

VOTE RATIONALLY, VOTE INTELLIGENTLY, JUST VOTE:
AN APPLICATION TO ADDRESS UNINFORMED VOTING AND VOTER APATHY.

A Thesis by
TIMOTHY AARON BARDLAVENS JR.

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TIMOTHY AARON BARDLAVENS JR.

Approved by:

Advisor: Virgil Scott

Committee: Lee Whitmarsh, *Major Professor*
Virgil Scott
Margaret Bowles DeBosier
Raul Varela

Head of Department: Dr. William Wadley

Dean of the College: Dr. Salvatore Attardo

Dean of Graduate Studies: Dr. Arlene Horn

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1. Purpose of the Exhibition

This exhibit will address the viability of a mobile application to encourage civic engagement, inform voters and create a more convenient option for casting a ballot. The exhibition will also explore the various types of voters and the effect of generational events on their level of civil engagement, the psychology of politics—delving into the effects of emotions, such as anxiety and enthusiasm, on a voter’s views of a political candidate as well as their memory of that which is presented and the effects of technology on voting, including voter decisions—technological influences which would range from the antiquated voting methods currently in place within municipalities across the country to the use of notification systems as a motivator to complete an action.

While the study and exhibition will focus on local and state elections, the application will be adaptable to larger, national uses. The researcher will also explore how social outlets, such as Facebook and Twitter, affect voter views and the role of political media. Furthermore, the researcher will explore how educating voters on how government works and the usefulness of “dumbing down” policy information for the layman can lead to more informed voters and voter decisions. Finally, the researcher will explore avenues in which to remove emotions from politics by disconnecting partisanship from policies as to encourage voters to vote for policies as opposed to politicians.

2. Statement of the Problem

The US has the lowest voter turnout of any democratic nation worldwide. Studies have shown only an estimated 60% of eligible voters exercise their right within national elections, a number that quickly decreases to less than 40% when analyzing midterm elections (Fairvote.org, “Voter Turnout”). Voter apathy, the lack of caring or interest in voting, can be largely attributed to various causes such as: (1) frustration due to limited polling locations, reduced early voting hours or days and strict/confusing voting laws, (2) misleading information from social media or biased news websites, (3) over saturation of politics within the news cycle and (4) the perceived lack of favorable candidate options. This frustration is compounded with the oversaturation of fake or inaccurate information perforating social media channels, the lack of desire to research candidates or break from partisanship to vote logically as opposed to emotionally. Studies have shown emotions, such as anger and anxiety, or party loyalty can cause a voter to choose a candidate they find unfavorable, in contradiction to their standard of ethics.

Additionally, based on a study by New York University School of Law's Brennan Center for Justice, 43 states in the US are using outdated voting machinery—most have not undergone an update for over 15 years or are still using paper ballots. With the cost to replace these machines upwards of \$1 billion, many states desire updated systems, but lack the resources. Moreover, because these machines are antiquated, their security systems are more vulnerable to cyberattacks than that of a common cellular device.

3. Research Questions and Objectives

The researcher must first answer the question, whether the goal of this application to simply encourage informed voting or civic engagement. The answer to this will dictate how information is presented to the users of the planned application. The researcher will seek to understand the polling process in which candidates and proposed provisions are uploaded onto polling machines or printed on paper ballots, as well as understand the information-security requirements to submit votes. In addition, the researcher will explore the plausibility of removing emotion from politics—making the irrational, rational, if notification systems drive action or if the overuse of cellular devices have reduced the sense of urgency attributed to notifications and how to amalgamate information from across various municipalities.

If successful, this study could demonstrate a precise set of variables—i.e. an application, notifications, layman term information and policy without partisanship—can increase the number of individuals voting and their knowledge of that in which they are voting. Citizens would benefit from the increase in voting and informed voting with the election of representatives who share most voters' views and policy expectations. The success of this application would also lead to the increase in the largest voting bloc in America, Millennials.

