

Social Media and Digital Participation in Politics

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Key words: Social media, participation, digital participation, statistical analysis, political participation

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Page No.: 108-111

Volume: 16, Issue 6, 2021

ISSN: 1818-5800

The Social Sciences

Copy Right: Medwell Publications

Abstract: The objective of the study is to investigate the influence of social media and digital participation in politics of the first time eligible voters in 2019, university students in Thailand. The 29 items of a questionnaire was developed from literature review and tested validity (KMO = 0.899, 0.937) and reliability (Alpha = 0.89, 0.92) and collected 400 respondents of the university students before the election in March, 2019 in Thailand. The statistical analysis are variance analysis and Stepwise Multi Regression analysis. Facebook, Twitter and Instagram are social media usage in this study. The results revealed that the sub-variables of social media usage such as time in using social media (Sm4) and sharing like (Sm12) and sub-variables of political participation in terms of supporting activity (Sa), voting and following information (Ei), predicted significantly at 0.05, on digital participation in politics. Moreover, these 4 sub-variables also demonstrated moderately the coefficient at $R^2 = 0.43, 0.36, 0.009$ and 0.023 , respectively, to digital participation in politics. Consequently, the utilizing of Facebook and Twitter for the benefits of political participation should be related mainly to solving the civic problems.

INTRODUCTION

The global diffusion of social media and the mobile phone, a part of digital network capacity is another channel of communication causing social movement and shaping individualism including a model of digital political participation^[1]. The digital technology accommodates the public with easy access to participate in politics in communications and civic engagement. They are able to link to politicians creating digital democracy as a result^[2]. Given the technological advancement as a backdrop, the internet role in relation to political

participation and the civic engagement has been studied widely among social sciences scholars. Social movements in political events very often use internet or social media as a tool employed to encourage social movements and political participation or civic engagement. It is being used due to the fact that internet usage involves minimum costs and efficient in communication diffusion to mass users^[3]. The rapid change in digital technology has brought about media convergence, interactivity, diminishing role of traditional media and blogosphere^[4]. Dimitrova and Bystrom^[5] further explained that online media continued to building on participatory culture.

Hence, the participatory culture in Thai politics has been change when the coup d'état in September 2006 leading to the Thai Rak Thai party dissolution and the reborn of People Power Party and subsequently was dissolved and Puea Thai Party was established. Another coup incidence occurred in May 2014 and the new constitution was passed in 2017 which led to the proliferation of political parties, such as Seriruum Thai, New Economics Party, People Reform Party, Puea Chart Party and Future Forward Party and the general election was held in March 2019. The widespread use of technological products such as the smartphone and networks and technological methods outdated the traditional methods such as newsprints, radios and television media.

The Future Forward Party has successfully employed higher forms of technology to reach out its voters giving rise to openness in politics and the subsequent political matters become a concern for the Thais^[6]. Consequently, politicians in Thailand and another countries use to create politics information and interacted with their audiences through Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube or Line^[7].

Social networking and political participation: Ferrel^[8] has concluded that social network site or social media site, another communication channel via. the internet, has an impact on users' behavior and the outcome of using social media data is inducing users to participate in different ways. The use of internet is no longer a personal matter but rather the social activities. The users usually engage in online platform or social media platform which they easily build social inference for subsequent social capital development and eventually will push for political participation^[9].

Moreover, in Thailand, the Facebook users via smartphones have reached 37 million in terms of daily traffic inside. Facebook users in Thailand classified by age groups and gender, those whose ages between 18-24, 25-34 and 35-44 accounted the most. The male to female ratio is about the same^[10]. Besides, tweeter is also another social network platform, a microblogging type. The users can share the messages which cannot exceed 140 characters, easy of spreading messages to a large number of users in a few seconds. A survey of internet user behavior in Thailand by the Ministry of Digital Economy and Society in 2018 revealed that the average Thai person spent 10 h and 5 min every day on the internet increased from 3 h and 30 min in 2017.

The Thai population in 2018 was 66,294,064 and the percentage of mobile phone users was 188.22 per one person. This shows that each person owned more than one cellular phone numbers. The online internet users are

Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, accounted for 93.6% of all mobile phone users. Within a total population of 66 million people in Thailand, 51 million are Facebook users which gives Thailand ranking the 8th of the world. Online activities available for Thai internet users are receiving-sending an email, data searching, watching TV, watching videos, listening to music and online shopping^[11].

Importantly, the critical channel of using internet for social network or social media related to political participation is becoming complicated^[12]. The interaction among users through social network channel, participation as such is political activities. The users may intend to receive political information from their own searching or political information posted in the social network with their opinions expressed, this is considered political activities^[13]. Throcharis and Van Deth^[14] further added that using internet online activities creating a new model of participation is different from traditional model of participation such as information posting, commenting and online sharing. These online activities are the principal reason effecting a digital political participation. Boulianue^[15] argued that internet neither positively nor negatively influence political engagement. His findings were consistent with the study of Young^[16] which found out that blogging or email messages have no influence on political engagement of the youth ages between 15-25 years. However, his research was inconsistent with the study of the youths in North America and Europe. Esser and De Vriess^[17] confirmed that, from their study, communication via the internet has influenced political participation. Furthermore, the channel of social media usage for engaging in political activities of youth were seen in terms of seeking political information and interact with colleague enhancing new model of participation in politics^[14]. The new model of political participation refers to the online activities such as posting, commenting, online sharing, contact politician and signing petition^[18]. Meanwhile, the traditional political participation contributed in the actions of donating money, protesting, campaigning and voting^[19, 20].

