Social Media and Technology's Impact on Politics in the Age of Information

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By

Christopher Lee

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On my honor as a University student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this assignment as defined by the Honor Guidelines for Thesis-Related Assignments.

Signed: _____*Christopher Lee*_____ Date__04/20/2020__

Christopher Lee

Approved: _____ Date _____

Rider Foley, Department of Engineering and Society

Introduction

The information age has affected a wide variety of fields in both positive and negative ways. One field that is not immune to these changes that the age of information has brought forth is in politics. Specifically, the Internet and social media has changed the political landscape drastically in ways ranging from providing another platform of communications to voters to employing detailed data analytics for candidates (Kreis and Mcgregor, 2018). Additionally, the way candidates market themselves and campaign has drastically changed as well, creating the need for candidates to create social media campaigns to reach out to as many voters as possible (Anim et al., 2019). With all of these changes that the Internet in general has brought forth, it is important to ask the question of how the Internet and social media has affected politics in the age of information.

In order to answer this question, both the technical and human aspect of the problem needs to be explored. For the technical side, the algorithms and the social media and Internet platforms which are leveraged by candidates should be explored in order to explain the human aspect of the problem. As for the human side, the societal impacts that the Internet and social media have on the political landscape will be further investigated. For my technical topic, I have created an application with a team to help facilitate democracy through an application called Power Share. My app is built to fulfill the need of having direct communication with the voter and the elected official. The voter can post goals for the elected officials to see while the elected officials can update the voters on the progress of the goals that were posted by them. This gives elected officials direct access to their constituent's needs instead of getting information from indirect sources, such as political analysts. This app will show how technology can be used to promote democracy and display technology's potential effects on politics. As for my science,

technology, and society topic, I have decided to prove that technology has a profound effect on politics through showing that technology itself, such as social media, has political properties using the framework of techno-politics and technological determinism.

Case Context

In the age of information, everything is being digitalized. Politics are no exception to this trend. Everything from data analytics of candidates to candidates marketing themselves is being shifted towards technology (Kreiss and Mcgregor, 2018). With this in mind, how exactly technology impacts politics must be considered.

Before the age of information, politicians and elected officials often relied on political consultants to give them the latest feedback. This feedback could include satisfaction rates in their districts, or predicted election outcomes in states. However, the age of information has revolutionized this role. Politicians and elected officials can now in real time view highly detailed statistics that can give a candidate a better idea of an outcome. Additionally, there are no more access to powerful algorithms and predictive models that can accurately and efficiently analyze data to provide useful insights to candidates (Kreiss and Mcgregor, 2018). This type of technology has likely shifted the political landscapes and the role of political consultants.

In addition to providing detailed analytics, the age of information has provided a completely new platform to change how politicians campaign and market themselves. This platform is social media and the Internet. Now, up and coming politicians can easily run social media campaigns and reach out to a wide array of audiences. Traditionally, politicians often relied on older methods such as political rallies and fliers to campaign themselves. Although these more traditional methods are still in practice, politicians now have a whole new platform to

engage with audiences. Not only is campaigning on the Internet effective in marketing to the masses, but now voters can directly interact with politicians. Voters can make social media posts or direct message politicians. The politicians can respond to these posts or messages, which creates a closer connection between voter and politician. Now, voters can feel like a greater part of the process through this interaction rather than feeling like just another vote.

As a whole, social media and the Internet may seem to facilitate democracy, as they reduce the disconnect between politician and the common person. People can voice their opinions and actually be heard through social media. Politicians and elected officials now have more direct access straight from the voters themselves rather than relying on political consultants to decipher the general sentiment of the people that they wish to represent. Additionally, voters can spread ideas amongst themselves while consuming news and updates on politics. This allows voters to have a greater sense of democracy, as they are practicing free speech and communication and using this to voice their ideas. Additionally, social media and the Internet provide another platform to help voters organize and fight for beliefs that they believe to be important.

Although it may seem that social media and the Internet might be good for democracy, there are certain instances where they might hinder democracy. For an example, fake news can potentially spread misinformation among voters and citizens alike rapidly. This would undermine democracy as voters would now be voting for an issue in which they are not properly informed on. Furthermore, other technological advancements such as advanced video editing and deep fakes could further spread misinformation which thereby hinders democracy. Although it seems that social media and the Internet facilitates democracy through providing a platform for communication and news, the converse is true, as misinformation can be spread easily.

