

Social Media in Politics: an American Perspective

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Social media outlets such as Facebook and Twitter have grown to be indispensable parts of the political process in many modern countries. However, their popularity among Japanese consumers has been very limited: in contrast to the United States, 60% of whose population uses Facebook, less than 2% of Japanese have Facebook accounts.¹ While sites like Twitter and Mixi have found more widespread success in Japan, the ingrained privacy of many Japanese internet users may make them distrustful of the disclosure level of a Facebook page. This reluctance of Japanese voters to engage in social media to the extent of those in many other countries has negative implications for its use in the political sphere. Although I was able to meet several Diet members and members of Japan's political world, both young and old, during my time at the Asian Forum Japan, social media does not appear to have played significant roles in any of their political strategies. An examination of the role of social media in politics in my home country of the United States reveals several interesting implications of this underdevelopment.

Social media has become a complex yet crucial aspect of modern American politics. It is now a ubiquitous aspect of any politician's political messaging and campaign tactics, and has also contributed greatly to the rise of political movements on either side of the political spectrum. In the press, it is widely viewed as a positive part of a new rise in participatory democracy around the globe. In reality, its political effectiveness is debatable, and its ultimate role in politics is still developing. For instance, while Obama's use of Facebook, Twitter, weekly internet addresses, and other forms of social media and the internet have undoubtedly increased the visibility of his messages, it is not clear that the content of those messages have changed. Moreover, Obama's Facebook page promotes his policy initiatives and spreads his campaign messages, but his social media participation does not

¹ *New York Times*, January 9, 2011. "Facebook Wins Relatively Few Friends in Japan."

appear to have significantly increased his political base relative to the republicans. This highlights the central concern about the effectiveness of social media in American politics: while its use may generate more participation within its confines, it does not necessarily lead to increased participation in the real world. This limits the potential for any actual changes, either in the form of power shifts between political parties or changes in the substance of either party's agenda. In other words, participation on a politician's Facebook page does not necessarily translate to a commitment of time or effort for that politician.

Recent social movements can be seen as either a confirmation or rejection of the effectiveness of new social media. The Occupy Wall Street movement relied heavily on social media outlets such as Facebook, Twitter, and blogs as a replacement for hierarchical structure in order to organize meetings, share information, and debate their views. The Tea Party movement, whose messages attracted an older and perhaps less tech-savvy demographic, found more use in traditional and politically sympathetic media sources, such as the Fox News Channel. Both the Occupy Wall Street and Tea Party movements gained political notoriety and power, and their messages began to influence those of liberal and conservative politicians, respectively. The Tea Party managed to have a more tenable effect on elections, with many members of congress elected on Tea Party inspired platforms. However, the Occupy movement proved less able to sustain long-term popularity or political gains, and is now struggling to keep its message in the spotlight. The short-term nature of social media use when compared to traditional methods of political organization illustrates the problems of using it for immediate political goals. Firstly, any social media movement is constrained by the relatively short attention span of social media users (this short attention span is echoed by mainstream national media). Secondly, social media users are not necessarily willing to transfer their participation from the online sphere to the real world. Lastly, the large user base of social media makes it hard for one cause or politician to garner its unified support on its own terms. Rather, the most effective social media movements tend to originate not as the result of a conscious action by a mainstream political leader, but as an anonymous and nebulous manifestation of some public whim. These movements rarely if ever conform

to an established political viewpoint, and are instead often formed in opposition to one.

Nevertheless, social media outlets have become an undeniably important aspect of American politics. They have expanded political awareness, especially among young people. Furthermore, by increasing access to outside materials, they have arguably heightened and diversified the level of debate over political issues. In America, access to social media and other internet outlets has become a key political issue, as evidenced by the widespread internet protests of the SOPA bill, which would have facilitated internet censorship, in January 2012. Opposition to the bill in the House of Representatives skyrocketed from 31 to 101 members after several prominent websites shut down for a day to protest the bill. However, it remains to be seen whether social media will have any meaningful long-term effects on the American political sphere, which has a longstanding tradition of vocal and participatory politics. Where social media offers the best chances of substantive long-term change is in countries with a weak democratic tradition, such as those of the Arab spring. Even in these countries, developments after the protests of the Arab spring have called into question the long-term efficacy of mass movements fueled by social media.

The varying success of social media use in politics has interesting implications for its development in Japan. On one hand, its adoption by politicians could attract a younger demographic, thereby helping to combat the political apathy among young voters that I noticed during my year at a Japanese University. Furthermore, it could counter the stereotype of Japanese politics as un-transparent, taking place almost entirely behind closed doors. Lastly, social media's proven use in ideology-driven opposition politics could play a valuable role in injecting diversity into Japan's two party political system. However, social media should not be expected to accomplish these goals by itself; rather, it should ideally serve as a supplement to traditional political organizations, be they in opposition or not. In order for social media sources to develop into their true political potential, they must first earn the widespread acceptance in Japan that they have gained in so many other countries.