

# Pair studies social media's impact on election



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As the presidential race approaches its climax, Greg Budzban, PhD, Dean of the Southern Illinois University Edwardsville College of Arts and Sciences, welcomes Ken Moffett and Laurie Rice, associate professors in the SIUE Department of Political Science, to Segue for a discussion about political engagement among college students.

The 2008 election marked a tipping point for social media and its role in politics. Moffett stated that two years prior to that election, then-presidential candidate Barack Obama and his campaign organization, “got together with the creators of Facebook, seeing an immediate application of online tools to be able to mobilize voters.” He followed this up by creating a Facebook account and using social media in ways that previously were untapped.

This provided an opportunity to investigate the ways in which social media affects civic activity, especially among young people. To do so, Moffett and Rice recently wrote a book, *Web 2.0 and the Political Mobilization of College Students*. They collected survey data in 2008 as the U.S. approached Obama’s first presidential election, and followed it up with data from 2012. They collected data from SIUE students, and compared it against nationwide survey data to ensure that their findings can be generalized beyond a single institution.

They analyzed data gathered on the many categories of college students’ online activities, ranging from how often do students “like” or “friend” presidential candidates using social media, to how often students post online about politics. They found that someone, who likes a candidate for office or political party or joins groups on social media very frequently, is more likely to engage in one or two additional offline activities than someone who does not like candidates or parties at all.

Such activities range from actively participating in a political protest, patronizing or boycotting a business based on its practices, or any other number of civic activities. Because of Twitter’s growing popularity, Moffett and Rice found that African Americans were becoming more actively involved in political discussions in 2012.

“We speculate this occurs because for groups that have not been as involved in politics, it’s because nobody asks them to be,” Rice explains. “Social media lowers the boundary of accessibility, making it so much easier to ask these groups for heightened involvement. By being active on Facebook or Twitter, suddenly, politics come

to users rather easily and are now offering invitations for engagement. When these groups find out about political events, they are much more likely to attend.”

Their research counters the common stereotype in American society today that young people are “slactivists.” Many say this because young people are seemingly on their phones all the time, don’t use their time online in a productive way, aren’t productive in civic life, and their actions online do not lead to real world impact. This is false because the evidence indicates that the online political activities in which young people engage do lead to other forms of civic life, both online and offline.

The findings from their book have garnered national recognition. These findings have been acknowledged by the Mikva Foundation, the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement at Tufts University, and Illinois Campus Compact. In addition, their research has been profiled in recent articles on The Hill and in The Huffington Post.

The research has also qualified SIUE to participate in the “All-In Challenge,” which encourages colleges, universities and community colleges to increase the levels of civic activity and involvement in voting across student bodies. “Depending on how well a campus does in that regard, a campus can receive different prizes and badges to be featured on a campus website,” Moffett says.

At the same time, they are extending their data analyses to cover 2016 by conducting a survey of SIUE students. This will allow them to investigate several questions.

For instance, they plan to investigate whether Democratic presidential candidate Bernie Sanders’ March 2016 visit created a “Bernie Sanders Effect” on civic activity among students. Moffett and Rice will use survey data from before and after the event to investigate how this on-campus political event impacted student civic engagement, student excitement for the 2016 Presidential Election, and variations in student voting participation. Their research will also examine the extent to which Sanders supporters transitioned their support to Hillary Clinton in the upcoming election.

For the future, Moffett and Rice are excited by the potential of their research to provide valuable insights to the success of political campaigns. Rice explains, “There are a lot of people interested in, ‘How can we get citizens more involved? How do we revitalize the democracy and get people more engaged in the political process?’ Our research shows ways that social media makes a difference, and we’re continuing to look at social media platforms to see which one’s are more or less successful in getting people more politically involved.”

The discussion concluded with contrasts between the Clinton campaign’s more broad-based social media approach to the upcoming presidential election, as opposed to the Trump campaign’s focuses on Snapchat and Twitter to promote the candidate’s messages.

“In today’s political practices, part of the success is finding social media mechanisms that encourage continuous online political involvement,” Budzban explains. “We’ve all received emails encouraging us to do that, and I imagine they’re getting more sophisticated about targeting these messages. Eventually, there will be a shake out of which social media platforms are successful, and which are not. This research will help to establish those results.

“As we are less than a month from the election, I believe we will soon see some of the most amazing political theater in the history of this country. It’s going to be fascinating to watch.”

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*By Logan Cameron, SIUE Marketing & Communications*