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Insu Park

State University of New York at Buffalo

Jin-Kyu Lee

State University of New York at Buffalo

Raghav Rao

State University of New York at Buffalo

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Digital Democracy: The Influence of the Internet on Voting Intention

Insu Park

State University of New York at Buffalo
insupark@buffalo.edu

Jin Kyu Lee

State University of New York at Buffalo
jkleee2@buffalo.edu

H. R. Rao

State University of New York at Buffalo
mgmtrao@buffalo.edu

ABSTRACT:

This study examines the effect of Internet on intention to vote. Specifically, we explore how Interactivity and credibility as the characteristics of Internet influence apolitical and political internet users' intention to vote. We argue apolitical users who have political apathy are affected more by the characteristics on Internet than political users who are interested in politics. We also argue that political groups are not as affected by the characteristics of Internet. Our preliminary study shows that intention to vote of Internet users who have apathy to politics changes after they are exposed to political communications on the Internet. Also the study found evidence that Internet users who perceive Internet as a credible medium have a higher intention to vote than those who believe the Internet is not credible.

Keywords

Intention to vote, interactivity, credibility, digital democracy, political apathy

INTRODUCTION

The Guardian, a British newspaper, featured the presidential election held on February 24th, 2003 in South Korea with the article, "World's First Internet President Logs on." This highlights the fact that cyber space has become the place where citizens are induced to participate in and attain democracy. The Internet has become a tool to build public opinion about presidential candidates and their policies and eventually to facilitate citizens' participation in elections. We are seeing this happen in the current democratic primary race in the U.S.¹ as well.

An important issue for future democracy is the meeting of information technology and democracy (Barber, 1998), and use of the new communication technology is radically restructuring the fabric of American democracy by establishing more direct democracy opportunities (Cavanaugh, 2000). "Digital Democracy" is "a way of extending participation into civil society" (Schlosberg and Dryzek, 2002) and elect representatives while carrying out online-communications or using the Information and Communications Technologies (ICT) elected representatives (Nugent, 2001, Gronlund, 2001) and it reflects attributes of the Internet such as participative, bi-directional, and anonymous communication. Such characteristics enable Digital Democracy not only to be a means of electing political representatives but also to be a way of extending individuals' participation into civil society. Therefore, the goal of e-democracy is to arrange IT to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of democracy (Watson et al., 1999). Internet voting is a way to boost voters' participation through updating aging voting techniques and accommodating changing citizens' needs (Mohen and Glidden, 2001).

The purpose of this study is to explore the ways that citizens' Internet use influences citizens' voting intentions and has an impact on paths to e-democracy (Watson and Mundy, 2001). Specifically, this study focuses on the influences of online interaction and credibility of the Internet on voting intentions of two groups of electorates; *political* citizens who are interested in politics and *apolitical* citizens who are not interested in politics.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND HYPOTHESES

Political Apathy and Voting Intention

¹ CNN, 'Internet Helps Make Dean a Contender', Saturday, July 5, 2003.

'Internet users click and vote for Democratic contenders', Monday, January 12, 2004.

In past research, political apathy has been proposed to be an important factor that influences citizens' participation in democratic processes. The legitimacy of democratic political systems depends primarily on the extent to which the electorate trusts the government to do what is right (Easton, 1975). However, people with political apathy tend to believe that their government or political representatives are no longer answerable to their needs and their efforts at the ballot box are in vain. It has been observed that the US government faces a high level of political apathy and dissatisfaction (Banker, 1992). A recent study attributed the cause of the recent apathy and distrust toward the US government to the complex bureaucracy, inaccessibility of government, and frequent unresponsiveness to the electorate (Lewis, 1998). Political campaigns through traditional media have aggravated the problem of government credibility (Kaid, 1999).

The Role of the Internet

Traditional media technology exemplified by television, radio, and newspapers are not only structured as one-way, top-down communication, but also confine or create few opportunities for communication to occur easily among citizens and between citizens and political leaders (Stromer-Galley, 2000). TV was even blamed for being a major reason for the decreasing political trust and participation in the US (Putnam, 1995). Contrary to the traditional mass media, the Internet is a highly interactive medium and can contribute to the democracy in that people equally participate and express their opinion about political issues online.

