

The Impact of Twitter on the Voters of Parliamentary Election in Kuwait

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Abstract: The rapid rise of Twitter and other social media tools has motivated people to use these services in election campaigns. During election campaigns, the use of social media by parliamentary candidates has become a way for many voters to obtain information about candidates. As a result, parliamentary candidates have had to adapt their campaign strategies to work with these media in a way that would effectively target voters. This study investigates the impact of using Twitter during the Kuwaiti 2012 parliamentary election on the voters' sentiment. The findings indicate positive relationship between Twitter use and the voters' sentiment in Kuwaiti election.

Keywords: Twitter, Social networking, Parliamentary election, Kuwait, Technology and online collaboration.

Introduction

Since their introduction, social network sites (SNSs) such as MySpace, Facebook, and Twitter have attracted millions of users, many of whom have integrated these sites into their daily practices. Although SNSs were intended to be social communications tools, the uses of the SNSs have extended to several domains including the political. According to McClurg (2003), these social interactions create “opportunities for individuals to gather information about politics that allows them to live beyond personal resource constraints, thereby supporting their political

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activity". The substantial opportunities of collaboration available to Middle Eastern civilians through Facebook and Twitter make these social media tools exceptionally powerful, leading to the potential to cause political change (Ghannam, 2011). Social media tools have continued to grow in popularity in Kuwait. According to Arab Social Media Report (2011), the number of active Twitter users in Kuwait reached 113, 428. With a percentage of 16.24%, Kuwait is the top generator of tweets in the Arab region (Arab Social Media, 2011), where the number of Facebook users in Kuwait reached 721,020 (SocialBakers, 2012). This makes Twitter & Facebook the most powerful social media tools in the country.

As one of the most famous SNSs, Twitter, a micro-blogging service launched in 2006, commands more than 200 million registered users as of July 2011, with 50 million users every day (INFOGRAPHIC, 2011). 24% of the users are of an age range of 25-34; and 20% of twitter users are below 21 years of age (Roy Morjan, 2012). In terms of gender, 61% of Twitter users are women. The growing number of Twitter users, and the ease of access to their tweets, make Twitter a popular subject for research in various research communities (Java et al., 2007). Though much of this research is concerned with the general population of users, a number are relevant to political structures.

The original idea behind Twitter was to provide personal status updates. However, Twitter turned to be an ideal tool for postings all types of topics, ranging from direct messages to political news & views, and to website links (Tumasjan et al., 2010). It is noticeable that Twitter received a lot of attention from commentators during the 2011 "Arab Spring" (Morozov, 2011).

Much has been made of the importance of social media in modern politics. Political groups and individual candidates have come to regard their online presence as so fundamentally important that they have hired staff members to act as social media coordinators (Livne et al, 2010); and the speed by which a candidate can now access voters has led to extreme sophistication in the use of these systems (Livne et al., 2010). Twitter, with its millions - registered users, is a particularly popular tool, allowing for rapid micro-blogged tweets to be sent to any follower.

Recently, with the rapid growth of the internet, social media may be emerging as a substantial part of campaigns that is just as important as the

more traditional forms of media that have been utilized in the past. The use of online campaigning has grown rapidly. This growth will probably continue and will eventually lead to the use of the internet becoming the most important element of campaigning (Milliken, 2012). Successful use of social media as part of political campaigns had drawn both popular and academic attention, particularly in the 2008 U.S. Presidential campaign of Barack Obama, which had captured both the popular and academic attention (Livnel et al, 2010). Diakopoulos and Shamma (2010) showed that tweets can be used to track real-time sentiment about a candidate's performance during a televised debate. Twitter came to be an influential tool in all types of elections, especially during presidential or parliamentary election. Knowing this, politicians communicate with voters and try to attract supporters. A substantial amount (22%) of adult internet users were engaged with the electoral campaigns through online social networks during the November 2010 US elections (Smith, 2011). Typical uses of Twitter, including daily chatter, information sharing, reporting news and conversing (Java et al., 2007), can all contain indicators of political opinion and sentiment. This is particularly true during the times of elections, when citizens are more likely to discuss politicians, parties and political issues online (Skoric et al., 2011).

There is not a significant amount of research on Twitter and its potential impact on politics. However, it seems to be an emerging research area (Tumasjan et al., 2010). The use of Twitter in elections has been discussed in many recent studies. Tumasjan et al. (2010) used chatter on Twitter to predict the German federal election. Diakopoulos and Shamma (2010) showed that tweets can be used to track real-time sentiment about a candidate's performance during a televised debate. The aim of this study is to examine whether Twitter has an impact on voters' sentiments during political campaigns in Kuwait.

