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PLEASE CITE THE PUBLISHED VERSION

<http://dx.doi.org/10.4324/9781315677569>

PUBLISHER

© Taylor & Francis (Routledge)

VERSION

AM (Accepted Manuscript)

PUBLISHER STATEMENT

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REPOSITORY RECORD

Mazak, Jaromir, and Vaclav Stetka. 2019. "Who's Afraid of Clicktivism? Exploring Citizens' Use of Social Media and Political Participation in the Czech Republic". figshare. <https://hdl.handle.net/2134/22428>.

Who's afraid of clicktivism? Exploring citizens' use of social media and political participation in the Czech Republic

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Abstract

This chapter aims to empirically investigate the connection between online political expression (Gil de Zuniga et al. 2014) and offline political and civic engagement in the context of the 2013 Czech Parliamentary elections. The theoretical context of the chapter is informed by the debates surrounding the role of social network sites and other Web 2.0 applications in facilitating new forms of civic engagement and political participation, and particularly by the concepts of “clicktivism” or “slacktivism” (e.g. Morozov 2009), claiming that online activism is often not being followed or complemented by offline or forms of participation, and that there is no link between digital engagement and citizens’ real-life actions. Driven by the main research question “How does social media use relate to election turnout and other forms of offline political participation?”, this study attempts to test this thesis, using data from a representative survey of the Czech adult population, distributed directly following the 2013 elections. The results suggest that the hypothesis about “clicktivism” is all but unfounded in the context of the Czech social network users, as those politically active online during the campaign are more likely to vote, and engage more often in other traditional participatory activities as well. The analysis further explores the relationship between participation and the use of social media, taking into account other factors such as political interest and political efficacy, with the ambition to provide a more detailed understanding of online political engagement and its determinants.

Introduction¹

The recent explosion of social network sites and other Web 2.0 applications has been accompanied by a rapidly growing body of research exploring their role in civic engagement and political participation. Optimistic perspectives have stressed the potential of these new communication technologies to rejuvenate democracy, mainly by enabling for greater interactivity and user participation in the creation of online political content, as well as by facilitating new forms of civic and political activism (Jenkins 2006; Bruns 2008; Shirky 2008; Castells 2012; Bennett and Segerberg 2013). However, claims about the importance of online media in enhancing citizens' involvement in political affairs and bringing previously disaffected members of the public into the arena of democratic politics soon started to be challenged by more skeptical arguments, according to which online engagement has no connection to (or impact on) the "real life". Denouncing social media activism as "clicktivism" or "slacktivism" (Morozov 2009; White 2010a), these critics have alleged that there is a profound gap between peoples' actions in the online and in the offline world and that engaging in this form of participation might even lead to increasing passivity in relation to offline politics.

Given the increasing adoption of social media by political candidates and parties across the Western world for electoral campaigning (see e.g. Lilleker and Jackson 2010; Larsson and Moe 2012; Strandberg 2013; Gibson 2013), the incentive to study the relationship between online and offline forms of political engagement is obviously even more relevant. However, so far the evidence about whether online and traditional campaign tools mobilize the same kind of people and whether and how the online participatory activities translate into political

¹ This research was supported by the Czech Science Foundation (GACR), Standard Grant Nr 14-05575S – "The Role of Social Media in the Transformation of Political Communication and Citizen Participation in the Czech Republic".

engagement offline has been fragmented and is still rather inconclusive (Boulianne 2009; Gibson and Cantijoch 2013).

Drawing on these debates, this chapter aims to empirically investigate the connection between offline political/civic engagement and a specific form of political engagement carried out in the online environment, namely online political expression (Gil de Zuniga et al. 2014), in the context of the 2013 Czech Parliamentary Elections. Driven by the main research question “*How does social media use relate to election turnout and offline forms of political participation?*”, this study uses data collected by means of a representative survey of the Czech adult population (N = 1,653), distributed directly following the 2013 elections. The analysis further explores the relationship between traditional forms of political participation and the use of social media for online political expression, taking into account other factors such as political interest, political efficacy and social-demographic variables, with the ambition to provide a more detailed understanding of online political engagement and its correlates.

