

# Social media in election campaigning

#### **SUMMARY**

Low engagement of citizens in politics and ever declining voter turnout are taken as evidence of a democratic deficit in the European Union. By providing a new form of communication among politicians and citizens, social media may provide a way of increasing citizen involvement in political life, especially during election campaigns.

Social media allow political actors, particularly smaller parties or less well-known candidates, to bypass mass-media filters. They can influence journalists who follow social media for story ideas. Whilst specific targeting of voters, which has proven effective elsewhere, may be problematic in much of the EU, messages can at least be targeted at the young, the largest group of social media users. They can be used to organise or reinforce participation in 'offline' events, and can increase the personal appeal of a candidate. The network effects of social media, amplifying as they do the transmission of a political message through social connections, make social media a valuable part of an election campaign.

While social media is increasingly used in campaigns across Europe, the ultimate effect of this usage remains unclear. Some attribute the increasing levels of political activity on the internet to citizens who are already politically committed. It may be that social media have only a very limited effect on getting otherwise disengaged citizens to engage — even just to go out to vote. It will take time, and more elections such as the forthcoming May 2014 European Parliament election, to evaluate the true role that social media will come to play.



# In this briefing:

- Context
- Political communication
- Campaign organisation
- Multiplier effects
- Effectiveness of social media
- Further reading





#### **Context**

## Social media and democracy

In a modern democracy, social media can be used by governments to involve citizens in decision-making, and by civil society to engage people in specific issues. However social media can also be used to broaden political participation by helping citizens to communicate with their representatives and with each other. Arguably this political communication is most important during election campaigns when political parties and

candidates seek to mobilise citizens and persuade them to vote for a given party or candidate.

1980s, Since the democracy across the European Union (EU) has been characterised by the increasing disengagement of citizens, particularly younger ones. Decreasing voter turnout, declining party membership, frequently negative opinions about politicians and a lack of interest in the EU are seen as signs of the diminishing legitimacy of the political system.<sup>1</sup> For some observers,<sup>2</sup> social media offer the possibility of encouraging more active participation in debate and more widespread participation in elections, thereby helping to overcome the EU's perceived democratic deficit.

Most social media technologies and services have been in existence for less than a decade, but they are increasingly popular, particularly as the use of mobile devices such as tablets and smartphones increases individuals' connectivity. In 2013, three out of every four persons in the EU used the internet (62% of them daily). A 2012 survey showed that almost one in ten

#### What are social media?

Social media encompass a range of information and communication technologies used for sharing information and opinions, often through explicit connections with other people or groups. They include:

- Interactive websites that use 'Web 2.0' techniques to encourage usercontributed content and comment
- Blogs (i.e. personal, publicly available journals) that allow anyone to report or comment on news and events
- Micro-blogging services such as Twitter that make it possible to publish, instantaneously, short messages to which other users can subscribe
- Photo and video-sharing services like Flickr or YouTube that let users publish material they have produced
- Social networking services (SNS) such as Facebook and the professional network LinkedIn, which allow users to create an online profile and to link to – and communicate with – friends, colleagues and organisations.

internet users in the EU27 created a website or blog, a third uploaded self-created content, and over half posted messages to social media. The increase in social networking services (SNS) has been particularly striking: according to a 2013 Eurobarometer survey 44% of Europeans used SNS at least once a week, and nearly one-third did so daily or almost daily.

#### Politics and the use of social media

Political use of social media in the last two United States' presidential elections has attracted much attention: a report published in advance of the 2012 election estimated that between 5 and 10% of a campaign budget is spent on internet-based media.<sup>3</sup> However social media are also changing politics and election campaigning in Europe. Researchers have studied the effect of social media in elections in various Member States including Ireland, Germany, Austria, Sweden, Finland, Denmark, Poland and the UK, as well as in the 2009 elections for the European Parliament (EP). Social media can be used in election campaigns in various ways, to mobilise a candidate's supporters or to convince the uncommitted to vote for them.