Interactivity (IN)

Interactivity is defined as "the degree to which two or more communication parties can act on each other, on the communication medium, and on the messages and the degree to which such influences are synchronized" (Liu and Shrum, 2002).

Interactivity allows Internet users to play the role of opinion leaders. In pre-Internet communication society, citizens' ability to communicate their view on politics, economics, and society with other people or government through the traditional mass media was extremely limited. Therefore, public opinion was formed indirectly through press or a small number of opinion leaders in most cases (Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955). However, interactivity of the Internet makes two-way communication possible among Internet users. The opinion of users through Internet would play a key role in early stages of the political process in forming public opinion. Internet technology can be used to make representation more responsive to nonelite citizens (Morris and Ogan, 1996). The interactivity of Internet has generated a strong drive for direct participation of citizens in the policy making process of government (Bertelson, 1992). By opening up new sources of information and means of participation, the Internet would reinforce the political system, even one which suffers from citizens' political apathy toward voting (Levin, 2002). Therefore, we expect that voters, especially those who have had a high level of political apathy in the past, can gain higher political efficacy through online interaction resulting in becoming more willing to vote. Therefore we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 1a; In the apolitical Internet group, users who use Internet to communicate have a higher intention to vote than the users who do not communicate with other users on the Internet.

Hypothesis 1b; The relationship between the political interest and Intention to vote will be moderated by the Interactivity of the Internet; the relationship will be stronger for those who interact with others on Internet than those who don't interact

Internet Credibility (IC)

Research devoted to the connection between online credibility and political attitudes is sparse, though some research has examined the relation between Internet use and political attitude. Internet credibility is concerned with how important and reliable the Internet has been in terms of providing information. When it comes to voting intention, how credible the Internet is, in terms of providing election related information is an important question. Generally speaking, credibility of media is strongly linked to how often one uses it, and people consider the most utilized media as the most credible (Wanta and Yu, 1994). Citizens tend to seek political information from the traditional mass media like T.V, and newspapers, because they regard Internet as a less credible media.

The Internet provides a large amount of detailed information with convenient search capabilities. Moreover, the Internet facilitates activities of various interest groups that focus on a wide variety of political issues, including minority rights and interests. (e.g. Minority Rights Group International², or politics online³). Such characteristics lead to an increase in the credibility of the Internet. This credibility would have more profound effects for those who could not previously find political agendas relevant to their interest, increasing the voting intention of politically alienated citizens. Therefore only if they perceive the Internet as an important channel for seeking political information, intention to vote will be higher than users who don't perceive.

² Minority Rights Group International (MRG) works to secure the rights of ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities (<http://www.minorityrights.org/>)

³ <http://www.politicsonline.com/>

Hypothesis2a: In the apolitical Internet group, the users who perceive Internet to be credible have higher intention to vote than the users who perceive Internet not to be credible.

Hypothesis2b; The relationship between the political interest and intention to vote will be moderated by the perceived credibility of the Internet; the relationship will be stronger for those who perceive credibility of Internet than those who do not perceive credibility of Internet.

In addition, these characteristics would more impact apolitical groups than political groups. Political groups reinforce their attitude toward politics through information from interactivity on Internet, whereas apolitical group change belief or attitude toward politics through them. In order to justify their existing attitude, political users tend to accept selectively or distort information (Festinger, 1957). That is, political groups will not change their intention to vote due to information from interactivity on Internet or Internet credibility.

Hypothesis3a: In the political Internet group, there is no difference in the intention to vote between users who interact with other and users who do not interact.

Hypothesis3a: In the political Internet group, there is no difference in the intention to vote between users who perceive Internet to be credible and users who perceive Internet not to be credible.

Figure 1 depicts the hypothesized relationships in our research model.

