Civic Engagement in Trump Era Politics

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Abstract: Current research on online and offline forms of civic engagement lacks the necessary information through which to understand the relationship between different forms of activism under the new presidential administration in the United States. President Trump's administration has consistently incited passionate and ongoing response from both sides of the political spectrum which has led to both support and protest towards the administration. Nonetheless, his active presence on his personal social media accounts both differs significantly from past presidencies in the United States and further complicates and instigates response from his constituents online and offline. Moreover, social media has transformed into a readily available tool through which users partake in forms of online activism by simply retweeting or posting. However, the current methods of organization simultaneously evolve and revert back to traditional forms of activism as seen through the succession of events following the 2017 DACA repeal. As a result, my proposal seeks to understand the relationship between online and offline forms of civic engagement as it is impacted by the Trump administration to examine how citizens respond to changing political climates.

On September 5, 2017, President Donald Trump's administration signed an executive order to rescind the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) established in 2012. On the day of the repeal, Loyola Marymount University President, Timothy Snyder, released a statement in support of the DACA recipients which received support online from the students. The next day, these students participated in an on-campus protest of the DACA repeal and the Trump Administration. Rather than solely voice support for their opinions on an online platform, these students took their political beliefs and participated in an offline form of political engagement as well.

Both events were protesting the DACA repeal; however, the medium used to protest differed and led me to research whether a relationship existed between online and offline activism. Two works in particular provided a solid foundation towards understanding the differences between online and offline activism and the benefits of using either. Illia's 2003 article, "Passage to cyberactivism: how dynamics of activism change," provides a comprehensive history of the ways in which cyberactivism, or online activism, developed. She argues that while cyberactivism, like online promotion or campaign websites, resembles the process of traditional activism, like protesting and voting, it differs because the online space allows for "cyberactivists to gain visibility—and to reach objectives" without physical gatherings (Illia 334). Therefor, the author's work acknowledges the validity of cyberactivism as a form of civic engagement. Shirky's 2008 book, *Here comes everybody, the power of organizing without organizations*, examines the ways the Internet and mobile phones redefined the groups organization and identity construction. He contends that social media differs from traditional media because the "systems of filtering" and "systems of production" vary (Shirky 96). His work illustrates that the ability to cooperate shifts into the power of the user in social media which

facilitates online and offline organization. Although Shirky and Illia present a framework to understand the process of offline activism and group organization, more recent work provides greater detail.

More recent studies concentrate on the relationship between online and offline activism or the ways users employ social media to reach a goal. In 2011, Oser and Marien published an empirical study and attempted to find a connection between the two forms of activism, and they analyzed the participation in terms of mobilization thesis and the reinforcement thesis. The mobilization thesis contends the availability of technology enables disengaged groups to participate in politics while the reinforcement thesis asserts the Internet does not change existing patterns and further marginalizes disadvantaged populations (Oser 91). They concluded that while an analysis of age and gender confirm the mobilization thesis, socioeconomic inequalities were reinforced online (Oser 99). Consequently, Oser's work provides some insight on the relationship between forms of activism. In 2015, Bonilla published a case study surrounding the social media context that created a spotlight on the Ferguson shootings. Their use of viral social media posts effectively demonstrates how online activism exerts a different pressure on institutions, like judicial proceedings. The author states that social media, like Twitter, "does not just allow you to peer through a window; it allows you to look through manifold windows at once" (Bonilla 7). Bonilla's research suggests the spotlight cast by online activism was brief, but it impacted and allowed a wider audience to call for social justice reform.