Clicktivism or expressive political action? Participation in the age of social buttons

The intertwined concepts of “clicktivism” / “slacktivism” have been recently popularized as a critical answer to the initial optimistic narratives about the ability of the Internet and social media to uplift and intensify democratic participation and to arm citizens with effective instruments to mobilize for collective action (Gladwell 2010; Popova 2010; White 2010b; Christensen 2011; Zuckerman 2014). For the critics, activities such as signing online petitions, sharing content on social network sites or demonstrating support or solidarity via the “social buttons” (such as Facebook’s “Like” button) represent a low-key or “thin form of engagement” (Halupka 2014: 117) which does not express a full-fledged political

commitment. Instead, its main role is seen in making the Internet users feel good about themselves, while avoiding a “real” involvement which might be more demanding in terms of time and effort. In the words of one of the leading proponents of the slacktivism thesis, Evgeny Morozov, this is an “ideal type of activism for a lazy generation”, giving “to those who participate in ‘slacktivist’ campaigns an illusion of having a meaningful impact on the world without demanding anything more than joining a Facebook group” (Morozov 2009). Aside from allegedly having “zero political or social impact”, Morozov denounces slacktivism for potentially turning people “away from conventional (and proven) forms of activism (demonstrations, sit-ins, confrontation with police, strategic litigation, etc.)” (Morozov 2009). Micah White, one of the Occupy Wall Street initiators, goes even further down this line of thought, expressing an opinion that clicktivism actually damages genuine political movements, alienating potential supporters by an overt reliance on online marketing strategies. As he puts it,

“Digital activism is a danger to the left. Its ineffectual marketing campaigns spread political cynicism and draw attention away from genuinely radical movements.

Political passivity is the end result of replacing salient political critique with the logic of advertising“ (White 2010a).

Notwithstanding such criticism dismissing the impact of clicktivism on offline political behaviour as either negligible or negative, empirical scholarship has been seeking to provide evidence for a spillover effect from online engagement over to offline participation. Using individual web survey data from Norway, Enjolras et al. (2013) found that social media mobilize specific socio-demographic segments and that “participation in Facebook groups has a strong and independent effect on mobilization” (Enjolras et al. 2013: 904). Based on a student survey before the 2008 U.S. presidential elections, Vitak et al. (2011) found that political activity on Facebook is a significant predictor of other forms of political

participation. In response to the need for a more nuanced approach towards examining political participation in the social media environment, the concept of online political expression (or e-expression) has recently been introduced by several authors attempting to describe online activities such as posting or sharing politically relevant comments, befriending or following politicians and candidates – in other words, activities regularly labelled as “clicktivism” – without the negative connotations associated with that term (Rojas and Puig-i-Abril 2009; Gil de Zúñiga, Jung and Valenzuela 2012; Gil de Zúñiga, Molyneux and Zheng 2014). Focusing on “the public expression of political orientations” (Rojas and Puig-i-Abril 2009: 906), this e-expressive mode of participation (Gibson and Cantijoch 2013) has been found by the above quoted studies to be significantly related to political participation both online (through donating money, volunteering, writing emails etc.) and – even more importantly – offline. In light of such findings, Gil de Zúñiga et al. have argued that:

Political discussion in person and offline expression, while not being less important, may now be complemented by supplemental paths to political involvement via social media. This supplementary connection to political expression in social media use is promising for the development of a politically active future, especially for younger people (2014: 627).

However, despite these outcomes indicating a possible rehabilitation of clicktivism as a “legitimate political action” (Halupka 2014), existing research is far from providing a clear-cut answer concerning the link between political expression on social media platforms and other forms of political engagement. This study attempts to contribute to this still emerging research territory by examining the above mentioned relationship using empirical data from the Czech Republic, a country where social media have only very recently started playing a more significant role in political communication. Inspired by the pioneering campaign of the presidential candidate Karel Schwarzenberg in January 2013, which was particularly

successful in mobilizing young voters via Facebook (Štětka, Macková and Fialová 2014), most politicians and political parties lifted pace in adoption of social media for electoral communication. In consequence, the 2013 Parliamentary Elections campaign, which took place less than a year after the Presidential Election, was marked by the intensive use of Facebook by the majority of relevant parties (see Štětka and Vochocová 2014). Such situation has given us an opportunity to empirically analyze the responsiveness of the Czech citizens to the electoral mobilization via social network sites by parties and candidates, as well as to examine the intensity of political use of social media by the Czech online population.

