Facebook’s Impact on American Politics by Jose Marichal

To the extent that political scientists evaluate Facebook’s impact on the American politics system, the verdict is that it doesn’t matter much, particularly when compared with other factors such as the condition of the economy or number of combat casualties (see Andrew Linder’s fantastic TSP essay on the subject). The preliminary assessment that Facebook is a minor player in American electoral political system might be true if we assess impact via a direct, measurable effect on electoral outcomes. But what if Facebook impacts politics in a much broader way than simply campaign wins and losses?  In this essay, I look at how Facebook’s increasing ubiquitous use might change not just the outcome of the political game, but the playing field itself.

Worldwide, Facebook is closing in on one-billion accounts.  Facebook claimed in [a 2010 post](http://www.facebook.com/note.php?note_id=448981740881) on their blog that its researchers could predict the winning House candidate over 70 percent of the time based on candidate “likes.” While Facebook has a vested interest in conveying to the mass public that it has its proverbial “finger on the pulse” of mass culture, social scientists have a great deal of skepticism regarding its impact on the political process. As Gregory Ferstein recently posted[on TechCrunch](http://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&ved=0CCIQFjAA&url=http%3A%2F%2Ftechcrunch.com%2F2012%2F05%2F11%2Fthe-importance-of-social-media-in-elections-mostly-hot-air%2F&ei=Da9PUMyMO6S6iwLGr4GIDg&usg=AFQjCNEnT3czuZMavAR82ePGlBi_c9XwIQ&sig2=jDm2v-MB_ZgUzIQupFQkiQ) “if social media mattered in elections, Ron Paul would have a realistic shot at being the Republican nominee” (online). Indeed one only has to compare at the significant gap in Facebook page “likes” between President Obama (28,071,154 - Aug 31, 2012) and Republican Candidate Mitt Romney (5,680,147 - Aug 31, 2012) and their position in the polls to recognize that Facebook popularity contests are not directly translatable to electoral outcomes.

A key argument for Facebook’s limited impact in American politics is that those most likely to use Facebook are the same people that are least likely to be engaged with politics. A [May 2012 Pew survey](http://pewinternet.org/Commentary/2012/March/Pew-Internet-Social-Networking-full-detail.aspx) found that close to two-thirds of people in the United States reported using some form of social media and almost all of those used Facebook (Brenner 2012). When broken down by age, 86 percent of 18-29 year olds were using social networking sites. By comparison, only 34 percent of those 65 and older were SNS users.  Since 18-29 year-olds are [historically less likely to vote than other groups](http://www.civicyouth.org/quick-facts/youth-voting/), Facebook would not appear to be very fertile soil from which to extract votes. Indeed, a recent [Gallup survey](http://www.people-press.org/2011/11/03/the-generation-gap-and-the-2012-election-3/?cnn=yes) found that 18-30 year-olds were significantly less engaged in the 2012 presidential election when compared to 2008.

But Facebook can’t be blamed for the public cynicism that stems from partisan gridlock in Washington. Some argue that Facebook might be ushering in a new, different era of youth participation. While it may be true that young voters are less likely to vote in elections, Facebook users are “civically engaged” in other ways. A 2011 [Pew Internet and American Life survey](http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2011/Technology-and-social-networks/Summary.aspx) for found that frequent Facebook users (e.g. those who visited the site at least once a day) were more likely to exhibit a number of pro-civic attitudes. Frequent Facebook users were three times as likely as non-users to believe that people could be trusted, had closer personal ties than non-users and were more likely to receive social, emotional and tangible support from friends as compared to infrequent or non-users. These “connected” Facebook citizens exhibited greater levels of the [social capital that Robert Putnam](http://bowlingalone.com/) and others see as vital to civic life and are thus more likely to engage in public life than be disconnected from it.

Furthermore, the same Pew survey found that frequent Facebook users were much more politically active than non-users. These frequent users were 53 percent more likely to vote than non-members or infrequent users, 78 percent more likely to try and influence someone to vote, and over two and a half times more likely to attend a political meeting or rally.

So is Facebook a vital engine for promoting civic engagement?  Perhaps, but major questions remain. Do civically and politically engaged people become heavy Facebook users or does heavy Facebook use make users more politically engaged?  Perhaps what matters is not how often people use Facebook, but they types of uses in which they engage. [Burke and Kraut](http://dl.acm.org/citation.cfm?id=1979023) found that Facebook users receive increases in their level of social capital when they engage in direct, person-to-person communication with Facebook friends. [Park, Kee and Valenzuela](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/19619037) found that students who used Facebook to socialize with friends or seek information were more likely to become engaged in politics than those who just used it for entertainment. [Conroy, Feezell and Guerrero](http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1451456) found that college students that belonged to a Facebook group were more likely to be engaged with politics and more likely to vote than those that were not part of a political group. Put another way, those who seek out political information on Facebook find it and are more likely to engage in politics that those Facebook users that don’t seek it out. But whether Facebook “creates” politically engaged citizens is another matter.

