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A look at the United States voter turnout

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American Government

May 4th, 2012

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Robert D. Putnam coined and studied the *social capital* to understand, as he starts off his book, "Why do some democratic governments succeed and others fail" (3). Certainly there is a correlation between communities that actively participates on impacting the government, but to what extent exactly? It is imperative to understand the direction of a society with respect to how they care to interact with the governmental institution to quantify progression of the community as a whole. If this is possible, then Putnam's theory can be applied to the current state of voting and elections in the United States. Voter turnout and civic engagement has been declining, and the national interest has been deeply polarized between a "black and white" perspective on issues that strip away the details and opportunity of conversation and of discussion. Yet these are voices that argue too much democratic participation is unhealthy as well where Americans who do not have a deep understanding of how politics work may end up abandoning democratic views all together (Carmines et al., 330). Regardless, citizens with consistency in their beliefs and party affiliations constitute a small portion of the American electorate (333).

Evolution of the American voter and the political party

The bipartisan system has undergone considerable change in the previous few decades to produce the modern Republican and Democratic parties. However there is general direction that is consistent with both of these parties: the utilization of partisan polarization. While looking at this more generally, it is usually the "liberals" or "blue states" on the left side of this single-ideological spectrum and the "conservatives" or

"red states" in the right end (Carmines et al, 330). These extreme attitudes are generally

dangerous and force a democracy to conform to a policy or an agenda without truly

standing for it. This paper aims to look at these issues of bipartisan polarization and

whether it affects political engagement of American citizens. Studying the role of history

on American politics allows us to understand why certain groups of voters turn out

more for elections.

We look now at whether these extreme behaviors from institution have swayed

the so-called health of the American democracy. To begin, extreme behaviors in a

democracy allow an unrepresented majority to be established (Carmines et al., 330).

This loud majority forces the public to misinterpret this behavior as a "culture war."

However, "ideologically consistent" people that hold similar broad issues offered by

party elites may find it less challenging to engage in the political process (331) --

quantitatively we discuss this with a modern example below. In a study of data from the

American National Election Studies (ANES) from 1972 to 2004, there are two patterns

that emerge, as studied by Carmines et al in 2011. One, people with "orthodox issue

positions" such as consistently conservative or liberal in their preferences of economic

and social issues thereof are concluded to participate more in at least campaign

activities (331). While, people of heterodox preferences for their institution are

concluded to participate in fewer activities (331). However, more striking is that

moderist are concluded to participate in lesser frequencies than their liberal or

conservative counterparts (331). With these conclusions in mind, we gain some insight

as to why voter turnout is consistent with current poll records. The importance of this

issue is certainly beyond quantitative studies, it is necessary for a government to correctly reflect its society and the society to be correctly represented by its government. Voter turn-out generally is differentiated based on different ideological types. Majority of the 1970s included a gain in *cultural* liberals voters (342).

Using *Twitter* to understand patterns in voter and candidate participation in U. S.

Elections

The youth voter turn out is perhaps more interesting to look at. As recent at 2008, the infamous U.S Presidential Campaign of Barak Obama sought to gain voter participation by utilizing novel sources of media that were not used by Presidential candidates in history. Twitter, a micro-blogging *social networking* web-app with 190 million registered users has gained considerable attention as a tool for studying social networks and opens a new chapter of studying society by mining Twitter data by applying statistical models to *tweets*. *Tweets* are a production of the webapp, where users are limited to a 140-character discussion. In a study by Livne et al (2011), data generated by Twitter from House, Senate or state governor seats from the U.S. 2010 election is mined to understand how effective each party is at using media to gain party support and convey party agendas. The database studied included 687 users, 339 Democrats, 348 Republicans with a subset of 95 members of the Tea Party (202). Indeed, *Twitter* is of interest as it has been shown to allow discussion than one-way-communications while tweets can be traced to study influential users among its multi-million user-base – thus deeming it is a *social sensor* (Livene et.al 202).

This study concludes that a more dense and increased messaging profile among conservative party members. The Republican party made considerable gains during the 2010 midterm election, and it is also concluded that they also ran a stronger social campaign (207). The mechanics of twitter networking is further studied to conclude that a correlation exists between dense graph of followers, number of tweets, and discussion of issues such as economic issues in tweets and winning elections. The Democratic party candidates conformed to a less dense network and topics that were less coherent overall (207). Furthermore, candidates whose tweets were more centered in their views were consistent a correlation to victory while candidates with more opposition or "extremist" views may not have been.

Social Networks in a democracy, and social issues related to freedom of speech

Every generational divide is given a name, such as the Baby Boomers, or Generation X. In the current era, the culture has moved away from the traditional family values to incorporate billions of people that now inhabited the earth, and is now connected by virtue of the Internet. With different communication mediums such as the World Wide Web and instant messaging, information and sharing is directly available with much more ease than ever before. Family and friends can still engage in long conversations at a fraction of the cost, courtesy of technologies such as Voice over IP, used by companies that made Skype possible. Instant messaging made texting over the phone possible, was a technology that had existed since the days of the 14.4k modems. As the technology advances, so do their uses, and so there is a direct consequence of its

impacts on the media.

