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The Role of Online Political Videos in Fostering Political Engagement

YouTube is one of the newest media channels for political campaigning, and online political videos have proliferated since the site was launched in 2005. Anyone—whether they work for a campaign or are making independently-produced video—can generate original material or take already mediated material and publish it on the site. YouTube videos feature a wide variety of content, as do the comments that viewers leave on the site. Put simply, YouTube enables a participatory media culture that provides anyone with a computer and Internet connection new opportunities to express a political voice.

Surveys have shown that many people watch videos on YouTube, including political videos. In December 2007 the Pew Internet and American Life Project conducted a national phone survey of 2,054 American adults 18 and older. Among all Internet users, 48% said that they had visited “a video-sharing site such as YouTube” and 70% of the participants ages 18-29 said that they had done so. A survey conducted from February 15 – March 7, 2007 by the same organization found that 15% of Internet users had watched political videos online. A Pew Internet Project Survey conducted from April 8 – May 11, 2008 found that 64% of Obama supporters had viewed a political video online whereas 43% of Clinton supporters had done so.

The downfall of Senator George Allen in 2006 illustrates the growing political power of YouTube. As then Republican Senator George Allen toured the state of Virginia campaigning for re-election, he was being tracked by a videographer hired by Jim Webb, the opposing Democrat candidate. While on the campaign trail Allen decided to make the presence of the cameraman obvious and called him a ‘macaca’ (a term taken by some as a racial or ethnic slur). He then welcomed him to America and the real world of Virginia. The videographer retaliated by posting the video on YouTube and other video sharing sites. It was viewed by many users and even ended up on television. The incident ultimately ruined Allen’s chances at re-election.

The 2008 presidential election is the first presidential election with YouTube. The humorous “Obama girl” video was first posted on June 13, 2007 and subsequently received almost nine million hits. Later that same year, CNN teamed with YouTube to conduct a pair of presidential debates. At present, YouTube is flooded with political videos, some of which receive large numbers of hits. Now, even the candidates are making videos and releasing them on YouTube.

I am in the process of conducting research that will examine whether independently-produced online political videos about presidential candidates can foster political engagement among young people. I will use experimental research to collect data for this study. There will be three treatment groups and a control group. One treatment group will watch an independently-produced video about presidential candidate Barack Obama. Another will watch an independently-produced video about presidential candidate John McCain. The third treatment group will watch both videos. All four groups will then complete a posttest measuring their political engagement. The posttest

will consist of a series of questions measuring participants' level of political engagement, including attention to campaign news as well as intent to vote, wear a button, display a bumper sticker, donate money and attend campaign events. The posttest will also measure participants' level of media consumption, familiarity with YouTube, political party affiliation, political ideology, age, gender, and race/ethnicity.

The results will shed light on the potential for YouTube to encourage political engagement among a relatively disengaged category of citizens. Previous research conducted by the Pew Research Center has examined consumption of political videos on YouTube but has not examined their impact on political engagement. Given that they package political information in an entertaining format, YouTube videos have the potential to foster political engagement; this experiment will test that potential. I anticipate that watching YouTube videos about the 2008 presidential election will foster political engagement among young people. Specifically, I expect that participants who watch the videos will report higher levels of political engagement than will participants in the control group.