Social Media and the Internet's Effect on Politics in the Age of Information

The argument of social media and the Internet affecting politics is deeply connected with societal and human elements. The framework used to show this relationship is techno-politics, which is the notion that technological artifacts themselves have political properties (Winner 1980). He defines this relationship between technological artifacts and politics as being "strongly compatible with particular kinds of political relationships" (Winner, 1980 p.123). History has shown us that there is a strong correlation between technology and the politics of society. Social media and technology definitely has this effect with politics. For an example, Christensen and Garfias (2018) assert that social media and cellphone coverage increase the risk of protest by half. Winner (1980) asserts that some technologies have inherently political properties in that they change the relationship of power in society. Social media and the Internet does this through giving more power in the hands of voters by allowing them to express themselves and organize more efficiently for protests or rallies. Additionally, a more direct line of communication to elected officials is given to voters, thus reducing the disconnect between voters and politicians.

In addition to the main framework of techno-politics, the relationship between technology and politics also follows a technological determinism pattern as well. Technological determinism is defined as technology itself shaping society (Wyatt 2008). While technology has political properties, society is being shaped by these technological artifacts with political properties. For an example, large social media companies are responsible for much of the data analytics gathered, and thus influence how voters and elected officials communicate, and how politicians campaign (Kreiss and Mcgregor 2014). Through technology, the way politics works has been completely reconfigured. Now, politicians need to focus their strategy on engaging voters through the Internet in addition to the traditional methods such as rallying for support.

Social media initially started off as a way to connect with friends. However, through the changing social and environmental factors, social media has become a platform to do much more, such as providing a platform for politicians to campaign themselves. This is what Hughes (1987) calls development in technology. As a result of social media and the Internet growing at such a fast pace and becoming a dominant technology, it has taken on political properties that has drastically changed the landscape of politics. The purpose of the Internet has become so multifaceted, that it is even becoming a medium for politicians to communicate with voters, to gain insightful analytics on voters, to market themselves, and much more. This ties back into techno-politics, as it is shown through this development of technology that the Internet and social media has taken on political properties themselves.

The fact that social media inherently has political properties means that it will affect many different stakeholders. One stakeholders is elected officials and politicians, and social media and technology drastically change the way they campaign themselves and the information on voter sentiment based on data analytics (Kreis and Mcgregor, 2018). Another stakeholder social media effects is the voters themselves, as now voters can directly communicate with the politicians and have more access to political information.

Because social media and technology has political properties, it should be our responsibility as a society to make sure that this technology is being used responsibly. Andrews (2006) argues that technology is affecting democracy, and that it is our responsibility as a society to keep the balance between technology and democracy in check. Citizens need to vouch for technologies that reduce human injury and promote the overall well-being of society. In addition, it is important for citizens to recognize technologies that have potential for harming society and ousting these technologies whenever possible. Through promoting technologies that facilitate

democracy, society can reduce the possibility of tyranny and oppression. Citizens must look at the overall techno-politics of social media and the Internet, and evaluate the positives and negatives that these technologies have on the political landscape and society. The rules and obligations that Andrews (2006) offers is that citizens need to use such a technology responsibly. Social media has the political properties to spread democracy and facilitate it, so it is important to aggregate all of social media's effect on politics to see its value in society.

Research Question

How does social media and the Internet impact politics in the age of information?

Methods

The method I employed to pursue this question is through surveys. I used surveys in order to get as many responses as possible from voters. I sent out surveys to voters and ask questions about how social media has affected how they see candidates and how they communicate their values with candidates. These questions gave me a general understanding of the relationships between social media/ technology and politics.

The survey questions consisted of mainly questions where survey participants rank there choice from 1-5, or some other multiple choice value. This allowed me to run averages on these numbers and gain a general consensus of what the sentiment is based on a scale. In addition, I had one free response question that allowed participants to go more in depth with their answers and allowed me to analyze not only numbers, but actual thoughts of the participants. Through the analysis of these surveys, I gained a better understanding of the issue at hand and was able to make a valid conclusion on how exactly social media and technology affects politics in general.

Results: Overview

Overall, it can be concluded that social media and the internet do indeed have a significant impact on politics in the age of information. As shown in the survey statistics, it is apparent that most people would agree that social media has a significant impact on politics. Something I found interesting, however, was that not everyone agreed that social media and technology necessarily impacted politics in a positive manner.

