, 2010). New technology promises better citizen understanding and political engagement. No longer are communications bound by time and space constraints of traditional media.

Very early on, the Obama campaign understood the concept of "citizen marketing" – that is, motivating ordinary people to distribute your messages for you. They utilized popular social media sites like Facebook and Flickr as well as not-so-popular ones like Black Planet and Eons to further engage and harness the power of the multitude by encouraging their supporters to make phone calls or go door-to-door in support of the campaign. Jascha Franklin-Hodge, co-founder of Blue State Digital says, "The point of the (social media) campaign is to get someone to donate money, make calls, write letters, organize a house party. The core of the software is having those links to taking action – to doing something."

They tightly integrate online activity with tasks ordinary people can easily perform in the real world. Outside of a campaign, officials can –and should – continue to use the power of their followers or friends to pressure Congress, keep their friends informed, and to simply maintain a relationship that must be rekindled each election season. It can even be used to organize collective research on policy questions, allowing

President Obama to ask for policy preferences and feedback, receive a measurable response, and be able to be held accountable for that as a representative of the general public.

At its base, politics takes place through communication. Communication is the basis for political thought, debate, and action constructing America's political, economic, and social institutions. In his writings, John Stuart Mill stressed the importance of discussion amongst citizens, specifically between diverse groups of people saying "such communication has always been… one of the primary sources of progress" (Mill, 1909). Online applications are useful for candidates to analyze the concerns of their constituents and to tap into a voter base that may not have been interested in politics before. Web interactivity allows for interaction to occur between the candidate and their followers and between the followers, themselves. This interaction is called interpersonal-interactivity (Panagopoulos, 2009).

Social networking is different than other communication modes because of the emphasis on two-way communication (Pack, 2010). The consumer-creator nature of social networking allows the conversation to occur between constituents and the representative without needing to go through a third party conventional media outlet. People can post questions or comments and the official's staff can respond. These sites become so important to campaigns because of their user-driven nature (Gueorguieva, 2009). Social media provides online users a sense of ownership over the political process (Jackson, Dorton, & Heindl, 2010).

Regardless of which platform one uses, the characteristics of social media sites are the same. They allow the average American to generate their own content, providing

an avenue for feedback to candidates and officials. Message delivery is no longer a top-down trajectory except for during campaigns.

Candidates and officials incur several benefits by utilizing the power of social media. First of all, online messaging and communication is possible for little to no cost. There are no envelopes to be stuffed, no stamps to be stuck, and no postage to be paid. Posting a tweet is free and yet it has the potential to reach literally millions of people around the country.

Because it is so affordable and accessible, social networking provides an outlet for lesser-known candidates to introduce themselves and their platform to voters. For example, Trevor Thomas, a young Democratic candidate for the House of Representatives, ran a social-networking oriented campaign in 2012. Thomas relied heavily on traditional social media websites including Facebook and Twitter. His campaign also produced several high-quality videos for YouTube, a user-generated video sharing website that has grown in popularity over the past few years especially amongst younger generations. For a candidate who did not have the reputation and experience of his competitors, social networking helped him get his name out into public consciousness. Even since ultimately losing the seat for Michigan's third congressional district, Thomas continues to engage Michigan voters by updating his campaign Facebook page frequently and by tweeting several times a day. Today, Trevor Thomas serves as Communications Director for Americans for Tax Fairness, a group pushing for tax cuts for the middle-class (Thomas, 2013).

Because they have to compete for audience, the media elites like Fox News and MSNBC have become more focused on extremism and infotainment than objective

reporting. Journalists reinforce distorted impressions and offer a false portrayal of American politics (Fiorina, 2009). Third party blogs and e-mails continue this tendency, publishing rumors like the question of Obama's birthplace (Mann and Ornstein, 2012). In an age where network TV and political radio have become increasingly sensationalized, two-way communication without a mediator ought to lessen the effects of the political rumor mill on American discourse. Social networking allows for direct communication between representative and individual. If a candidate or representative can be held accountable for the content they publish, one ought to expect the discourse to improve.