Evegny Morozov’s 2011 book [The Net Delusion](http://www.publicaffairsbooks.com/publicaffairsbooks-cgi-bin/display?book=9781586488741) provides a withering critique of the transformational possibilities of the Internet in general, but Facebook in particular. He suggests that the ease with which users can express sympathy with social causes through “like” and “share” buttons leads to what he calls slacktivism. Once one can identify with a social cause at a distance, there is little incentive to get directly involved in the serious and coordinated work of social change. Malcom Gladwell made a similar argument in an [October 2010 New Yorker article](http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2010/10/04/101004fa_fact_gladwell). Claiming that Facebook connections were based “weak” ties rather than the “strong” social connections needed to sustain social change. He cites McAdam’s (1986) finding that activists during the civil rights movement were personally affected by racism and discrimination and this personal attachment sustained movement intensity. In addition, Gladwell argues that Facebook is based on a network model whereas sustained social movements require some level of hierarchical organization, hence movements formed on Facebook are too diffuse to produce lasting change.

In my own research, I come to a similar conclusion, but for different reasons.  In my new book, [Facebook Democracy](http://www.ashgate.com/default.aspx?calcTitle=1&page=637&title_id=11713&edition_id=12081), I examined 250 political Facebook groups.  I found that few political groups were actually created for the purpose of mobilization. But this was not because of weak-ties within Facebook networks. Rather than simply promote weak ties, Facebook can amplify or attenuate both the weak-tie and strong-tie bonds that we form offline. Facebook can accommodate a whole range of different types of network formations. As [James Fowler and Nickolas Christakis noted in their popular 2010 book Connected](http://connectedthebook.com/), individual networks can be small, long lasting and dense with high levels of transitivity or they can be large, diffuse and with low-transitivity. Individual networks can have aspect of both small, long-lasting, transitive, strong-tie networks and large, informal, weak-tie networks. Facebook networks range from the college student who “friends” a stranger from halfway around the world or the husband who “updates” his wife to pick up a carton of milk from the supermarket. There is no one type of network formation that predominates on Facebook. The service allows for a myriad of different ways for individuals to connect. Indeed it is this plurality of network formations that makes Facebook so appealing.

So why so little emphasis on mobilizing? I argue it is because of Facebook’s architecture of disclosure that emphasizes connection and disclosure over other forms of political discourse. What happens when political discourse is about connection and disclosure?  In Facebook Democracy, I argue that Facebook has the effect of privatizing the public sphere. By taking the inherently public act of disclosing to and connecting with others and commodifying/ privatizing it, political talk becomes personalized. If the public sphere is about engaging with the other over shared pursuits, what[Arendt (1958) calls the “world of things,”](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Human_Condition_%28book%29) the private/market sphere is about the personal pursuit of self-interest.

How does this get reflected in political Facebook groups? I found that the majority of sites were “informational” or intended to exercise political voice. For example, a site called “[Ronald Reagan](http://www.facebook.com/pages/Ronald-Reagan/37323020498)” was created specifically to show admiration for the former US president. The creation of such a site is not intended to engage in a collective search for “the truth” but is rather an exercise in disclosing admiration and connecting with similar others.  In effect, it is an exercise in “performing political identity.” This type of discourse is particularly prevalent on Facebook. One can hardly imagine someone bothering to stand on a street corner holding a sign that they support a president that hasn’t held office for over 20 years.

The personalization of political discourse focuses on those policy issues with high affective salience. It is much easier to process how one feels about a Senate candidate talking about “legitimate rape” than it is to talk about the Greek debt crisis or the US mortgage meltdown.  Media critic [Lincoln Dahlberg](http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol7/issue1/dahlberg.html) noted that the great promise of the Internet was creating online rhetorical spaces that were free of elite control. By personalizing and privatizing the public sphere, Facebook makes it harder to create these “free” spaces, but not because it is formally controlling discourse. Rather it is because discourse is driven towards subjects that are easily translatable into “feelings” that can be “performed” on Facebook.

This emphasis on disclosure is not restricted to homogeneous networks. Facebook is not, as Eli Pariser suggests, a [filter bubble](http://www.thefilterbubble.com/) where we can tune out dissonant voices. In his book, Pariser argues that Facebook is one of a number of social applications that encourage users to live in a filter bubble of content in which we are easily able to filter out information that does not reinforce our pre-existing beliefs.  If true, Facebook would exacerbate our already built-in tendency to group around our ideological “tribes.” In reality, Facebook users are in more diverse networks than we might presume. But Facebook isn’t a political blog like Daily Kos or Red State. Facebook connections are primarily formed based on social/geographic proximity, not on shared interest like on other parts of the web. As such, Facebook is less likely to promote individual filter bubbles.