Results

The first survey question I asked was: on a scale of 1-5, how much would you say that social media has influenced your political opinion, with 1 being not influenced at all, 3 being moderately influenced, and 5 being strongly influenced. As shown in figure 1 below, over half of the participants expressed that they were strongly more than moderately influenced while only a select few expressed that they were not influenced at all, with the average being 3.53 out of 5. This tells me that on average, social media influences one's political opinion.

on a scale of 1-5, how much would you say that social media has influenced your political opinion? (Figure 1)
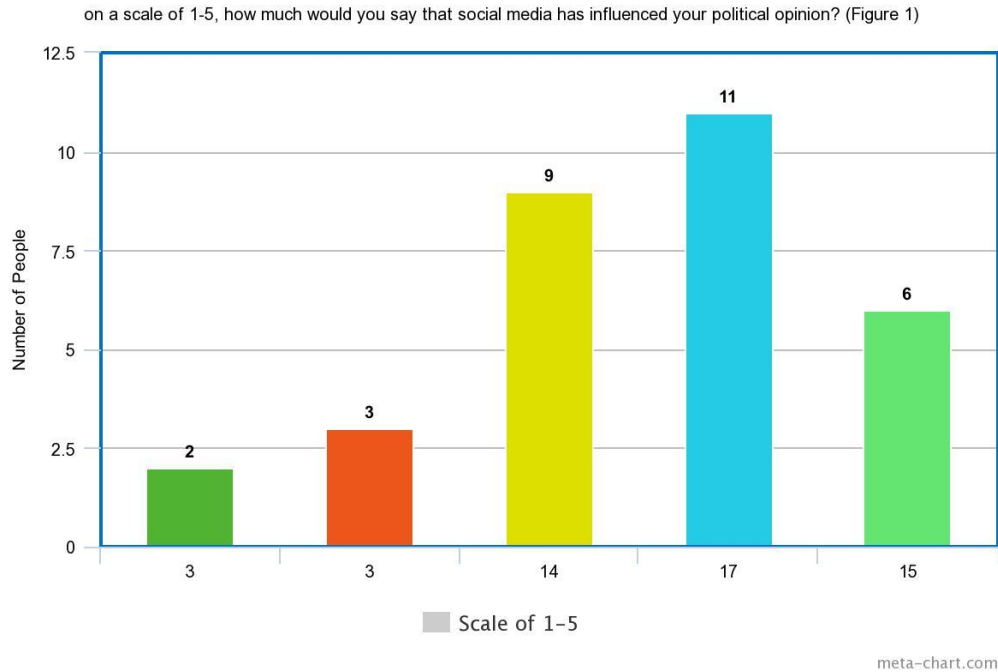

Furthermore, I asked: how much would you say that social media influences politics as a whole, using the same scale of 1-5. The bar chart in the figure 2 below shows an overwhelming consensus that most people would agree that social media and the internet effects politics as a whole. The average score out of 5 for this question was 3.90, and I found this to be interesting as more people agreed that social media and the Internet influences the political landscape in general rather than having an influence on the individual themselves. I think this might be the case because people may think that social media and the Internet has revolutionized the way politicians campaign. Thus, this accounts for why people may think that the political landscape itself might have changed. However, some people may think that they are not influenced by this even though they are being fed political information through social media feeds constantly.

How much would you say that social media influences politics as a whole (Figure 2)
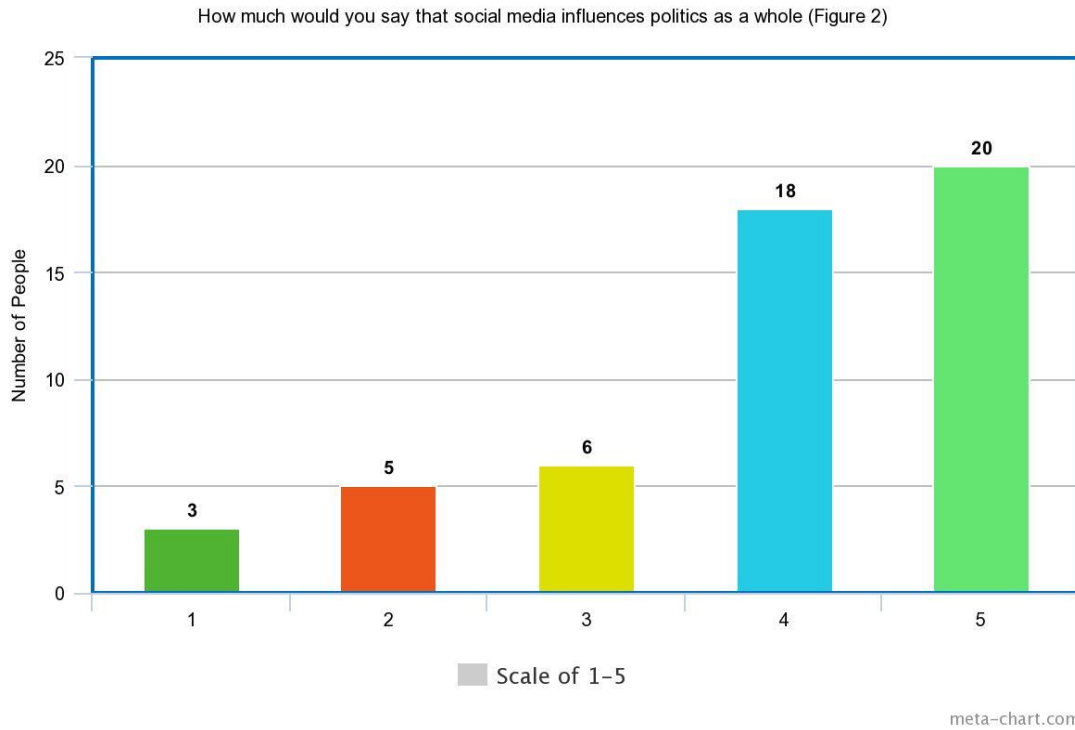