Despite the foundation established by the aforementioned work, the literature available lacks critical information necessary to analyze the DACA events. Although Illia's article provides a starting point, online forms of protest changed drastically since her initial research. While the author's concepts remain applicable, there lacks a comprehensive analysis of social

media activism in particular. Additionally, Clay Shirky's work centers on the changing dynamics of group organization and because of its date may not apply to our current form of cyberactivism. Oser's article, while more recent, fails to investigate how the 2012 Presidential Election, which heavily used social media, impacted their findings. Their focus on the mobilization and reinforcement thesis, while useful, also narrows their understanding of the relationship between online and offline activism. Finally, while Bonilla discusses how social media supplemented the Ferguson events, their article resembles a news article and fails to address the concepts of online and offline engagement it alludes to in its examples. While a useful starting point, the research available lacks critical information to address the current relationship between online and offline civic engagement.

The missing components I found when investigating online and offline activism drove me to further acknowledge the uniqueness of the DACA events. In contrast to past administrations, never before has the United States seen a president so personally active on social media, like Donald J. Trump. Additionally, never before has the president's words incited such visible discussion on both sides of the political spectrum seen online and offline. Because of the divisive nature of President Trump's administration, I want to analyze the relationship between online forms of activism on social media and offline civic engagement, specifically in the context of Trump Era politics.

I plan to address my research question through two parts: the collection of empirical data and social media posts and the analysis of the two platforms. My empirical results will come from a survey I conduct of random participants engaged in offline forms of civic engagement. The other portion would require the random collection and analysis of social media posts relating to the event I choose to attend which would measure levels of online civic engagement.

In order to answer the way offline activism operates within the current political climate, I plant to attend two different protests, or political gatherings, and conduct a survey of the attendees. My research deals with human subjects, so I will submit proper paperwork to the Institutional Review Board for approval of my methods. I am choosing two events because I want to attend both an anti-Trump and a pro-Trump administration gathering in order to remain unbiased. I will interview random attendees using the Pew Internet and American Life survey questions. I will supplement those questions with my own regarding the participants rationale behind attending the event, past attendance, and their participation level on social media platforms. Then, I will record these answers and create a table for each question. This will allow me to analyze what incited their desire to protest, on what type of platform they first heard of the event, their history with civic engagement, and their online social media participation.

I understand that because of the unpredictable nature of protests, it poses a challenge when attempting to conduct research. However, I have chosen to attend the 2018 Women's March in Los Angeles in January and a Young Republicans meeting in Los Angeles in February 2018. Although not directly aimed against the Trump Administration, the first Women's March in Los Angeles did occur on the date of President Trump's first full day as president to protest the incoming administration. Also, some protester signs did directly criticize comments made by President Trump during his campaign. I also acknowledge the Young Republicans meeting is acting as a placeholder for a pro-Trump administration rally but serves as a viable substitute. I understand that the political party does not necessarily align with the Trump Administration. However, they do align with more conservative measures which the Trump Administration has publicized they represent.

In order to supplement that research, I will analyze social media posts that relate to those two events, specifically on Twitter. I will specifically use Twitter because that is the social media form that President Trump utilizes the most. I will use Twitter's search function and search keywords that relate to the event I'm studying. To collect results, I will sort the results by most relevant and collect every fifth tweet until I have accumulated fifteen tweets per key phrase. I will then look at the collection of these tweets and determine whether or not they are in favor or against the event they pertain to.

I will compile the results from both experiments in a published academic paper. Ultimately, my research will form an understanding of social media's impact within our time period to not only establish connections, but as a medium through which individuals can bring about substantial change offline. Furthermore, it is also imperative to study because we have yet to examine how the sudden shift in political climate in the United States affects a nation's willingness and means of civic engagement.

In order to conduct my research, given the two events I have chosen, I will need $150 dollars. I will need $100 in order to purchase the software SPSS which will allow me to collect and quantify my survey results. The rest of the budget, $50, will go towards transportation related expenses to reach the locations where I will carry out my research.

The DACA events in September 2017 were unique because they demonstrated how both online and offline activism were actively present. Although the literature available provided a preliminary understanding of the relationship between the two, the information was either outdated or insufficiently researched. As a result, my proposal seeks to address this gap by investigating two forms of civic engagement in hopes of understanding the way a divisive political administration affects citizens willingness to engage in different forms of activism.

Works Cited

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