#### **Political communication**

#### Bypassing media filters

Some analysts<sup>4</sup> consider that voters do not turn out during European parliamentary elections because the European Parliament's work rarely makes the news. Mainstream media, such as the press, television and radio, pay relatively little attention to most EU issues or EU elections.<sup>5</sup> However, the Internet and social media have become important alternative sources of political and campaign information. More than half of <u>European internet users</u> now think SNS are a good way of keeping up-to-date on, or having a say in, political affairs. Though not as high a figure as in the US (where the Internet became a regular source of campaign information for <u>25%</u> of voters in 2012), as early as the 2009 German federal election, 15% of voters read campaign material on social media at least once a week.<sup>6</sup>

Social media allow candidates to <u>communicate</u> directly with citizens, keeping control of the content, distribution and timing of their messages, as well as reducing their dependence on traditional intermediaries such as journalists. New or less established parties in particular may find social media an easier path to getting their voice heard. Similarly, various studies have shown that candidates who are not incumbents, or who are lower down their party list are particularly active in social media.

#### **User-generated content**

User-generated content supporting a party or candidate is another way to bypass traditional mass media. Campaigns can encourage supporters to upload their own video and photo material about the candidate. In the 2008 US election, user-created videos uploaded to Obama and McCain YouTube channels were viewed almost as often as official campaign videos. <sup>10</sup>

The authenticity of such user-generated content can have a powerful effect. (Indeed some parties in Poland have been <u>accused</u> of 'astroturfing' – presenting professionally prepared materials as if they were unsolicited contributions from the general public). However user-produced content is not without risks: user-supplied content may end up muddying or even contradicting the official message that a candidate wants to put out.<sup>11</sup>

### Influencing mass media

Social media can also serve as an indirect influence on the stories that mass media present. In order to compete in a fast-moving media environment, journalists increasingly rely on political blogs, Twitter conversations and user video and photo content as sources for their stories. By using social media to raise an issue, react to a story or give a response, a politician may be able to spark a new story in the press or broadcast media, or at least to influence how journalists frame the news. Their message can then reach many more potential voters as the story is broadcast through media such as television (which, according to a recent Eurobarometer survey, remains the most important source of both national and European political news).

# Providing a view of the electorate

Social media also provide a way for politicians to monitor what is happening in the public sphere during an election campaign. Howard Dean, the first US presidential hopeful acknowledged to have used the internet effectively in his 2004 campaign, <u>said</u> he regularly adjusted his standard 'stump' speech on the basis of what he read in the following day's blogs.

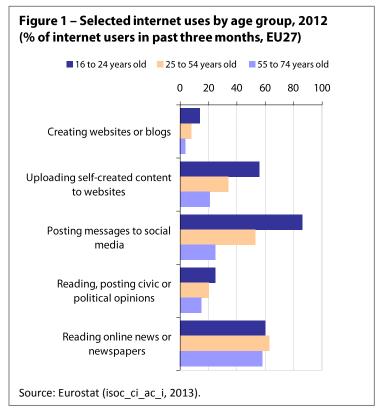


Politicians, at least members of the German *Bundestag*, <u>want</u> tools with which to identify trending political topics. However they should not place too much importance on trending social media topics. <u>Studies</u> of the use of Twitter in the US and analysis of the *Wutbürger* protest movements in Germany in 2010<sup>13</sup> show that sentiments in social media can shift rapidly from positive to negative and that the opinions expressed online do not necessarily track with general public opinion. Relying too much on messages appearing in social media might therefore give an incorrect impression of what the electorate as a whole feels about an issue. Some experts suggest that candidates and parties should identify influential social media users ('opinion leaders' in traditional political science terms) and focus on following their discussions to get insight into public perceptions.

# **Campaign organisation**

## Targeting the young

Social media can be used as a means to direct political messages to certain target groups. Of course not all citizens have access to the Internet and social media, so a part of society may be excluded from political discussion on social media due to this 'digital divide'. Whilst social media cannot replace face-to-face contact with youth, they can be a useful additional tool to deliberately target young people (the age group most likely to be disengaged from politics) because they are more likely to use social media, especially SNS. Young people aged 16 to 24 in the EU27 are more active users of social media functions than other age groups,



including creating blogs, posting content or sending messages via social media (see figure 1).

#### Micro-targeting

Social media can also assist with much more refined targeting of voter groups. The 2012 Obama presidential campaign in the US made successful use of social media, including blogs, tweets, text-messaging, e-mails and search-engine advertising. However <u>experts</u> consider that the critical edge came in the way voter data (partly collected via social media) were used to 'micro-target' messages sent to particular groups of users during the campaign.

The Obama campaign also used 'friend power' to reach voters, believing that politically unengaged citizens are more likely to be convinced by one of their friends than by a standard political message. Based on the social media-sourced information in the campaign database (see box on following page), volunteers were given lists of a small number of friends or neighbours identified as potential Obama voters so that the volunteers could contact them. Reportedly, one in five 'friends' contacted was persuaded to register, donate, volunteer or vote for Obama.