In addition, I asked survey participants how often they see politicians running social media campaigns. As shown in the bar chart in figure 3 below, an overwhelming majority of people see social media political campaigns either often or very often.

How often do you see politicians running social media campaigns? (Figure 3)
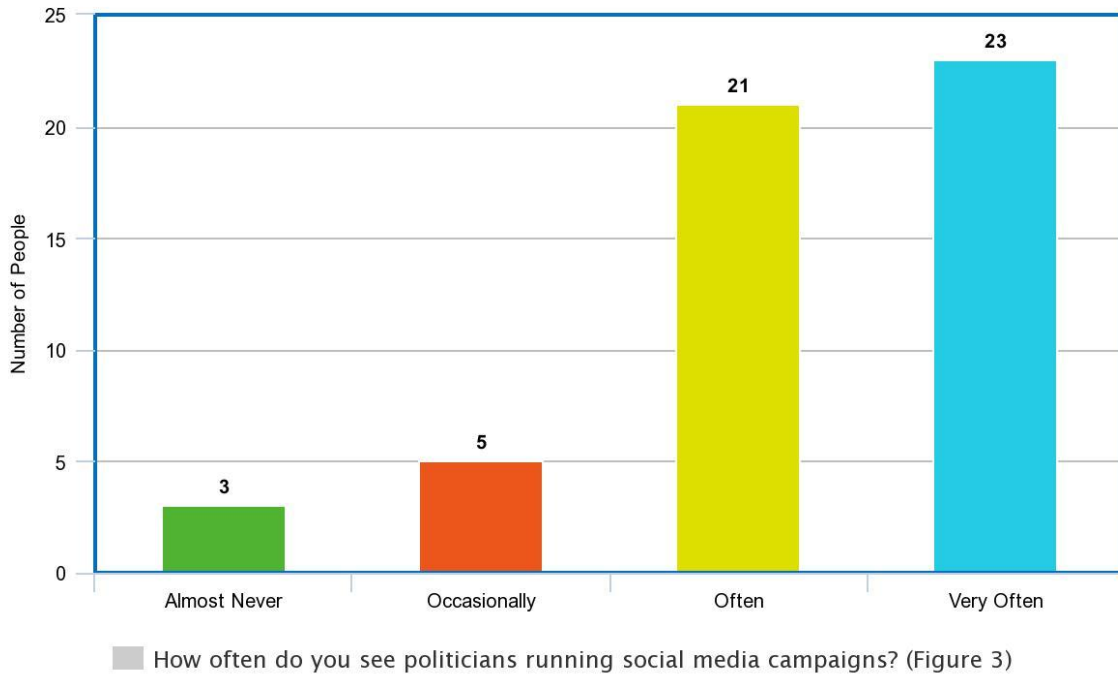
meta-chart.com

I feel that this ties into the question of asking survey participants what means of campaigning is more effective in terms of gaining political information, social media or through more traditional means. As shown in the bar chart in figure 4, it is apparent that the vast majority of people think that obtaining political information by means of social media is more effective.