In her book, *Rude Democracy,* Susan Herbst predicts that online political discussion will replace the now common political forums on traditional media outlets. Discussions led by a moderator or host may become less popular as people move to online news platforms that allow users to have more direct participation. New norms and rules will emerge to develop civility and accountability amongst participants to legitimize the debate and ultimately lead to real policy influence (Herbst, 2010).

Social media sites, like the microblog Twitter, allow politicians to spread their message by releasing the information through a 140-character tweet. Twitter became popular just as the 2008 Election revved up. As applications for Twitter postings became available for mobile phones, the social media site became an influential user-centric community with information being posted instantaneously 24/7. "We are going from the era of the sound bite to the sound blast." Says Andrew Rasiej, founder of the Personal Democracy Forum (Talbot, 2008). One small message can be spread to millions as their supporters spread it further through retweets and at-replies.

Today, Twitter is partly known for being a dynamic news source, breaking stories before the major news media. For example, in January 2009, Twitter alerted the world to a plane landing on the Hudson River before the mainstream media. It has also played a role in major international events, like the Iran uprising and the Syrian Revolution (Solop, 2010).

Twitter can also be used to supplement traditional news and commentary. In March 2009, Senator John McCain participated in a Twitter interview with George Stephanopoulos. The interview began as McCain tweeted out "hi george im a little slow", emphasizing his lack of familiarity with the social network. The interview continued as Stephanopoulos asked the Senator questions that McCain replied to bound by the character limit and reasonable time. The questions had been selected by Stephanopoulos and his staff from submissions of Twitter users (Parker, 2009).

Commentary exists outside of the conversations of journalists as well. Ordinary users tweet and discuss issues with policy makers and each other on a regular basis. On Election Day, Twitter counted over 32 million tweets actively discussing politics. Once the presidency was called for Obama, politics-related tweets reached 327,452 submissions per minute (Langer, 2012). Like a true town hall, people were talking to one another but at a national and global level.

Facebook is another example of a mainstream platform striving to incorporate politics into everyday life. They have facilitated and supported previous presidential debates and are considering incorporating real-time, large-scale polls in the future. This would be utilized in a debate specifically, so that once a question is answered, a candidate could be told immediately, "Eighty percent of people don't like your answer" and

allowing them to follow up and change their answer (Newsom, 2013). The result would be more accountable debates focused on the public rather than appeasing special interest groups.

Facebook is perhaps the most politically involved social networking company. In fact, one of the founding members of the company left the popular networking site to run digital communications for the Obama Campaign. The company's influence can be felt in countless political interactions. For example, during the 2010 Congressional election, hundreds of thousands of Americans voted who would not have otherwise directly because of Facebook. Located immediately next to the status update box was a button labeled, "I voted!" Users would add their profile picture to the list of their friends along the side of the screen, making it cool to participate in politics and to tell your friends about it. The peer pressure aspect succeeded in getting people, especially the younger generations, to vote and to incorporate politics into normal life – one's Facebook timeline (Sunstein, 2013).

In addition to the dominant social media platforms, many officials create their own programs, like Obama's Organizing For America site, to engage the public. In 2010, Republican majority leader, Eric Cantor, introduced his project, "YouCut" to the Internet and to the House of Representatives. YouCut is an online civic engagement tool with real life policy results. The public is presented with up to five fiscal policy items per week that individuals are encouraged to vote on in an attempt to and cut wasteful spending. At the end of each week, Cantor submitted the most popular choice for an up-or-down vote for elimination in the House (Newsom, 2013). On a weekly basis, the Internet had a guaranteed vote in the House of Representatives.

Another Cantor project, "Citizen CoSponsors" is a Facebook-based program that allows constituents to cosponsor real legislation. Individuals receive automatic electronic updates as the bill moves through the legislative process. They also are kept up to date on opportunities to participate in hearings, conference call discussions, and other forms of participation usually reserved for elected representatives. The updates can go to the individual's timeline and newsfeed, another example of the incorporation of politics and government into everyday life.