Members' Research Service 140709REV1



#### Campaign data management

The 2012 Obama campaign developed a central unified <u>database</u> with information on millions of voters. One source for this information came from inviting volunteers to sign into the campaign website with their Facebook credentials, automatically uploading information on themselves (e.g. place of residence, age, gender, education and interests) but also data about their network of friends. Data-mining techniques were then applied to this central data store to classify voters based on characteristics such as socio-economic class, personal interests and residence (e.g. in a closely contested 'swing' state) as well as to evaluate specific factors such as how convinced they already were by the candidate, whether they might contribute financially to the campaign and how likely they were to vote. Tailored messages could then be sent to those who were likely to contribute, or to those not yet convinced by the candidate but likely to vote, all for a fraction of the cost of conventional mass mailings and at much greater speed.

How transferable this 'micro-targeting' is to Europe is debatable. In the Netherlands, for example, political parties are only allowed to store information on party members (roughly 2% of the population). Analysts consider that the reluctance of UK parties in the 2010 general election to follow the US example in micro-targeting voters was in part due to concerns about legal challenges based on data protection legislation.

#### Supporting 'offline' events

In the view of some <u>analysts</u>, one of the main changes in campaigning with the advent of the Internet has been the use of social media's online capabilities to communicate and organise events that take place 'offline', i.e. in the real world. A candidate can send a message about an upcoming event, and encourage supporters to spread the message so that others will attend. As noted, Beppe Grillo's M5S has used social media to organise meetings and demonstrations throughout Italy; these mobilised citizens but also garnered much television and press coverage. However advance planning is essential to this 'convergence' strategy<sup>16</sup> so that social media can be integrated into regular campaign planning.

# Beppe Grillo and the M5S Movement

In the view of many analysts, the media in Italy lack independence: there are strong links to political parties or the government, little competition in broadcast media, limited print media circulation and poor professionalism in journalism.<sup>17</sup> Some argue that news and commentary are consequently filtered in a way that excludes certain political points of view.<sup>18</sup> The size, dynamic nature and low communication cost of the Internet and social media have allowed alternative actors such as the popular comedian turned 'anti-politician', Beppe Grillo, to bypass these filters and communicate directly with citizens. Starting with his blog, Grillo has successfully used social media to raise issues, respond to news, publicise meetings, mobilise citizens at grassroots level and recruit new supporters. He has developed his Movimento 5 Stelle (M5S) into a significant political force in the space of a few years. Blogs and 'meet-ups' (real-world meetings organised through an SNS) are even singled out as building blocks of the movement in its manifesto, the 'Non-Statute'. In the February 2013 Italian elections, voters gave M5S candidates more than 25% of the popular vote, and elected 108 M5S members of parliament and 54 senators.

#### **Campaign personalisation**

Commentators<sup>19</sup> have noted the increasing personalisation of modern election campaigns. Social media reinforce that trend by putting the emphasis on the individual politician and by focusing on personalities and personal relationships (even in party-oriented electoral systems). Tweets or Facebook updates keep followers and friends

# Social media in election campaigning



informed about what the candidate is currently doing as part of the campaign; photographs or videos of the candidate at events or speaking to constituents are posted on social media afterwards to give a more personal and humanised view of him or her. Personalisation is associated with a higher level of emotional appeal. Such aspects can make messages more likely to be shared with others: tweets that have more emotional content and that contain appraisals of candidates and parties are more likely to be retweeted. 12

Many politicians use social media (Twitter in particular) primarily as a private broadcast channel for one-directional communication (called, in one <u>analysis</u> a 'homestyle information provision strategy'). For example, a small sample of recent Tweets by MEPs showed that <u>84%</u> of them were one-way communications, and only 7% replies to others. This confirms the results of a UK study where the majority of tweets by politicians were essentially broadcasting information, primarily with the aim of mobilising supporters, and only roughly one-quarter were in reply to some other message. While a politician certainly can enter into a real interactive conversation or exchange with voters, this strategy is not without risks. Resources are required to keep up the interaction. Moreover the chance of encountering people opposed to a candidate's position is much greater, and politicians need to be prepared to deal with these so-called 'trolls', even if just by politely ignoring them.