Background on the Kuwaiti National Assembly Election

Democracy is an integral part of the Kuwaiti political culture and identity (Herb, 2009). Its parliament considers to be the most powerful in the Arab world. Kuwait enjoys a high level of political movement. According to Kuwait's Constitution, the elections of National Assembly must be held every four years. Kuwait's 1962 constitution calls for elections to National Assembly and Kuwait holds generally free and fair parliamentary elections.

The population of Kuwait reached approximately 3.065 Million (1,089,969 Kuwaitis & 1,975,881 expats). With 93% literacy rate, Kuwait is one of the Arab world' highest, a matter that is due to extensive government support for the education system (Kuwait Planning Ministry, 2012). The National Assembly, the first elected parliament in the Gulf, was established in 1963 and has 50 elected seats. National Assembly election has been held since 1963, but the national Assembly was suspended by the Emir between 1976-1981, and between 1986-1992. Kuwait is divided into five districts in the National Assembly elections. The voter can cast votes for four candidates; and in each district, the highest 10 candidates earn seats. In the 2012 parliamentary election there were 265 candidates and 450,000 voters. The voter turnout of the election was 59% (240,000 of 400,000 registered voters).

Methodology

This study is trying to explore the impact of the use of Twitter on changing the voters' sentiments in Kuwait. Twitter is so popular in Kuwait. There are 113,000 Twitter users in Kuwait. Knowing the powerful impact of Twitter, 74% of the National Assembly candidates have personal accounts on Twitter, and 9% of them have created accounts especially for their campaigns. Several descriptive and analytical statistical tests were used in this study. The normality of the data distributions was analyzed using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test to determine whether the significance levels of the sample data fit a normal distribution.

We expect that using Twitter by Kuwaiti voters has an effect on deciding which candidates they will vote for.

H1: Twitter has a significant impact on the voters' sentiment in the parliamentary election.

We used original survey data to test the hypothesis regarding the relationship between Twitter use and voters' sentiment. We opted to focus on Twitter only because it is the most popular SNS in the country. The survey method of research was used to collect data. This exploratory study employed a convenience sample due to limited time available to gather data during the election campaign. The survey allowed us to gather data about Twitter usage among a relevant population. The

sample consisted of 317 twitter users who are in age that allows them to vote, which is 21 and above.

A questionnaire was developed by the researchers to gather data from participants. The instrument was reviewed and approved by a statistical expert. The questionnaire consisted of 20 questions and was disseminated in the first two weeks of February 2012. The questionnaire was composed of two sections. The first one consisted of demographic questions (Age, Gender, Level of Education, etc). The second consisted of questions related to the general usage of Twitter (Number of Friends, Usage Time, etc.). Each question in this section was measured on a five-point Likert scale. Respondents specified their level of agreement to a statement when responding to a Likert questionnaire item. The questionnaire was posted on the Internet, and Twitter users were asked to participate. Prior to the real use of the questionnaire, a pilot of 15 Twitter users was conducted to test whether the questionnaire wording was understood by a range of different people. The questionnaires were received back within the following two weeks.

Results and Findings

We constructed a survey that was given to Kuwaiti Twitter users ($n = 317$). The survey allowed us to gather data about Twitter usage among voting population. The reliability of the instrument was calculated using Cronbach's alpha. Reliability test refers to the degree to which a test is consistent and stable in measuring what it is intended to measure (Cavana et.al., 2001). Consistency indicates how well the items measuring a concept hang together as a set. The most common consistency measure is Cronbach's alpha. The results of the pilot study indicated that the questions were reliable. The overall alpha core for the pilot data was 0.93, which indicated high reliability of the instrument. Among the valid participants, there were 60.6% males and 39.47% females. The results showed that 244 (77%) of the participants use their real name in their Twitter accounts, while 23% of the participants said that they did not use their real names. In terms of intensity of Twitter usage, 28.4% were found to use Twitter three hours or more daily. Regarding the age of participants, 47.3% found to be in the range of 21-30. Table 1 shows the details of the demographic data.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics for Scale of demographic data

	%
Age distribution	
21-30	47.3
31-40	36.6
41-50	10.7
More than 50	5.4
On a typical day, how much time do you spend on Twitter?	
Less than an Hour	23.0
1-2 Hours	24.6
2-3 Hours	24.0
More than 3 hours	28.4
Level of education for Twitter users	
Below High School	1.6
High School/ Diploma	22.7
Bachelor	60.3
Master	10.4
Ph.D.	5.0

Twitter Impact on Voters

The result revealed that 54% of the participants either agree or strongly agree that they received statements from the candidates through Twitter. Furthermore, 39.6% participants listed clips of the candidates. The results also showed that 21% of the participants believed that what was published on Twitter was credible; where 59% of them thought that what was published was somehow credible. These results show that the majority of Twitter users rely on it in gathering data about the candidates.