4. Literature Review

Introduction

Research has shown that there has been a historically low level of civic engagement in recent decades due to apathy. Yet, researching this subject matter is no linear task for someone to take on, but a multivariate endeavor. This research not only focuses on the person or the voter in which the researcher must understand the role of emotions and decision making, but the generational sociocultural context and the deepening influence of technology. Existing research explores the psychology of politics—how emotions

affect voters, the various type of voters—how their life experiences and socioeconomic connections influence their voting habits and the role of technology given its idiosyncratic ability to influence the human thoughts and behaviors. The researcher seeks to aggregate existing research to create connections, identify patterns, and develop a solution to engage, inform, and encourage voters.

Understanding Voters

Democratic participation, as defined by Bartl Commaerts (647), can be defined in two ways. The first being a more narrow definition by which an individual would seek to elect competent leaders into office. The second, is broader and stresses the value of participation as it pertains to civic society organizations and social movements. On a micro level, this could be participation in student government, school board governance or worker participation in professional organizations and a macro level encompassing the participation in state and national democratic processes.

Studies have shown unique historical cycles or generational shifts as they relate to social experience (Maloy 3). Consider the early 1950s and 60s, voter activity was particularly high due to the civil rights movement and the perpetuation of civic engagement throughout the country, whereas during the 1990s events such as the Cold War and the Rodney King incident negatively impacted the American social experience causing a feeling of instability. More recently, a generational shift between years has occurred with the inception of Barack Obama and the “Obama effect”—an effect in which people experienced more positive feelings of hope and pride, leading them to a social broadening, or the expansion to the feeling of self to include others (Ong 424). This almost utopian effect ultimately lead to the current climate of anger and fear, due to the belief that the nation would continue to progress as opposed to regress.

When accounting for the generational differences between voting groups one must also consider the influence of the role model. With many studies portraying millennials as apathetic and lacking political interest, the role model must also be considered. Studies have shown the value of a role model taking the time to develop a positive attitude toward civic engagement and how that engagement can lead to positive outcomes. Conversely the expression of hopelessness and apathy as it relates to political engagement, while also leading a life of perceived prosperity, will likely create attitudes that result in limited political involvement (Froiland, "Political Apathy And Youth"). Consequently, if a role model displays the importance of civic engagement and its benefits a child or mentee will be more likely to model their

enthusiasm. Whereas a role model openly displaying disdain for the political process, yet continues to be unaffected by its result, can negatively affect a mentee—as they would fail to understand the correlation between civic engagement and personal prosperity. Thus, examining the level of civic engagement within races, religions or educational levels includes understanding generational influences and those of role models on the encouragement or detraction of participation.

Emotions and Politics

The saying, “there are two things you do not talk about, religion and politics,” is likely one of the most substantive statements one could make. Due to the nature of the subject matter being inclusive of a wide range of issues, politics has continued to be a contentious topic among social groups, but, when considering an individual’s voting habits, emotions and politics become more convoluted. Studies measuring the relationship between anxiety and candidate choices can be problematic due to the lack of distinction between whether anxiety influences candidate evaluations or if candidate evaluations influence anxiety (Ladd, 2008). The Affective Intelligence Theory, coined by Marcus, Neuman, & MacKuen (henceforth MNM) (348), asserts that people have two emotional systems: the first is the disposition system governing enthusiasm and the second is the surveillance system, which governs anxiety. In short this theory states that enthusiasm reinforces an individual’s political choices, while anxiety would cause a fundamental change in political thinking. Thus, instead of voting along party lines or religious beliefs, anxiety may cause an individual to rely more heavily on additional information about the candidate’s personal qualities and positions on issues.

Jonathan McDonald Ladd and Gabriel S. Lenz (276–277) challenged MNM on this theory by asserting two alternative theories: (1) Affect Transfer, which states a voter would lower their evaluations of a candidate if they are anxious and raise their evaluations if they are enthusiastic—this is to say, a voter would want to know less information about a candidate who causes feelings of anxiety and would want to have more information about a candidate that they are enthusiastic about. One could logically conclude humans have a natural inclination to dislike or reject negative information, while seeking more information to maintain a sense of awe or to evangelize for that which they are enthusiastic. (2) The Endogenous Affect is an alternative in which research indicates voters first rationalize their candidates or parties of choice, then apply emotion to those evaluations. Voters reflect their party preferences and their emotions are elicited by