# **Multiplier effects**

Perhaps the most important aspect of social media is the 'network' effect produced when someone who has seen a video, visited a page or read a tweet passes on the same message or a reference to all of their friends or followers. These 'second degree' networks (i.e. followers of followers) may represent weak social ties, but can be very large: the second degree contacts for one Dutch political party and its candidates have been calculated at <a href="mailto:180 million">180 million</a> (a figure admittedly much inflated by media organisations that follow members and in turn have very large numbers of followers).

The extreme case of this network effect is that of a campaign item which 'goes viral', i.e. is distributed or seen by large numbers of social media users in a short period of time. This may be unexpected, e.g. during the 2011 national campaign the Polish People's Party created a song video that generated more than 130 000 views, far more than other political video clips. On the other hand, such amplification may not always be positive: videos of spontaneous campaign comments posted on the Internet were blamed for the defeats of two US Senate candidates, depriving the Republican party of control of the Senate after the 2006 elections.<sup>23</sup>

Experts are divided, however, on how effective these network effects are in convincing voters to cast their ballot for the candidate or party involved. Some<sup>24</sup> fear that social media networks only create 'echo chambers' where messages get passed between likeminded people who are already likely to vote for a given candidate or party. Others<sup>25</sup> point to evidence that social media networks are composed of heterogeneous groups: a given person's friends will not necessarily share their political views, and these friends are more likely to be convinced by someone they know than by a campaign speech or a party leaflet.

# **Effectiveness of social media**

Not all analysts are enthusiastic about social media and its effect on politics and political campaigning: they highlight the capacity of social media to undermine serious

Members' Research Service 140709REV1

# **▶**EPRS

# Social media in election campaigning

deliberation, encourage populist rhetoric and celebrity politics, and erode responsible collective action. <sup>26</sup> Arguably the fundamental question in the EU context is whether social media are effective in mobilising those who are engaged online to become engaged 'offline' (i.e. in the real world) and thereby to reduce democratic deficits.

There are indeed signs of increasing political activism on the Internet and social media. For example, a 2011 UK <u>survey</u> showed that 9% of people had sent an electronic message supporting a political cause and an equivalent number commented on politics in social media; and the percentage of people who signed an online petition <u>doubled</u> between 2007 and 2011 to 14%. A Dutch study also found a positive relation between political internet use and voter turnout.<sup>27</sup>

However a number of experts remain sceptical. <u>Some</u> point to evidence that the most active political users of social media are those who are already committed to political causes. Others<sup>28</sup> find that the internet seems less effective than other media at engaging the disengaged. Still others characterise many social media users as 'slacktivists', i.e. people who are happy enough to make a comment or re-tweet a political message but who are not willing to be otherwise engaged. In the 2010 UK general election, there was an increase in online participation in politics over previous elections (including previously unengaged citizens) but with <u>limited effect</u> on actual voter turnout. Similarly a study<sup>29</sup> of Swedish Facebook users showed that using social media does not drive otherwise politically unengaged users to political engagement. In general terms, EU citizens in five Member States surveyed by the <u>World Internet Project</u> in 2009 and 2012 were among those most sceptical about the positive effect of the internet on the political process.

It will take some time, and further elections, before a clearer picture emerges. The influence of social media use in elections may be different in countries with different size populations and with different political and electoral systems. Nevertheless even motivating a small percentage of the population can (at least in some electoral systems) make a considerable difference to the result of a party or an individual candidate. Certainly an upward trend in citizen participation in European elections due to any media, social or not, would be taken by many as a good sign.

# **Further reading**

How is social media changing politics? / Friends of Europe, 2013.

<u>iPolitics</u>: <u>citizens</u>, <u>elections</u>, <u>and governing in the new media era</u> / R. Fox, J. Ramos, 2012.

Electronic democracy / N. Kersting, 2012.

Social media and democracy: innovations in participatory democracy / B. Loader, D. Mercea, 2012.

<u>Political campaign communication: principles and practices</u> / J. Trent et al., 2011.

#### **Endnotes**

- <sup>1</sup> Preface, In: Social media and democracy: innovations in participatory democracy / B. Loader, D. Mercea, 2012.
- See discussion in Networking democracy? / B. Loader, D. Mercea, In: B. Loader, op. cit., p. 1-5.
- Political campaign communication: principles and practices / J. Trent et al., 2011, p. 368.
- Irrelevant and obsolete? The European Parliament and voters in perspective / J. Lodge, In: The 2009 elections to the European Parliament / J. Lodge, 2010, p. 21.
- Some <u>experts</u> find that some topics have undergone a certain 'Europeanisation' in the media though there are still great gaps.
- <sup>6</sup> Electronic political campaigning / A. Römmele, In: Electronic democracy / N. Kersting, 2012, p. 113.