As there are now many more ways to showcase thoughts and opinions, it is becoming an absolute requirement that those who are eligible to vote seek out the knowledge made so readily available to them, and to form an opinion on certain issues as they serve as pillars that support the nation. Broadcast mediums such as news and political talk shows have a powerful voice that can shift the public opinion, but they are crucial and important as they help form an opinion for those that may not have one. Those that disagree with what they hear would feel a need to attend the voting booths and cast their vote to exemplify their right as a citizen, and to make a political stand. This is, however, not always the case as many listeners tend to become dismayed with the thoughts of pundits and feel that their vote will not issue the kind of change they so firmly want (or need). Social networks play a major role in activism, and a major one being Net Neutrality that affects nearly every end user of a web browser. Without the anonymity and privacy that the internet inherently employs, what purpose will the ability to speak your mind serve? Personal blogs that speak from the perspective of a "Regular Joe" allow one to observe a lifestyle they may not have heard of before, as well as to put themselves in the shoes of the disenfranchised so they can help amplify a voice that is not being heard. As stated earlier, the act of voting is a national right, and those who visit the polls on voting days are exercising their rights as citizens.

Returning to the *social capital*

Putnam writes in *Making democracy work* (1993) on institutions:

are devices for achieving purposes, not just for achieving agreement. We want

government to do things, not just decide things – ot educate children, pay

pensioners, stop crime, create jobs, hold down prices, encourage family

values, and so on. We do not agree on which of these things is most urgent,

nor how they should be accomplished, nor even whether they are all

worthwhile. All but the anarchists among us, however, agree that at least

some of the time on at least some issues, action is required of government

institutions. This fact must inform the way we think about success and failure

(8-9)

 Further, he states, "the conception of institutional performance...rests on a very simple

model of governance: societal demands -> political interaction -> government -> policy

choice -> implementation" (9). With this definition of an institution in mind, we look at

how prospective voters respond to policies -- either by trying to impact their

government or by a non-action.

       We have discussed the relative and absolute dangers of polarizing issues.

Furthermore, institutions and their failure to treat individuals results in the outset of a

confused heterodox populous, that either get mislabeled as moderates or are cut out of

the discussion as a hole -- a product of the "black and white" media preferences.

Putnam writes, "A region's chance of achieving socioeconomic development during this

century have depended less on its initial socio economic endowments than on its civic

endowments. This system of institutions, which has held its course since the middle

ages of local regimes with local civic commitment, was essential to create a network in

society. The contemporary correlation between civics and economics reflects primarily

the impact of civics on economics, not the reverse" (Putnam 157). There is a necessity of

the social capital and voter turn out is essential to ensure social and civic endowments.

Table 1. "Twitter mining: Top terms" (Livne et al 2011)

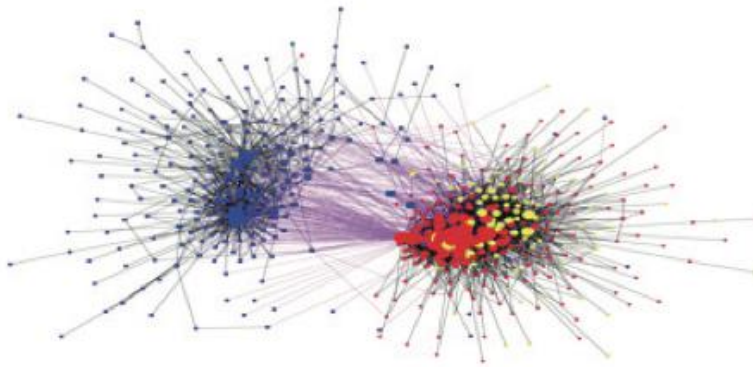| Democrat	Rep-TP	Tea Party
education	spending	barney_frank
jobs	bills	conservative
oil_spill	budget	tea_party
clean_energy	wsj (wall street journal)	clinton
afghanistan	bush	nancy_pelosi
reform	deficit	obamacare

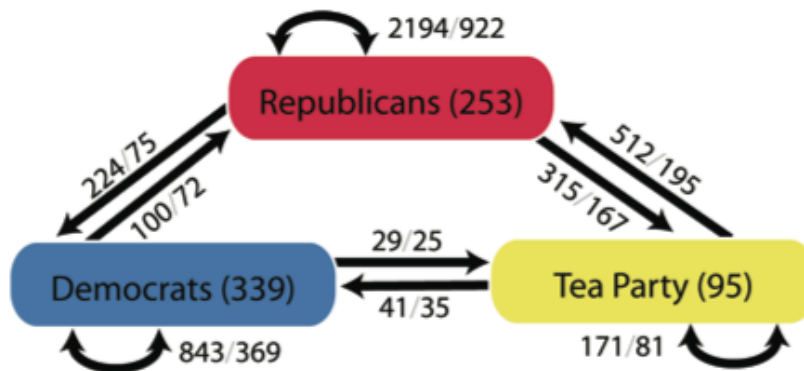**Figure 1. "Plot of candidate network" (Livne et al. 2011)**

Figure 2 "Explicit follower edges and nodes with unique mentions though @" (Livne et al. 2011)

Works Cited

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