The normality of the data distributions was analyzed using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test to determine whether the significance levels of the sample data fit a normal distribution. The confidence level was set at 95%. According to our test results, the p-value was greater than 0.05, which

indicates that the distribution of data was normal. In order to test whether there was a relationship between using Twitter and voters' decision, t-test was used to test the significance. The results indicate that using Twitter has a significant impact on voters' decision. See table 2 for details.

Table 2:
Impact of Twitter on voters' decision

Item	Mean	Std. Dev.	Significance
Twitter has an effect on evaluating candidates	2.30	1.008	.000
Depending on Twitter	2.65	11.616	.000

Since Kuwaiti society is conservative, it imposes some restrictions on females' behavior. These restrictions include participation in using SNSs. This has been shown to be significant in terms of the percentage of females having Twitter accounts, the number of followers, and the intensity of their Twitter use. Table 2 presents the details of t-test for gender significance. Gender was found to be a significant factor for the number of Twitter followers, use of real name, and discussing candidates with other Twitter Users. There was no indication that using Twitter was not significant in marketing or in choosing candidates. The results indicate that gender has no effect on voters' decision.

Table 3
Gender Significance

	Male Mean	Female Mean	Significance
Intensity of Twitter Use	2.63	2.50	.352
Use of real name	1.16	1.34	.000
Number of followers	346	145	.002
Discussions with other users	2.88	2.57	.035
campaigning for candidates	2.84	2.59	.135
Depend on Twitter in choosing candidate	2.59	2.74	.240

Discussion

With 84% of the participants under the age of 40, it is obvious that Twitter is an important communication tool among youth in Kuwait. Results show that 55% of the participants use twitter to follow news; this indicates that the majority of young adults in Kuwait rely on Twitter to express their voting sentiment. With a mean of 3.92, the results showed that participants rely heavily on Twitter to gain information on political candidates. With a significance of $p=.032$, the results revealed a significant relationship between social media and voter choice. The above findings suggest that using Twitter can be an effective means for shaping voters' decision. These findings support the hypothesis that being part of the Twitter community has its effect on voters' sentiment at the time of parliamentary election. The results demonstrated that participants agreed that Twitter was a suitable space for interactive political communication; and that an online campaign is important for campaign efficiency. This implies that Twitter is a suitable Internet space for political engagement. Therefore, political candidates should include more social media in their campaigns.

Conclusion

The objective of this paper has been to offer new insights when it comes to how Twitter may influence voters' perceptions and views, and how factors affecting voters' trust in candidates can be examined. Results were based on a quantitative study on Kuwaiti Twitter user's experience. We found that twitter offers a significant opportunity for candidates to reach out to voters and positively influence them; this is an opportunity that has not been fully utilized before. Using survey data collected, we predicted that there were positive relationships between the use of Twitter and voters' decision. The above findings can help candidates tailor their campaign strategies to their own interests.

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تأثير التويتر على الناخبين في انتخابات مجلس الأمة الكويتي

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ملخص: الانتشار السريع لموقع التويتر وباقي مواقع التواصل الاجتماعي شجع مستخدمي هذه المواقع على توظيفها في الحملات الانتخابية. ولذلك أصبحت هذه المواقع وسيلة للناخبين لتعرف المرشحين في أثناء الحملات الانتخابية. وفي المقابل حرص المرشحون على تحسين حملاتهم الانتخابية من خلال استخدام هذه المواقع للوصول إلى أكبر عدد من الناخبين.

هذا البحث يهدف إلى دراسة تأثير استخدام خدمة التويتر على قرار الناخب الكويتي خلال فترة انتخابات مجلس الأمة لعام 2012. النتائج المتحصلة من الدراسة تشير إلى وجود علاقة إيجابية بين استخدام التويتر واختيارات الناخب الكويتي.

المصطلحات الأساسية: التويتر، شبكات التواصل الاجتماعي، الانتخابات البرلمانية، الكويت، التكنولوجيا والتواصل الافتراضي.

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