In response to the controversial Stop Online Piracy Act (SOPA), Republican Representative Darrell Issa came up with an open, engaged way of using the Internet to produce policy. Inspired by President James Madison, "Project Madison" was a interactive blog-like platform that allowed citizens to select individual passages of legislation, change the language, and enter comments and suggestions. The result was a citizen-crafted bill called the Online Protection and Enforcement of Digital Trade (OPEN) Act. In the final bill, Issa's staff listed each citizen-suggested addition with rationales for why they chose to include it (Newsom, 2013). This approach could extend to many other pieces of legislation in the future. For example, nurses could offer their expertise and experience on health care policy language. Women, who often complain that a male-dominated branch of government makes policy concerning female reproductive rights, could weigh in on impending legislation. The purpose is to include and engage the people who will be directly affected by the policy.

An online update to the traditional town hall, is the online site Quora.com. Founded by former Facebook employees, the site is a politically oriented question-and-answer platform. Registered users ask questions and answer others, rating the best

answers as they go. The site requires people use their real names, which tends to calm the infamous Internet flame wars and shares the best answers based on an algorithm of user-ratings. This system rewards quality, informed answers over volume and extremism. Quora.com also allows questions to be answered by those who have unique knowledge of the topic. For example, someone asked "Why did Eric Cantor kill the STOCK Act?" and Majority Leader Eric Cantor, himself, replied (Newsom, 2013).

One of the most publicized form politically influential social networking is the online White House Petition site. The site, called "We The People," promises a response to every petition that garners a certain number of digital signatures as an exercise of Americans' First Amendment right to petition their government. To have one's petition reviewed by White House Staff and appropriate policy advisors, it must reach 100,000 signatures within 30 days of being posted (The White House, 2013). Since its launch in 2011, over 100 responses have been issued in reply to citizen petitions concerning issues from Wall Street Reform to the prospects for developing a real-life Death Star. Due to the overwhelming popularity of the We The People, the number of signatures needed to prompt a White House response has been incrementally raised from 5,000 to 25,000 to today's 100,000 (Munro, 2013).

Nonprofits and advocacy groups are getting in on the fun too. The proliferation of interest groups in the 1960s and 1970s and the polling explosion of the 1990s have developed and are fortified by social media use (Smith, 2010). Even AARP, one of the United States' most active lobbying organizations, has embraced the power of social media. The group has over one million "likes" on Facebook where they post videos, articles, and opportunities for involvement several times a day (AARP, 2013). Even on

Twitter, usually a much younger audience, the interest group for the elderly has garnered over 62,000 followers (AARP, 2013).

Challenges to the New Model

As with any new form of communication, there are various issues and complications that dependence on social media use could produce. First, policy makers tend to only reach those who are already supporters. To have an effective town hall style discussion, however, people need to interact with people they may not agree with. Second, though Internet availability has greatly expanded over the past few decades, some populations are not connected as others. Finally, candidates and officials from lower levels of government have been slow to embrace social networking. This is due to factors like cost and unfamiliarity.

Because one usually must opt-in to receive communications from campaigns and elected officials, messages reach those who are already engaged or supportive of that particular person. These highly specialized groups have a tendency to perpetuate extremism as members converse with each other, pushing the overall ideology away from moderation and actually increasing polarization (Sunstein C. R., 2007). Social networks and targeted blogs become a shelter from counter-arguments and candidate scrutiny (Kenski, Hardy, & Jamieson, 2010). The only way these sites become influential on swing voters is when the voter base belonging to the site reaches out to their friends. Their views are reinforced and new challenges contextualized so that, by word-of-mouth, they will spread the message.