What means of campaigning is more effective in terms of gaining political information, social media methods or more traditional methods?
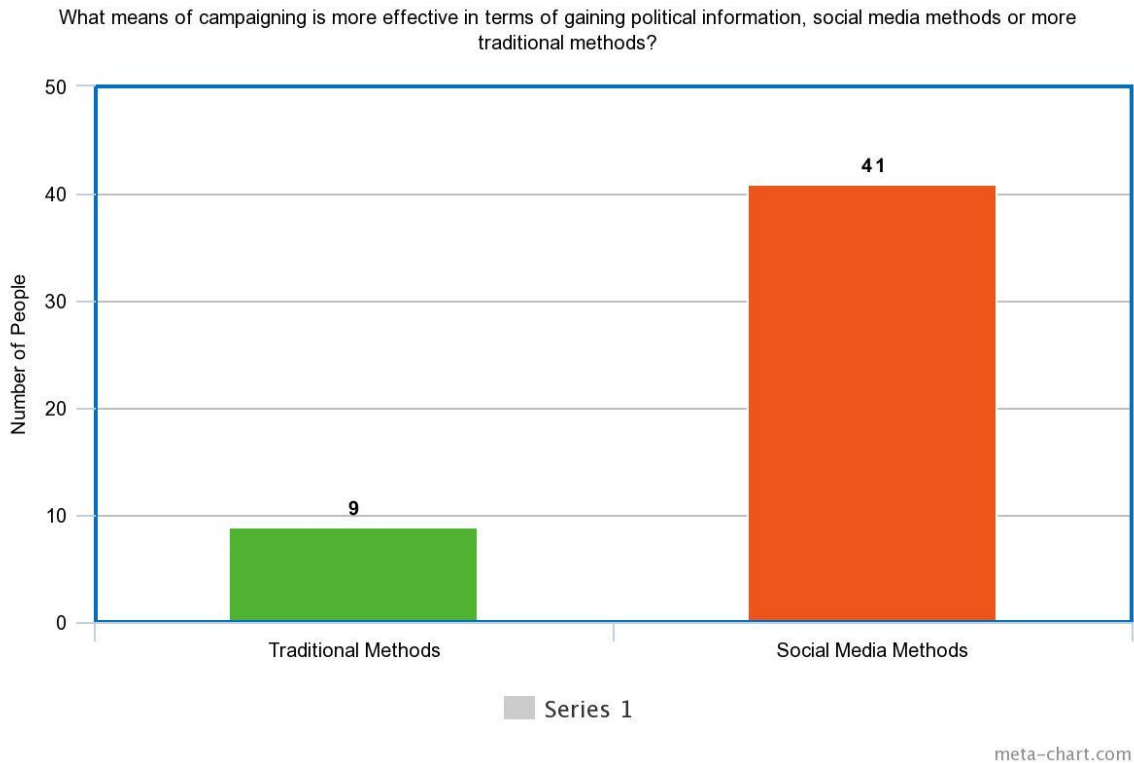
This shows the scope of political campaigns on social media and the effect they have on candidates marketing themselves. More people prefer this means of campaigning and it is seen more often than more traditional means. I feel that the reason for this is that social media provides a technological fix as outlined by Sarewitz and Nelson, which is the one where "technology largely embodies the cause and effect connecting the problem to the solution" (Sarewitz and Nelson 2008). The problem would be it is hard to reach out to a large number of audiences, and the cause would be not running social media campaigns. However, this is alleviated through providing social media as another platform for politicians to market themselves.

I also raised the question of whether or not the disconnect between voter and politician has been bridged through social media and the internet. As shown in figure 5, it is apparent that most people think so.

