Twitter and Politics

These examples of issues facing Canada are not meant to be exhaustive of every single election topic, only to be illustrative of the some of political, social, and economic contexts in which the election occurred. These issues are all relevant to the election and Canadian political process, but what is of particular importance to this work is how people discuss these issues, and how that discussion can be mapped along a narrative. One way people discuss political matters is via the internet, and on channel through which they do that is Twitter. Twitter is a fairly commonly used micro-blogging social network, where in 140 characters or less users can share their thoughts, feelings, and opinions with the world. This makes Twitter a fairly unique tool for politics, since discussion is limited in some ways and cast to a large enough audience. Many have thought that Twitter has a significant impact on the political process and in this case political analysis (Small, 2011 & Tumasjen, 2010 & Choy, 2011 & Wang, 2012 & Eltantawny and Wiest, 2011).

While certainly not the intent of this work, to illustrate its political salience there is some existing work which suggests the discussions on Twitter may be good predictors of the outcome of elections. Tumasjen (2010) from Germany has some work on sentiment analysis of tweets, closely related to the type of methodology which is used in this project, which suggests that sentiment of Tweets in an issue is actually a fairly good predictor of the preferences of voters. While this is certainly not to say that polls can be fully replaced by tweets, it is interesting to see it as a microcosm of the social world reflected in tweets. This isn't the only work, Wang (2012) has done a very similar process for American elections, finding much of the same results. One interesting note that will be taken up later is that this analysis would be impossible maintaining the same types of limitations imposed on this work. Prediction is not totally impossible too, Choy (2011) found that by using Twitter they could fairly accurate predict the top contenders for elections in Singapore. One thing to note about the existing work that is done, is that it varies on degrees of openness of technique and software. As will be explained later, this openness is of fundamental importance to digital methodology.

One of the most well-known examples of the influence that Twitter has on the political process is the 2011 Egyptian Revolution. Unlike this project, the impact that Twitter was said to have on the political process was not only to discussion, but also to political organization (Schwarz, 2011). The political process itself in Egypt is different than the one studied in this project. While this project studies an official federal election, the case in Egypt was a full blown revolution. This meant there are factors which make it a very different case. None the less, it’s important to note some of the existing findings from these studies because they can show how important Twitter can be to politics. During a revolution, one of the most significant factors in it's failure or success is resource mobilization(Jenkins, 1983 & Walsh, 1981 & Anduiza, 2014 & Theocharis, 2013, & Edwards, 2013), which is something that Eltantawny and Wiest (2011) found to be a fairly significant point of salience for Twitter. The platform allowed for mass organization and execution of social movements like boycotts protests and demonstrations. Not just Egypt, but around the world also because Twitter is a global platform there were countless 'solidarity' movements in countries around the globe (Wikipedia, 2015). Part of this global nature of these movements is thought by some to have sparked the Arab spring, contributing to many of the issues which face the Canadian election in more recent years.

Another fairly significant factor to political processes is dissemination of information, and even more so to something like a revolution in Egypt. We are All Kalhed Said (Eltantawny, 2011) was a Facebook group dedicated to one activist who was killed, this was thought to be a precipitating factor for the Egyptian revolution(Jaradaliyya, 2012). This group quickly became a digital vector of information about the protests to pass through, often giving activists near real-time information about what is happening in many parts of the country and at protests. Although this group was on a different platform, the capability is there for Twitter just readily as it is for Facebook. The biggest influence that a platform like Twitter has on the political process is this, the speed and scope of information and discussion.