Granted, social proximity and shared interest overlap to some degree, and people in the same upper-income neighborhood are more likely to share similar interests. However, this overlap is less pronounced when it comes to political attitudes. [Sharad Goel and his colleagues at Yahoo](http://5harad.com/papers/friendsense.pdf) found that Facebook friends were more homophilous in their political views than random groups, but the difference (75 percent agreement for Facebook friends vs. 63 percent for randomly assigned groups) was marginal, albeit statistically significant. Perhaps more curious than whether individuals are exposed to diverse views on Facebook is the fact that Facebook appears to be a generally apolitical forum. As Sharad Goel and his colleague noted, Facebook users:

[block quote] are probably surrounded by a greater diversity of opinions than is sometimes claimed, (but they) generally fail to talk about politics, and that when they do, they simply do not learn much from their conversations about each other’s views... the extent to which peers influence each other’s political attitudes may be less than is sometimes claimed (10).  [block quote]

This is the main problem with “talk” on Facebook. Because of its structure, Facebook encourages the performance of political identity over deliberation. But discourse that is focused on disclosing is not a collective search for the truth or particularly effective preparation for democratic citizenship. Identity formation is only a stage in the political process. Facebook as a business is disinterested in the transition of a public political identity into a public citizen that engages in political life. Having a political identity or a political opinion is not politics. Politics is about engaging in a collective collective conversation about how we should pursue the good life. That collective conversation does not means some unrealistic [Habermasian communicative rationality](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Communicative_rationality). But it does mean engaging in the political arena and recognizing that public life in a democratic society is about accepting a set of ground rules for the greater public good.

It also means recognizing that the public sphere is not completely about personal affect. Facebook reinforces the idea that politics is about authenticity. Richard Sennett’s 1974 book the [Fall of the Public Man](http://www.amazon.com/The-Fall-Public-Richard-Sennett/dp/0393308790) presaged the problems with a politics based on personality and authenticity. He argued that political life required an element of formality and inauthenticity, a public life of masks. This formality allowed us to engage in the public sphere free from uncertainty.

Facebook’s emphasis on authenticity is clearly seen in how politicians interact with the technology. Facebook makes your representative more available to you. At first blush it seems to present unprecedented opportunities to provide constituents with political information and to do constituency service.  But Facebook as a medium demands that politicians seem “authentic” and compels them to “disclose” and “connect.” The very notion of “following” or “liking” one’s Senator connotes a personalization of the constituent/representative relationship. This personalization of politics, this demand for authenticity means politicians need to appeal to affect, not policy. The constant striving to appear authentic moves politicians away from the world of guiding constituents in a collective search for the truth, and towards easy appeals towards affective responses to policy issues.

But when political talk is personallized, there is no assumption that there are winners and losers and that citizens might not get all they want from the political system. When I was a kid, we’d play pick-up basketball at the local park. We’d have no referee to call fouls. Without agreed upon ground rules, neither team would allow the other team to win. The team that was losing would constantly call a foul to extend the game or change the score needed to win “let’s go to 21” or “do over.”  This is the American political system today. No real sense of legitimacy about the rules. It’s a personalization of something public, a game of basketball.

Sometimes personalization is essential though. Facebook’s effect in galvanizing the 2011 Egyptian revolution is undeniable. A Facebook page called [We are All Khalid Said](http://www.facebook.com/elshaheeed.co.uk), created to memorialize an Egyptian citizen killed by police, served as a site for everyday Egyptians to express collective dissent. Indeed in places like Egypt, Facebook can provide a vehicle for the personal expression of political views. In places where the individual’s rights are constrained, this ability to express the personal is invaluable. It is particularly in places that don’t have respect for the individual that individual “voice” matters. However, an overemphasis on the personal in rights-based societies emphasizes politics through the filter of how one feels about politics rather than emphasizing politics through the lens of a collective search for pragmatic truth.

But in democratic states where voice is guaranteed by law, listening becomes an equally important quality. Early utopian thinking about the Web posited it as a radical public sphere (Salter 2005) where alternative voices could be heard. But unlike blogs that have a discrete URL cyber address, Facebook does not provide you with your own independent piece of real estate. Instead, Facebook is the corralling of all these voices in one place. Even in Egypt, listening was necessary to foment revolution. [Barry Wellman and his colleagues highlight](http://peacemagazine.org/archive/v27n3p06.htm) how the seeds of the revolution were sown by Egyptian bloggers that fostered a “networked public sphere” of social critics. Without this community of voices providing spaces for political deliberation, the Khalid Said page would have had little effect.

In our country, we need to balance out voice with more listening. If Facebook’s main purpose is to enhance social connection, then controversial (e.g. political) subjects run the risk of inhibiting the formation of these bonds. This is where I think Facebook has the largest impact upon politics. The common thread to all this is that Facebook encourages a further privatization and personalization of the public sphere. The civic sphere is a place that is inherently public. It is where everyone expresses their own personal identity, but they also come together to deliberation over the good life.

What does all this mean for the upcoming elections? It means that, on Facebook at least, we are likely to talk about how we “feel” about pressing political issues and more importantly how we “feel” about politicians, rather than the issues themselves. Political figures exacerbate that by personalizing themselves on sites like Facebook. Knowing whether President Obama likes Stevie Wonder should be less relevant than whether his proposal for remedying income inequality is likely to be effective. While Facebook didn’t create the personalization of politics, it exacerbates this trend towards expecting our public officials to “be like us.” Our times, however, require a re-engagement with vexing social problems. It requires us to pull away from the personalization of public life that Facebook encourages.