On a scale of 1-5 (1 being strongly disagree and 5 being strongly agree), has the disconnect between voter and politician been bridged through social media and the Internet? (Figure 5)
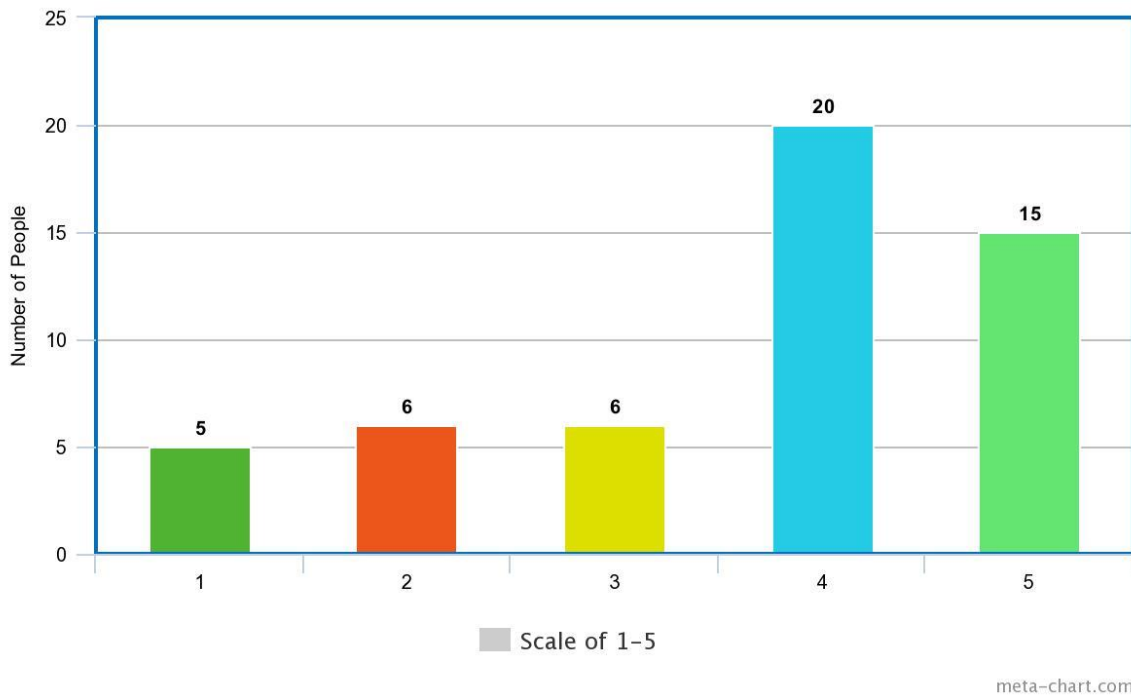

I asked this question on a scale of 1-5, and the majority agree or strongly agree, with the average score out of 5 being 3.66. This tells me that social media and the internet facilitate communication between voter and politician. Through social media, voters now have more access to communicate with voters through direct messaging them or making social media posts. Through this means of communication, voters now feel more in touch with the politician, and it makes sense that most would agree that the communication gap between voter and elected official has been getting progressively better. Entman and Usher (2018) have asserted that social media gives the common voter greater access to the political elite, so I am not surprised that most people would agree that the bridge of communication is being closed between voter and politician.

Results that surprised me was when I asked if survey participants thought that social media and technology helped or hindered democracy and when I asked if this technology had a

positive, negative or neutral effect. As shown in figure 6 below, most participants agreed that social media and the Internet facilitated democracy.

Would you say that social media has helped or hindered democracy? (Figure 6)
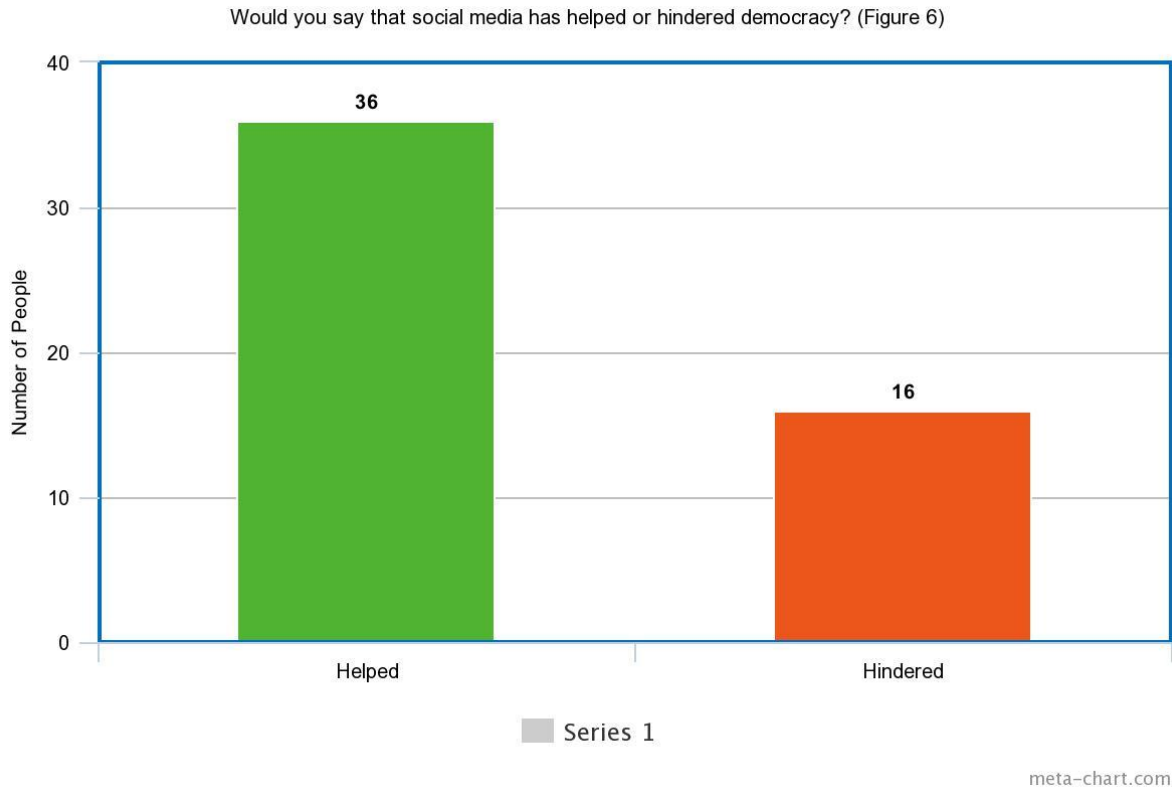
This is not surprising, as social media facilitates communication, which in turn can take actions to facilitate democracy. For an example, cellphone coverage increases the risk of protest and organization by more than half (Christensen and Garfias, 2018). However, as shown in figure 7, the votes between positive and negative were almost split evenly between the two.