Members' Research Service 140709REV1

# **▶**EPRS

# Social media in election campaigning

- <sup>7</sup> See summary of evidence in Untangling a complex media system: a comparative study of Twitter linking practices during three Scandinavian election campaigns / H. Moe, A. Larsson, In: Information Communication and Society, v. 16 no 5 (2013), p. 775-794 and discussion in Römmele, op. cit. p. 110.
  - Note however, contrary evidence where *major* party candidates were more likely to be present on the web in Finnish elections in The rise of web campaigning in Finland / T. Carlson, K. Strandberg, In: iPolitics: R. Fox, J. Ramos, 2013, p. 130; and evidence showing prioritised candidates were more likely to use Twitter in the 2010 Dutch elections.
- T. Carlson, op. cit., p. 138.
- Dodging the gatekeepers: social media in the campaign mix during the 2011 Danish elections / M. Skovsgaard, A. van Dalen, In: Information, communication and society, v. 16 no 5 (2013), p. 737-756; Between broadcasting political messages and interacting with voters / T. Graham et al., Information Communication and Society, v. 16 no 5, p. 692-716.
- <sup>10</sup> E-campaigns in Old Europe / U. Gasser, J. Gerlach, In: iPolitics : R. Fox, J. Ramos, 2013, p. 157.
- Digital media and the personalisation of collective action: social technology and the organisation of protests against the global economic crisis / W. L. Bennett, A. Segerberg, In: B. Loader, op. cit., p. 16.
- B. Loader, op.cit., p. 5; What the hashtag? a content analysis of Canadian politics on Twitter / T. Small, In: B. Loader, op. cit., p. 109.
- <sup>13</sup> A. Römmele, op. cit., p. 116-118.
- <sup>14</sup> Römmele, op. cit., p. 121.
- An investigation of influentials and the role of sentiment in political communication on Twitter during election periods / L. Dang-Xuan et al., Information, communication and society, v. 16 no 5 (2013), p. 818.
- <sup>16</sup> J. Trent, op. cit., p. 369.
- <sup>17</sup> The Internet as a new channel for political participation / L. Mosca, In: Democracy in transition: political participation in the European Union / K. Demetriou, 2013, p. 189. See also C. Vaccari, op.cit., p. 77-81.
- 18 C. Vaccari, op.cit., p. 78-79.
- Personalised campaigns in party-centred politics / G. S. Enli, E. Skogerbø, Information, communication and society, v. 16 n. 5 (2013) p. 757-774.
- <sup>20</sup> U. Gasser, op. cit., p. 154.
- <sup>21</sup> L. Dang-Xuan, op. cit., p. 818.
- Between broadcasting political messages and interacting with voters / T. Graham et al., Information, communication and society, v. 16 no 5 (2013), p. 692-716.
- <sup>23</sup> The candidates were George Allen in Virginia and Conrad Burns in Montana. J. Trent, op cit., p 368.
- <sup>24</sup> J. Trent, op. cit., p. 367.
- <sup>25</sup> See discussion in A. Römmele, op. cit., p. 109-110.
- <sup>26</sup> B. Loader, op. cit., p. 5.
- Unravelling the effects of active and passive forms or political Internet use: does it affect citizens' political involvement? / S. Kruikmeier et al., New media and society, 1461444813495163, published online 11 July 2013.
- Online participation: new forms of civic and political engagement or just new opportunities for networked individualism / G. Mascheroni, In: B. Loader, op. cit., p. 216.
- The subtle nature of Facebook politics: Swedish social network site users and political participation / N. Gustafsson, New media and society v. 14 no 7, p. 1111-1127.

#### **Disclaimer and Copyright**

This briefing is a summary of published information and does not necessarily represent the views of the author or the European Parliament. The document is exclusively addressed to the Members and staff of the European Parliament for their parliamentary work. Links to information sources within this document may be inaccessible from locations outside the European Parliament network. © European Union, 2014. All rights reserved.

Photo credits: © Sepia 100 / Fotolia.



http://www.eprs.ep.parl.union.eu http://epthinktank.eu eprs@ep.europa.eu