those reflections and their view of opposing candidates. The Endogenous Affect is further supported by studies in which participants who identify with a specific party are presented a video of congressional candidates labeled Democrat, Republican or not identified. These candidates deliver identical speeches in an emotionally expressive or unexpressive manner; test subjects immediately selected candidates aligned with their party who was unexpressive, but when presented with the unidentified candidate they preferred the emotionally expressive candidate (Stroud 41). Considering current events, the researcher is lead to believe that all three theories contain substantiated claims, but to truly understand which, if any, are most substantive one must understand at which point emotion negates logic or logic negates emotion. The results of the study leads one to conclude presenting non-partisan issues in an emotional way would garner the greatest reaction, but to do so would still create biases for or against that issue.

The Role of Technology

Technology is both a tool for learning, convenience and entertainment. Micro interactions such as push notifications, “short pieces of information being delivered to an individual when an active connection is available through push technology” (Chua 5684), are simply alerts triggered on a mobile device or within a web application by a new event, message, status or to confirm an action. Studies have shown that these notifications can be used to support user’s competency of subject matter, increase meta-learning or the reflection and awareness to foster understanding and motivate learning (Tabuenca 133). Push notifications also create a psychological sense of urgency to begin or complete a task. Studies have proven the efficacy of using technology, like push notifications, to inform users and encourage civic engagement, but they also argue that the perpetuation and normalization of notifications within mobile devices will more likely become peripheral, easily ignored or forgotten. While some studies display optimism of the potential of technology to not only educate, but engage other studies believe that technology is highly unlikely to increase civic participation, but would, ultimately, reflect the existing patters of participation (Alvarez and Nagler 133). These studies assert only a marginal few users would use technology to participate in a more meaningful way, those few being: enthusiastic, wealthy, civic minded, politically interested youth. Other demographics would only use the technology for a limited time or will lack the desire to break from their current level of participation.

Technology has also played and continues to play a dual role in politics and human behavior. In *Seducing America: How Television Charms the Modern Voter*, Hart (3) argues that shows, such as *Politically Incorrect*, encouraged political cynicism (Maloy 3). Hart believed that a focus on political personalities instead of issues resulted in the public's obsession with over articulate, personable candidates. What is interesting is the notion that by watching these political figures and pundits on television, American citizens felt the illusion of participating in the political process without voting. Social media platforms, like Facebook, have become the number one source of news for over 67% of adults in America (Gottfried, 2016)—it is believed that the notion of sharing news articles, in addition to posting and tweeting of political thoughts, views and criticisms somehow equates to civic engagement.

Conclusion

Voter apathy, or the lack of civic interest, is a trend that has continuously lead to lower voter engagement year over year. The studies and journal articles presented here simply preface the psychology of politics: how emotions influence political choices or how external stimuli, such as candidates, media and partisanship, effect voter's emotions and, or civic engagement and the role of technology: how notification systems encourage action and elicit meta-learning. Conversely, this research does not fully establish the relationship between emotion, information and motivation; the researcher will seek to establish the relationship with these three items—creating a solution that utilizes the influence of mobile technology and existing user experience models.

5. Methods or Procedures

The researcher will begin by thoroughly researching the psychology of voting, the types of voters by generation and technology and voting. The research will focus on the general American population, but will narrow the scope to focus primarily on local and state government elections when considering how to produce the application.

The researcher would then begin prototyping the mobile application to allow users to vote using mobile devices, access easy-to-understand information about policies, interact with social media and set notification reminders for election days.

6. Limitations

This study will not attempt to prove that voters will openly accept and trust an application as a new form of voting or any information presented within the application. Furthermore, this study will not attempt to prove municipalities will adopt this technology as an alternative to in-person voting. The researcher will focus on the general feasibility of this application, but the actual application is limited to a prototype and will not have the user testing needed to prove out the hypothesis. Finally, this study will not attempt to solve all issues as they relate to voter apathy and uninformed voting, but will present a limited scope of research to understand specific root cause and proposed solutions.

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