Research aims and methods

Drawing on the above presented theoretical framework, the main aim of our study was to investigate if there is a link between online political expression during the election campaign and traditional forms of political participation among Czech Facebook users. Following the above quoted studies (Rojas and Puig-i-Abril 2009; Vitak et al. 2011; Gil de Zúñiga, Jung and Valenzuela 2012; Gil de Zúñiga, Molyneux and Zheng 2014) we expected (H1) that online political expression during the campaign will be positively correlated with traditional, mostly offline forms of political participation. Online political expression was measured using a composite index of altogether nine selected activities during the 2013 Parliamentary Elections on Facebook (liking politician's or party post; commenting on a friend's contribution about the campaign; sharing contributions by politicians or political parties; becoming a fan of a politician or a political party, commenting on posts by politicians or political parties; adding comments or information concerning elections on one's own profile; becoming a fan of another political initiative related to elections) and on Internet discussion forums (reading online forums about the elections; contributing to these forums). For

traditional forms of political participation we included following variables: discussing politics offline; signing petitions; attending a demonstration; attending a local community-related gathering; working for a club or local organization; and finally voting in the 2013 Parliamentary Elections.

Furthermore, we decided to include political interest as a control variable in our analysis. Political interest has been traditionally considered an important resource for political participation (Brady, Verba and Schlozman 1995; Norris 2000) and recent empirical studies have confirmed that this relationship extends into the domain of online participation as well (Vitak et al. 2011; Boulianne 2011; Holt et al. 2013). In tackling the slacktivism thesis, we therefore wanted to see if the expected correlations between online political expression and traditional forms of political participation will still hold when controlling for declared political interest.

The second goal of this study was to propose an exploratory typology based on combining people's electoral participation and their online political expression and then to test whether different clusters of respondents (particularly those who go to the elections *and* display at least some level of online political expression versus the rest) differ in selected other characteristics, namely political efficacy (measured by the question whether people can change anything by participating in elections, as well as by the question whether there is a political party in the country sufficiently representing the respondent's opinions) and using preferential voting in the 2013 Parliamentary Elections. Following previous studies on online participation which have included measures of political efficacy (Gil de Zúñiga, Jung and Valenzuela 2012; Lariscy, Tinkham and Sweetser 2011; Jung, Kim and Gil de Zúñiga 2011) we expected (H2) that high political efficacy will be positively correlated to voting participation and online political expression.

The data set we drew on in this study was obtained by means of a quota sample (N = 1,653) representative of the adult Czech population with regards to region (NUTS 3), size of residence, gender, age and education. However, since our indicator of online political expression was primarily based on activities displayed by Facebook users during the election campaign period, we only used the subset of Facebook users (N = 743) for our analysis.² The survey was administered using face-to-face interviews between 28 October and 11 November 2013, immediately following the early Parliamentary elections that took place on 25 – 26 October 2013. Table 2.1 shows the socio-demographic distribution of the sample as well as shares of the Internet and Facebook users within individual socio-demographic categories. For example, among the 298 people in the sample aged 65 and more, 24 % use the Internet and 9 % use the Facebook. This means that about one in three Internet users in this age category also uses Facebook.

[INSERT TABLE 2.1 HERE]

Table 2.1 Sample distribution and shares of Internet/Facebook users within individual socio-demographic categories

Testing the relationship between online political expression and traditional forms of political participation

In order to study online political expression, we asked the respondents (Facebook users only) whether they engaged during the election campaign period in the following specific activities on Facebook and online discussion forums. The prevalence of these activities is displayed in Figure 2.1.

² The alternative solution – to include all respondents regardless of their internet use – might result in mislabelling a significant number of people as politically inactive online, while the primary reason for their lack of online political participation would be in fact the decision not to use Facebook or the Internet in the first place.

[INSERT FIGURE 2.1 HERE]

**Figure 2.1: Prevalence of online political expression in the election campaign period
(Facebook users only, N = 743)**

As the graph shows, the most predominant activities on Facebook in response to the election campaign were “liking” politician’s (or a political candidate’s) status – the sort of activity most often mentioned when illustrating the phenomenon of slacktivism (Fuchs 2013) – and commenting on an election-related status by friends. However, reading discussions under Internet news articles about the elections has been by far the most frequent activity of all, with almost half of the sub-sample (45 %) of Facebook users engaging in it.

The dependent variable in our model was derived from a composite index constructed from the nine items in Figure 2.1 (Cronbach alpha 0.83) representing online political expression.³ For the purpose of our statistical model, the index of online political expression has been transformed into three levels:

- No online political expression (45 % of Facebook users)⁴
- Lower online political expression (one or two of the nine items in the Figure 2.1 during the campaign; 31 % of Facebook users)
- Higher online political expression (at least three of the nine items, 24 % of Facebook users)

³ The reason why the online political expression is dependent whereas traditional, mostly offline forms of political participation are independent variables is purely technical – we do not propose any causality by the model, rather we examine the mutual association between these variables.