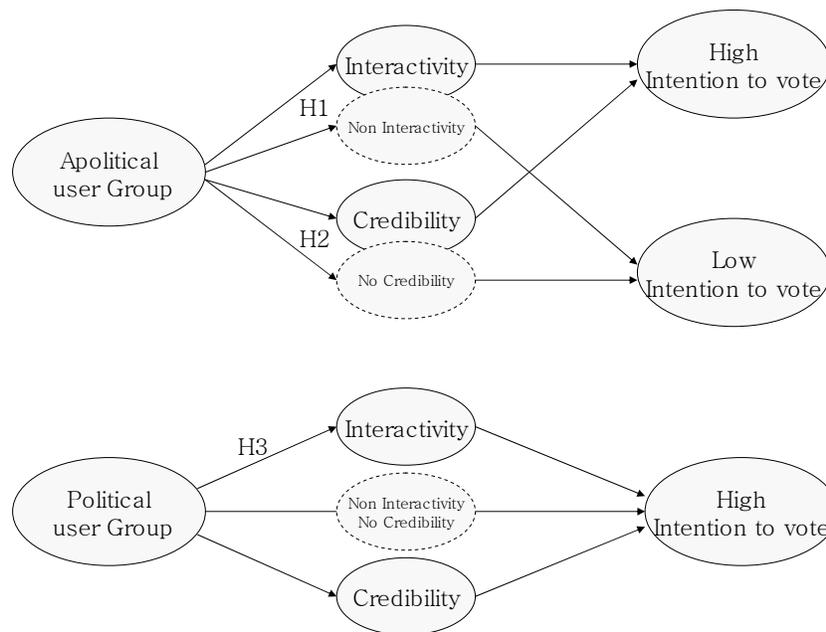


Figure 1. Conceptual Model of Effect of Internet Characteristics

PRELIMINARY RESEARCH FINDINGS

Sample

As a preliminary study, we analyzed Internet users’ intention to vote with 2002 US mid-term election (November 5) survey data provided by Pew Research Center⁴. From October 30 to November 24 in 2002, 18 year or older Americans were administered a structured telephone interview conducted by Princeton Survey Research Association.

Measurements

⁴ <http://www.pewInternet.org>

Voting intention before the election (VI) as the dependent variable was measured with a 10-point interval scale. The first moderating variable, *Interactivity (IN)* was measured by eight questions that asked the extent to which interviewees actively interchanged political information on the web on a dichotomous scale. *Credibility of Internet (CI)* was “how important and reliable has the Internet been in terms of providing you with information to help you decide how to vote in the mid-term election,” which was measured by a 4-point interval scale. For the main independent variable, we used a reverse concept of political apathy, *Political interest (PI)*. This variable was measured with a 4-point interval scale by a question, “how much thought have you given to the coming mid-term elections on November 5th?”

Two ANOVA tests were conducted separately in order to examine the significance of the direct and interaction effects of the independent and each of the two moderating variables. For these tests, the responses to political interest were re-coded into two groups; high and low interest groups.

Result

The effect of Political Interest (PI) and Internet interactivity (IN)

Only 207 of the 503 who went online to get information about the 2002 mid term elections answered the questions related to interactivity. While Internet interactivity increases overall voting intention, our particular interest is in the influence of Internet interactivity on the difference of voting intention between the political and apolitical groups⁵. On average, the mean difference of voting intentions between interactive (39) and non-interactive (168) voters was not significant for the *political* group, while the average voting intention of interactive voters was significantly higher than that of non-interactive voters within the *apolitical* group. This graphical result clearly shows that citizens’ interactive use of the Internet reduces the gap of voting intention between the politically engaged and apathetic voters (figure 2).