Does social media and the Internet have a negative, neutral, or positive effect on politics?
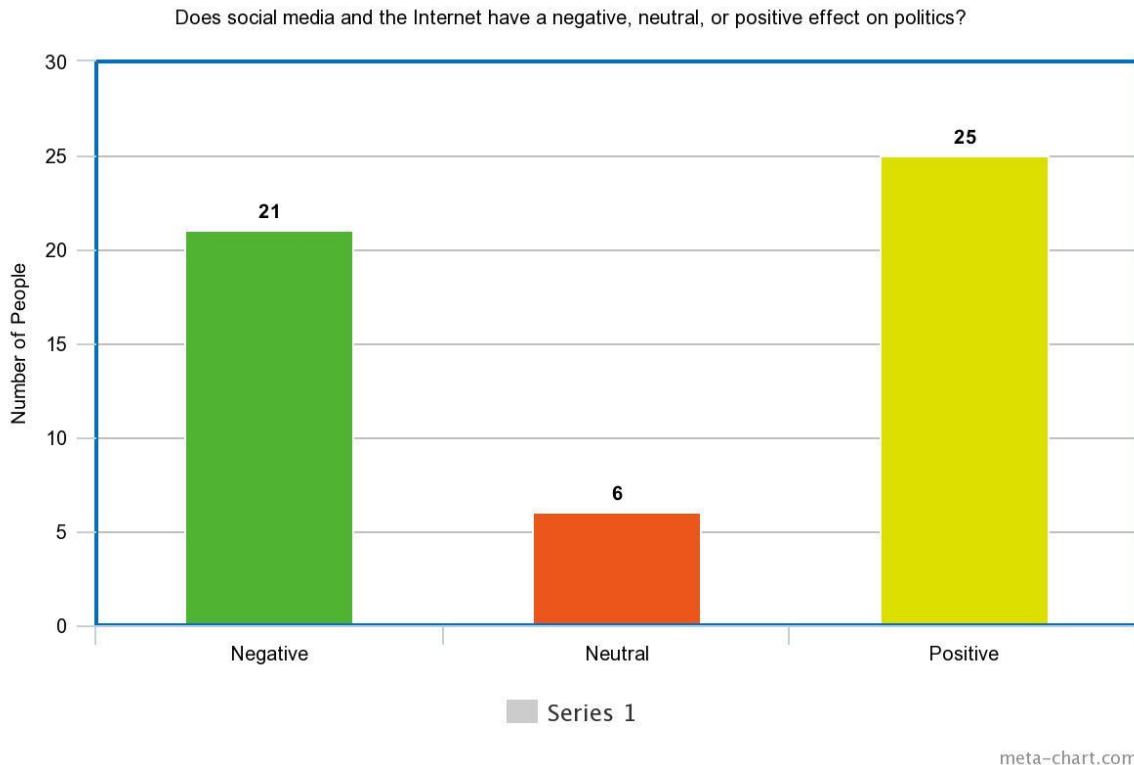
I would have expected them to follow a similar pattern. My speculation is that many would agree that social media does enhance democratic ideas such as free speech, but it does not always necessarily enhance the political landscape in general, as people can fall victim to fake news or group think when people post about politics on social media.