⁴ The total here is 731, not 743 as some Facebook users did not answer at least seven of the nine items, which was our arbitrary condition for inclusion.

Before inspecting the dependency model, we take a closer look at the independent variables. Table 2.2 shows percentage of Facebook users who claim to have pursued the selected forms of traditional political participation (first column) and the predictive capacity of these items in relation to online political expression (second column).

[INSERT TABLE 2.2 HERE]

Table 2.2: Traditional participatory activities and their predictive capacity in relation to online political expression

Whereas only 55 % of Facebook users in the sample engaged in some sort of online political expression before the elections, this number rises to 74 % for those who signed a petition in the 12 months prior to the survey and is even higher for those who attended a demonstration or discussed politics offline. All the individual forms of traditional political participation in the Table 2.2 show positive association with online political expression.

Do these positive relationships hold when we control for the influence of declared interest in politics? The interest in politics was measured using four categories in the survey, but we had to transform them into three due to the low number of respondents very much interested in politics. The resulting three-level variable had the following distribution for the subset of Facebook users: higher interest (combining the original categories “very much interested” and “quite a bit interested”) = 19 %, lower interest = 54 %, no interest = 28 %.

Due to the fact that the dependent variable (online political expression) was coded as an ordered categorical variable with three categories, we have used ordinal logistic regression to statistically test our model.⁵

⁵ Model PLUM in SPSS, test of parallel lines chi-square = 17; df = 13, p = 0.20.

The final model is displayed in Table 2.3. Even when controlling for the strong influence of declared interest in politics, traditional forms of political participation – discussing politics offline at least once a week, signing a petition in the previous 12 months and attending a demonstration in the previous 12 months – were all by themselves significant predictors of online political expression during the election campaign. Voting in the elections is also significantly positively associated with online political expression. This suggests that one of the main assumptions of the hypothesis about clicktivism which argues that pressing the “like button” is rarely accompanied by showing up for elections, does not find much support in our data, according to which voting is associated with online political expression even when we control for the remaining variables in the model.

On the other hand, neither attending public gatherings on local community issues, nor working for a local club or organization in the previous twelve months turned out to be significant predictors of online political expression during elections in the model.

[INSERT TABLE 2.3 HERE]

Table 2.3: Ordinal logistic regression analysis with online political expression as dependent variable (population: Facebook users, N = 686)

While declared political interest is clearly indicative of higher online engagement, the standard control variables of gender, age and education do not seem to be very important for explaining online political expression. Of all these three variables, only age has some statistically significant effect: older Facebook users are somewhat less likely to be politically active online.

To estimate the size effects of the individual variables when controlling for all the other variables in the model, see the odds ration column in Table 2.3. It explains that, for example,

the likelihood of higher online political expression is 8 times (2.5 times) greater for people with higher (lower) political interest than people with no political interest. Due to the nature of the ordinal logistic regression model, the same can be said for the joint likelihood of higher and lower online political expression.

Towards a typology of online political expression and voting behaviour

In the previous section, we have demonstrated that our cross-sectional data indicate a positive association between online political expression and at least some forms of traditional, mostly offline political participation (voting, demonstration, petition, discussing politics offline) as well as declared interest in politics. Our further goal was to conduct an exploratory analysis of a typology based on a combination of online political expression and voting as the arguably most important form of traditional political participation. Not only did we want to see how often online political expression and voting actually concur among the Facebook users during the campaign, but we were especially interested in examining how the people who participate by casting the ballot as well as by making politically related expressions on Facebook differ from those who either only go to the elections, or only express themselves online, or do none of these activities.

Our typology is based on a simple quadrant scheme (Table 2.4). For online political expression, we only differentiate between those who positively replied to any one of the nine items in Figure 2.1 and the others.

[INSERT TABLE 2.4 HERE]

Table 2.4: Online political expression vs. voting behaviour: typology and frequencies

Looking at the outcomes, it is clear that voting and online political expression concur fairly often during the campaign. More than two thirds of the Facebook users who cast the ballot also engaged in at least some form of online political expression. Among the non-voters, the ratio is the opposite: only less than a third of them engaged in online political expression.

With regards to the results from the regression model presented in the previous part of this chapter, it does not come as much of a surprise that expressive voters show much higher levels of declared political interest than all the remaining groups (35 % of them claim to be very or quite a lot interested in politics as opposed to 7 % among non-expressive voters and 3 % among both the other two categories of our typology). However, it turns out that they are also quite different when it comes to the issue of political efficacy, measured by asking the respondents whether they thought voting for a certain party “can change anything”. The expressive voters in the sample perceived voting as more effective than the other groups, as shown in the following Figure 2.2.