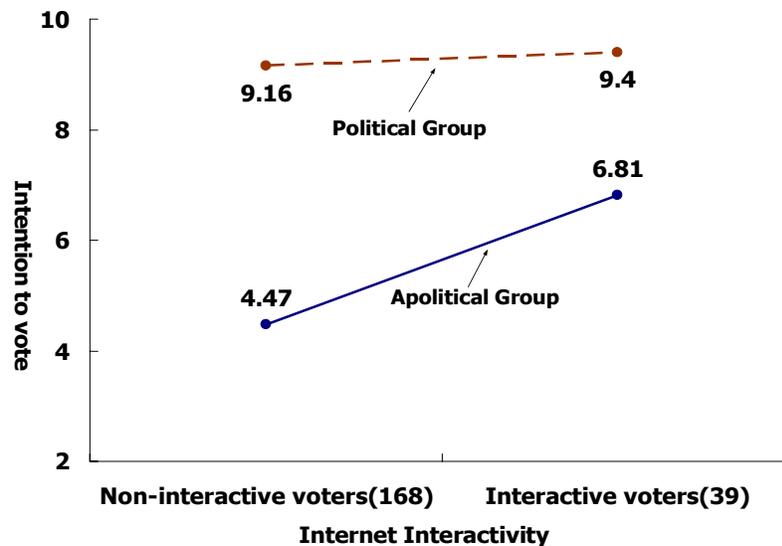


Figure 2. Moderating Effect of Interactivity

The effect of Political Interest (PI) and Internet credibility (IC)

497 of 503 voters answered the questions related to Internet credibility. Mean difference of voting intentions between those who found helpful information regarding the election and those who did not was not significant for the *political* group, whereas *apolitical* voters who benefited from credibility of the Internet were significantly more willing to vote than apolitical voters who did not receive such assistance. From this result, we can expect that useful and easy-to-access political information on the Internet can reduce the gap of voting intentions between political and apolitical groups (figure 3).

⁵ The political group refers to the high political interest group, and the apolitical group refers to the low political interest, or politically apathetic group. We use these terms interchangeably in this paper.

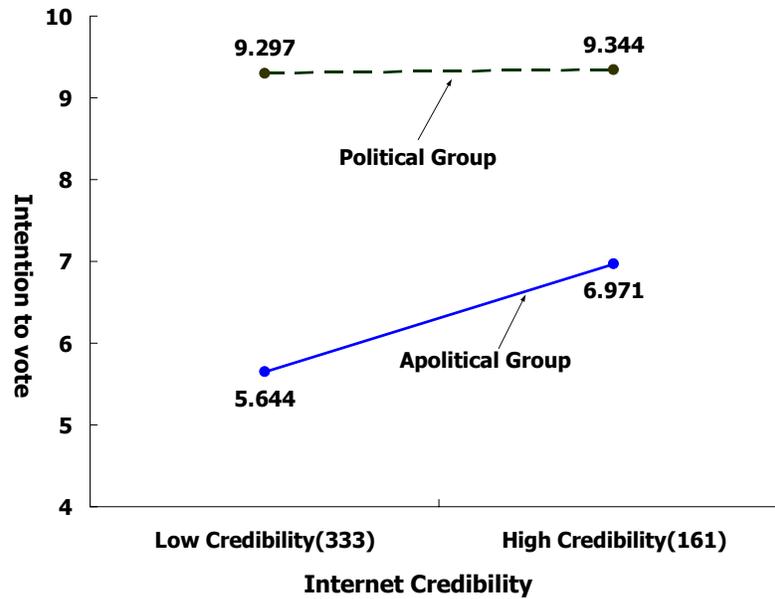


Figure 3. Moderating effect of Internet Credibility

IMPLICATIONS and RELATED WORKS

This study examines how the Internet influences citizens' voting intention. Assuming moderating effects of electorates' Internet use on the relationship between political interest and voting intention, the study attempts to find the role of the Internet in increasing citizens' participation in democratic process and reducing politically alienation in the society.

This study offers important practical and academic implication in that the findings present empirical evidences that the characteristics of Internet can be used to induce citizens' participation in democratic and political processes. Governments and politicians will be able to draw more attention from constituents and reflect political concerns of various interest groups to their policy. Citizens, including minorities, also can benefit from more accountable government and responsible policy.

This preliminary study, however, has some limitations on research design and results despite significance of results. Samples were not divided evenly in each group. Consequently, the significance of preliminary study is possibly decreased due to the discrepancy in the size between groups. We plan to develop and test more elaborate constructs related to interactivity and credibility in future research.

As one of the earliest studies of the impact of the Internet on politics and democracy, we believe our research has shed a small but meaningful light on the way to digital democracy.

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