In addition to the multiple choice questions, I also asked a free response question of, how has social media and technology influenced your personal politics? The most common responses I received was that it helps the survey participant stay informed with current issues. However, some people took this a step further and claim that social media has allowed them to participate more in politics through actively voicing their ideas. This makes sense, as Cardo asserts that social media and technology has led to "a more participatory and multidimensional flow of information between politicians and citizens" (Cardo, 2018 p.68). Social media seems like a platform that encourages active participation due to this more multidimensional flow.

Discussion

My research primarily connects to the theory of techno-politics, which is the notion that technological artifacts themselves have political properties (Winner 1980). Through my research, it is shown that many would agree that social media and the Internet has changed the power dynamic in politics. For one, most people agreed that social media has helped democracy overall. This is likely because many people think that social media facilitates free speech while allowing voters to more directly communicate with politicians. In addition, my research indicates that the vast majority of people would agree that social media has fundamentally changed the way politicians market themselves and how they campaign. Before social media and the Internet, politicians had to rely on more traditional means of communication, such as engaging with voters in campaign rallies. Politicians today still practice these more traditional means, but now they have the option to also use social media and the Internet to their advantage. This follows the theory of technological determinism, which is when technology itself shapes society (Wyatt 2008). One example of social media shaping how politicians campaign is when technological companies employ detailed analytics for candidates, whereas before, politicians often relied on political consultants (Kreiss and Mcrgregor, 2018).

In addition, the way campaigns market themselves have fundamentally shifted, as now politicians effectively use social media campaigns to reach out to as many voters as possible (Anim et al., 2019). My survey results reflects this, as the vast majority of people say they see social media campaigns very often.

Limitations

While my research gave me a plethora of evidence to analyze, there are some caveats to my survey. Firstly, I chose a medium sample size of only 52 people. This is likely not enough people to have a full representation of voters. In order to have a better representation, I would likely need a sample size in the thousands, which is simply not practical right now. In addition, my survey captures people that are in similar walks of life. I mainly chose to give out my survey to other students, which would mostly consist of upper middle class people ranging from 18-22. This leaves out a large demographic of people from different walks of life such as the working class or the older generation. Therefore, my survey does not provide a full representation of the average voter, but rather, a specific kind of voter.

What I would do differently

If I were to conduct this research in the future, there would be many things I would do differently. First of all, I would attempt to fix the caveat I described earlier through surveying a wider diversity of people. I would purposefully survey people who have different backgrounds than I do. This way, I could give a better representation of an average voter than just a targeted group of people. Furthermore, I would greatly increase the sample size. Statistically, 31 is not enough to make a strong argument. I would likely want to increase the sample size to at least 1000 if I had the resources to do so.

In addition to administering the surveys, I would conduct interviews on a randomized group of people. These interviews would allow me to go more in depth than the survey questions and ask follow up questions. Conducting these interviews would give me a more thorough understanding of the overall sentiment of social media and the Internet's impact on politics.

How I will use this research to advance my engineering practice

I will use this research to advance my engineering practice through making people aware of the fact that social media and the Internet has a profound impact on politics, and it is our responsibility to make sure this is for the better. Andrews (2006) asserts that it is our responsibility as technological citizens to keep the balance between technology and democracy in check. Thus as a technological citizen, I will spread awareness of the powers and dangers of social media and the Internet on the political landscape. Furthermore, this research has made me more aware of the vast impact that technology has on society in general, and I will certainly look at other cases in which technology has a profound impact on a societal element.

Conclusion

The broader significance of this research shows that technology, specifically social media and the Internet, have a significant impact on politics. As a result, people must carefully consider more specifically how technology impacts politics in order to make sure that the technology has an overall positive impact. My research shows that overall, social media and the Internet facilitate democracy through providing another platform of communication where voters and politicians alike can share their views freely. Knowing this, others could act on this knowledge through letting politicians know how to move their campaign more digitally or making political communication and information more readily available to the common voter.

To advance this research, I would say the next steps for this would be to survey more people. As stated before, a sample size of 52 is likely not enough to make solid conclusions. If thousands of more people were surveyed, the evidence would be significantly stronger. In addition, surveying a greater diversity of people would lead to a better representation. Also, I

would suggest that people continuing my research look at case studies of social media effecting politics in other countries and see how it applies to the United States. If these measures are taken for future research, this research will have a solid foundation of evidence.

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