In Egypt there were a number of dangers associated with the digital discussions that are worth discussing briefly. First, the revolutions may have grown too attached to the digital platforms. This was a fairly big problem during the revolution, the government had the power to cut internet access across the country and decided to excersize that(The Gaurdian, 2011, BBC, 2011). What this meant is that much of the protester’s lines of communication were cut and without the infrastructure to make more resliant versions of these communication lines the protest would not last a particularly long time. This was a problem for a few days in Egypt, but eventually the internet was back on, but it does warrant activist's introspection about depending on something state owned when protesting the state. There is also the problems of spying and tracking, which can be prevelant in all forms of public discussion. Spying is really only possible when the identities of people are reveled in their discussion, an issue which can be mitigated much better online with digital anonymity. Protestors discussing on Twitter are not anonymous however, often underestimating their digital footprint. This means a government can theoretically track a protestor despite their efforts, and while not much of an issue in Canada, during an Egyptian revolution opposing a dictator it can be critical. Finally, there is the problem of astroturfing, which is the act of faking an opinion in a public forum to give the illusion of the number of opposing views(Cho, 2011 & Zhang, 2013 & Lee, 2010$). What this really means for digital discussion is that information passed so quickly through these channels is incredibly difficult to verify, and from that it makes trust a fairly difficult thing to have. Again, much of these problems in Egypt are not particularly important for an official election, but they do shed some light on the types of ways in which Twitter is salient to the political process.

Twitter still plays a role in the Western world, where revolutions are significantly less common and more regulated political processes happen. When Barack Obama was elected President of the United States in 2008, and then again in 2012 it was thought that much of his success came from his contributions to online discussion (Cogburn, 2011 & Shirky, 2011). This is of course not to say that he won because he tweeted and updates a Facebook status, since he probably doesn't do that himself anyway. But much like Kennedy's success might be in part due to his television appeal, it is important in the contemporary political landscape to have a digital prescence (Piasecki, 2009 & Time, 2010). While uncertain at this time, its still possible to see similar trends in the 2016 election, with most candidates spending a good amount of time contouring their digital personas. Much of the work being done in this project has already been done for the 2012 presidential elections, though it is important to note that this work was done with a far smaller budget than those projects and much of the findings cannot be as confidently stated as theirs.

And now Canada is starting their own election, which no doubt will be discussed on Twitter and is the subject of this project. A lot of discussion and political influence has sprung up in the online domain regarding the election, and one of the topics which centers this discussion is the “ABC vote. Having had the same prime minister for a decade, and being thought to have a good shot at winning another election, many non-conservative voters feel that it is time for a new prime minister leading to the popular stop harper catch phrase prevelant online[[1]](#footnote-2). While these kinds of political discussion were not only on Facebook, some of the properties of Facebook loaned themselves to fuller discussion. The limit on how long a post can be on Facebook is considerably larger than the 140 characters that one finds on Twitter, which means people can express fuller opinions. Also people can reply in line with comments to posts that people make, including news storys, and it is much easier to isolate whole discussions in one place. Having lived in Alberta, and most of my own social network existing there it was especailly relevant during the large amounts of oilfield layoffs, many of the people laid off and their families were ready to share their experiences and in long form($).

It is very easy to think that Twitter and digital social media represent a major change to how the political process occurs, but it is important to temper that with realism. Yaroslav Baran feels this way, that these types of communication mediums represent an evolution, not a revolution, of the political process. Much of the online communication that happens online can be thought of for politicians as a potential hazard more than it is a site of good PR(Baran, 2011). This comes from the decreased ability of polticians and campaigns to control the amount of information that gets released online, meaning it is much harder to control an politicans image. There is also the problem that digital media doesn't reach all parts of a nation equally. It can be thought that digital media in this way really only reaches the young, since they are most often on the more bleeding edge of these types of technologies(Statistia, 2014 & Pew 2014 & Statistics Canada, 2010). This means that many of the messages that can happen online are likely to be targeted towards a younger audience, traditionally this demographic voters closer to the left and so the discussion online should have somewhat of a left leaning bias($). While this isn't nessecarily a problem, it does mean that the discussion will be somewhat biased, and therefore much of the findings of this project too will be biased. Again, this is not a fundamental problem, but an external force that should be noted before claiming some major objective findings.

1. http://stopharper.ca/ [↑](#footnote-ref-2)