One of the biggest challenges to the use of social media for closer communication and representation in American Politics is the demographic bias of the online community. Not everyone is invited to this type of town hall meeting. The elderly and the poor may not have access to a computer or the Internet to participate in online communication. This means the information collected through social networking is not representative of the nation as a whole. However, as time progresses and Internet becomes more readily available for all and today's generation replaces the baby boomers, this problem will fade.

Another major issue is the fact that state and local elected officials have been slow to adopt consistent and effective social networking practices. Kent County Commissioner Carol Hennessy said in an interview that she was not comfortable with basic sites like Facebook and Twitter. Her biggest use for social media platforms was to keep track of her constituent calendar (2013). She would determine which community events she ought to attend based on the RSVP list on Facebook event invitations. Otherwise, her Facebook and Twitter pages are hardly ever updated. As a result, each page has less than 50 followers that tend not to participate in conversation nor share Commissioner Hennessy's status updates with their friends.

Part of this disparity between federal and state and local races is due to money and sophistication. Today, a federal campaign would likely employ full-time computing consultants and professional new media consultants. New technology, especially for personalized sites like Organizing for America, requires time and expertise, which low-level campaigns may lack (Rackaway, 2009).

Before social networking is taken seriously as a preferred means of communication between policy maker and constituent, these challenges will need to be addressed. Ease of use and accessibility to the Internet has been improving since its inception, leading most scholars to believe the population demographics ought to balance over time as older generations and low-income individuals enter the online world.

Similarly, as more people move to online communication, state and local officials will be forced to focus on social networking in campaigns and public engagement. Online content and discussion will become a key role of communication staff regardless of which level position a candidate is seeking.

Moving Forward

In the future, America will likely experience an increased move toward online activity even beyond simple communication. Voter Registration could likely transfer online in an effort to be cheaper, more efficient, and to enable and encourage more citizens to register to vote (Mann and Ornstein, 2012). Though casting a ballot itself would not occur online, electronic records would make it easier for absentee voters and long-distance commuters to vote other than in their own county. These are just examples of the political potential of technology.

Despite the decrease in voter participation over the past few decades, new technology and macrocommunications allow the public to have a bigger voice in American politics. The "supply-side" of the political sphere, the people and processes that produce public policy, are more influenced by popular opinion today than even a

generation ago (Fiorina, 2009). Politicians' decisions – from what way to vote on a bill to how they do their hair – are all determined by the potential consequences of those decisions.

Current public approval ratings are low. Barack Obama's approval rating has averaged around 49% since the beginning of his presidency (Gallup, 2013). Congress's overall approval rating currently holds at around 13%, among the lowest that Gallup polling has ever tracked (Newport, 2013) (Gallup, 2013). As more Americans become frustrated with the status quo, elected officials must be willing change their behavior based on constituent feedback and engagement in order to continue to hold control over their houses and branches of government.

A key factor to this movement, as previously mentioned, will be to normalize political participation. According to California Lieutenant Governor Gavin Newsom, "one of the biggest hurdles in getting people excited about government is overcoming this pervasive notion that government is somehow separate from every day life" (2013). Social media helps to incorporate political awareness into ordinary activities as people view, act, and communicate with officials as they would with any of their other acquaintances, effectively shortening the distance between them and the Beltline. More political interaction on sites like Facebook and Twitter allows individuals to be involved in politics without needing to severely change their existing daily habits.

Former Vice President Al Gore called social media "a saving grace for democracy". He believes that "social media empowers the connecting of citizens to one another... the Internet mimics print in that it has low entry barriers for individuals" (Newsom, 2013). Technology changes the nature of government to a two-way

conversation. Democratic political systems are built upon a foundation of ongoing interactions between citizens and policy-makers. The result is an online public square, an ongoing town hall meeting, packed with the exchange of ideas and opinions between peers and with their representatives. Its democratizing influence leads to stronger, more responsive government. As time goes on and the electorate grows to include a greater number of digital natives, this form of communication will become the standard. The people who grew up accessing and understanding the power of technology will have more direct representation in US politics if candidates continue to embrace social media tools.

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