[INSERT FIGURE 2.2 HERE]

Figure 2.2: Political efficacy – can voting in the elections change anything?

Similarly, expressive voters are much more likely than the others to think that some party expresses their own opinions and attitudes well enough. Specifically, 64 % of expressive voters answered “yes” in this binary question as opposed to 39 % of non-expressive voters, 24 % of expressive non-voters and only 8 % of non-expressive non-voters.

Furthermore, when we compare only expressive and non-expressive voters in their usage of preference votes, enabling voters to select individual candidates on the party's ballot as opposed to accepting the order of candidates as suggested by the party, there is again a notable difference. Whereas 44 % of the expressive voters claim to have used the preference votes, this only holds for 25 % of non-expressive voters in the sample. As long as preference votes can be considered an indicator of a better informed or at least more engaged voting, online political expression is positively associated with it.

Discussion and conclusions

The results of this study, as displayed above, suggest that the use of social media for political expression is positively correlated with some forms of traditional, mainly offline political participation, thereby lending support to our first hypothesis (H1). Furthermore, our study has offered some more in-depth insights into the relationship between these two forms of political participation by demonstrating that the cluster of “expressive voters” – that is those voters actively engaging in online political expression during the campaign – are also more likely to display higher levels of political efficacy (believing that voting in elections will make a difference) and also to use the instrument of preferential voting more often than their fellow citizens who are not active online during the campaign. It is also worth stressing that our analysis found a positive relationship between online political expression and respondents' declared political interest, which remains strong even when controlling for the selected types of traditional political participation.

How can these findings inform the contemporary discussion about the validity of the concept of clicktivism? Even though we obviously cannot address all aspects featured in the rather complex debate, as outlined in the first part of our chapter, we have demonstrated that the

same people who engage in relatively effortless politically expressive activities such as mere liking, sharing or commenting online political content, can be also considered as more engaged citizens when it comes to the more traditional forms of participation, particularly attending demonstrations, signing petitions or debating politics outside of the Internet. While this might seem to be a rather minor empirical challenge to an arguably broader theoretical thesis, it directly questions one of its cores assumptions, namely that there is a deep gap between being politically active in the SNS environment and in the “real world”. In our opinion, the evidence is compelling enough to allow us to argue that the clicktivism thesis in its crudest version – portraying Facebook political enthusiasts as disconnected from offline participatory mechanisms and practices – has little ground when tested against our data.

By rejecting this assumption, based on our data from the 2013 Czech Parliamentary Elections, we of course do not want to go as far as to claim that online political expression itself paves way for other types of participatory activities, including voting. The cross-sectional design of our study did not enable for testing of the possible causal effect of online participation on offline engagement, as did some other studies, such as Holt et al. (2013) in their panel study, so our findings must remain on the level of establishing correlation between these activities. Another limitation of our study which we duly acknowledge concerns the fact that it was set within the rather specific period of the election campaign. While we found out that expressing political stances via Facebook’s social buttons during the campaign is positively correlated with subsequent voting as well as other offline participatory activities, we are also aware of the fact that the time of the campaign usually increases citizens’ interest in politics and the levels of their engagement. Future research should therefore target more routine periods of the election cycle and examine whether the Internet users – and particularly those from among the group of voters – will continue to be politically active online and use social

network sites for political expression even without the additional stimulation provided by electoral mobilization.

Despite these limitations, we believe the outcomes of our study add to the growing amount of empirical support for the argument that online political expression on social media platforms should be viewed as an activity which is complementing, rather than substituting, offline forms of civic and political engagement (e.g. Gil de Zúñiga et al. 2014). The fact that the number of Facebook users we called “expressive voters” in our sample turned out to be more than four times higher than the number of “expressive non-voters” (that is, those “clicktivists” who do not transfer their online engagement with the campaign into casting a ballot) suggests that the alleged divide between online and offline modes of political participation is probably much smaller than sometimes predicted (or even feared), at least when it comes to the electoral behaviour. Therefore, instead of disdaining social buttons as instruments of participation, we think further research should rather seek inspiration by those who propose to treat clicktivism as a legitimate political act (see Halupka 2014), and focus on more detailed explorations of the particular ways and mechanisms through which online activism, and especially the one exercised via social network sites, translates into offline political and civic engagement.

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