Macafee^[21] revealed that social media stimulate political interest and subsequently joined political activities. In the social network, the most popular pages the users post include link, comment and 'like' relating to political items, particularly using twitter and re-tweet for engaging political activities or replying. Online users who share their political information would normally be interested and support politics more than those who do not share political information^[22].

This research emphasized on the influence of social media on digital political participation of the youth voters likely the university student in Thailand prior to the

election in March 2019. The digital political participation refers to the activities in politics such as supporting, promoting, engage online community, online discussion in politics, sharing political information, comment post, link and like in political items^[21].

The objective of the study: The objective of this research is to investigate the influence of social media and political participation of the youth or the first voter in the election of Thailand, March 2019. The relationship of each variables of social media usage, traditional political participation and digital participation in politics, will be explored. Facebook, Twitter and Instagram will be examine as social media usage. Politician and others might use for the beneficial of politics.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

It is a survey research based on data collection from University students in Thailand, a total of 1,715,976 first time eligible voters, of which 400 sample students were selected as simple random for a convenience and utilization^[23]. The questionnaire consisted of 7 questions of the respondent's activities on social media, 14 questions on political participation and 15 questions on digital participation in politics. The validity and reliability test of Political Participation (PP) and Digital Participation in Politics (DPP) show KMO = 0.899, 0.937 and Alpha = 0.89, 0.92, respectively. Besides, the factor component analysis of political participation comprise with support and activities (Sa) and election and information (Ei). Meanwhile, the components of the trend of digital participation in politics are time in using social media (Sm4) and sharing like (Sm12). The statistical analysis are variance analysis and Stepwise Multi Regression analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results analysis demonstrated that 4 variables of social media usage predicted significantly at 0.05, on digital political participation such as supporting activity (Sa), voting and following information (Ei), time in using social media (Sm4) and sharing like (Sm12) as prediction equation model as follow:

$$DPP = 0.477(Sa) + 0.327(Ei) + 0.138(Sm4) + 0.070(Sm12)$$

Figure 1 shown that the 4 influencing factors of using social media as in the equation model, predicted together with coefficient $R^2 = 0.53$. The supporting activities (Sa), voting and following information (Ei), time using social media (Sm4) and sharing like (Sm12) demonstrated moderately the coefficient at $R^2 = 0.43, 0.36, 0.009$ and 0.023 , respectively.

In summary, the trends of digital participation in politics attainable if these four factors were further

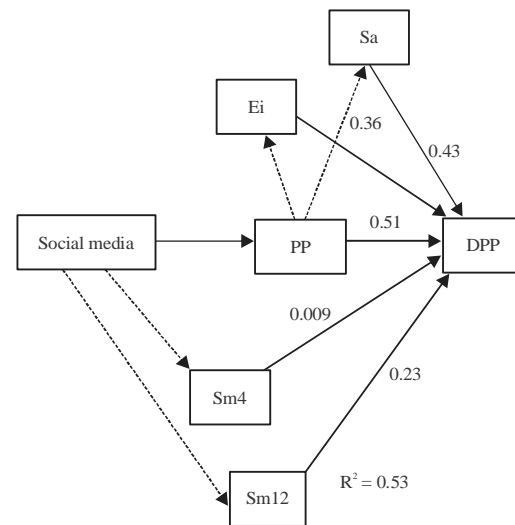


Fig. 1: Social media and the trend digital participation in politics

developed. They are the development of number of times spent on platforms Facebook, Twitter, Instagram; the development of Like and Share postings in conjunction with the development of support and political activities and together with the development of elections and follow up political information, shown in Fig. 1.

The finding results of the trends of digital participation in politics were consistent with the research of Granger-Frye^[24] whose findings indicated that the influence of Facebook and Twitter on support of political parties, political participation and the turnout of presidential elections in the United States during 2008 to 2016 with statistically significant at level of 0.05.

In addition the findings of this study were consistent with the research of Halpern and Katz^[25] whose findings revealed that the influence of political participation at individual level, the sharing political information on Facebook platform accounted for 19 percent, on Twitter platform 24 percent, both were statistically significant.

In practical term the Facebook and Twitter platforms can be further developed to effect digital political participation in supporting political parties or resolving, by politician, the problems of the public.

Furthermore they can be used as a channel for participation in political activities concerning the elections and follow up information as well as monitoring political movements of the politicians, political parties and even the government management concentrating mainly on problems of public suffering.

CONCLUSION

Importantly, the results can be conclude that knowledge sharing and political expression of the politician should be related to well-being of the public.

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