

Slactivists or Activists?

*The Impact of Social Media Use on Individual-Level Political Participation:
Evidence from the Brazilian Ficha Limpa Campaign*

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Abstract

Social media have come to form an inherent part of most activist campaigns today. Yet, their potential to foster political participation and mobilization remains debated. While cyber-utopians insist on the positive contribution of social online-activism to participatory democracy, supporters of the "slactivism" argument dismiss it as a hedonist activity that carries little societal benefit. Our analysis of the Brazilian anti-corruption campaign Ficha Limpa picks up on this debate. We present original survey data concerning citizens' use of social media and their offline participation in the context of this campaign. Using a binary logit model that estimates the relation between the use of different communication features supported by social media and contacting elected officials, we show that online activities involving relatively high transaction costs in terms of time and effort contribute more positively toward offline participation than simple single-click activities. Our findings indicate that the choice of appropriate social media formats may be a decisive element for the success of campaigners who seek to mobilize citizens via the Internet.

1. Introduction

Recent years have seen an increasing debate on the political role of the Internet. Especially social media (SM) have emerged as a phenomenon of interest in political science.¹ The prominent role of SM in political events of such diverse nature as the 2008 U.S. presidential election and the ouster of authoritarian regimes in Tunisia and Egypt in 2011, has spurred a controversial discussion on the effective impact of these tools on political outcomes. Cyber-utopians attribute them with quasi-magical virtues such as promoting participatory democracy and a transnational culture of public deliberation and civic mobilization. Meanwhile, at the other end of the opinion spectrum, cyber-sceptics dismiss the influence of SM as marginal or even warn about their potential to reinforce declining trends in political participation (Morozov 2011, (Schuefele and Nisbet 2002). The wide divergence of these positions clearly suggests that empirical research on this topic is still scarce and underdeveloped.

Research on the relation between internet use and citizens' civic and political engagement only goes back a little more than a decade. Nevertheless it has already experienced important gains in terms of differentiation and depth of analysis. Given the lack of more differentiated data, pioneering studies necessarily relied on simple binary measures of internet access and reported marginal or no effect on political engagement (Bimber 1999; Bimber 2001). Since then, survey research has expanded its range of items measuring internet use, giving way to more differentiated analyses that relate variance in levels of political engagement to different modes of internet use. A variety of studies have categorized general types of Internet use (e.g. informational vs. recreational), and analyzed their impact on political behaviour and civic engagement (Moy, Manosevitch et al. 2005; Mossberger, Tolbert et al. 2007). In general, however, the approach has remained primarily user focused, i.e. on the question how socio-demographic factors shape patterns of online behaviour and how these patterns translate into offline behaviour (Best and Krueger 2005; Wasserman and Richmond-Abbott 2005; Vitak, Zube et al. 2010; Baumgartner and Morris 2010).

Meanwhile, our knowledge concerning which and how specific characteristics and features of SM may work to engage or disengage citizens in politics remains, at best,

¹ The authors would like to thank Marlón Reis, Assistant Judge at the Supreme Electoral Court of Brazil for his support.

fragmentary. Existing SM formats display a considerable variety of purpose and format, catering to diverse target groups and offering different communication features to their users. This poses the question whether such variety in design translates into varying degrees of capability to foster citizen engagement in politics. To begin bridging this knowledge gap, this project focuses on different SM features, the central underlying question being whether SM formats that offer a certain mix of communication features are more efficient in fostering offline political participation and mobilization than others.

Specifically, we we'll be looking at political activities that are relevant in the context of cause related campaigning, i.e. consuming campaign content, discussing political campaigns, signing petitions, publishing campaign material, and contacting officials.

We part from the assumption that all of the above activities have a counterpart that can be performed online with the help of SM. Examples include: signing e-petitions, posting and sharing issue-oriented content, join issue oriented online discussion groups, etc. The fact, however, that these virtual activities carry less transaction costs than their "real life" equivalents has found its expression in a number of pejorative terms such as "clicktivism", "slactivism", "armchair activism", or "feelgood activism", all aimed at describing online support of political or social causes as an activity that has little or no practical effect other than the satisfaction of the person engaged in it. On a more pessimistic note, some analysts warn that the impact of online activism on political participation and mobilization might even be negative, as people would begin to turn away from conventional forms of participation to embrace more "slactivist" forms (Morozov 2009). To date, neither this negative notion, nor the opposite (optimistic) assumption that citizens' participation in digital activism may eventually increase their propensity to participate in politics offline, have been sufficiently supported by empirical evidence.

Existing studies concerning the relationship between the use of SM and political participation have so far typically been conducted under laboratory conditions with small numbers of participants selected from relatively homogenous populations (Vitak, Zube et al. 2010); (Min 2007 ; Bode 2008). However, what is needed to conclusively settle this controversy is robust statistical analysis on large datasets that investigates the relation between online and offline participatory political behaviour in the context of real life political events. The case of the Brazilian "Ficha Limpa" campaign selected for the purpose of this study provides an opportunity to do just that.

2. The case of the Brazilian *Ficha Limpa* Campaign

As most Latin American countries, following democratic restoration in 1985, Brazil expanded its citizens' participation rights by incorporating in its constitution a number of institutions that theoretically enabled Brazilians to take part in political decision making beyond representative elections. Among them was the *iniciativa legislativa* (legislative initiative), a semi-direct democratic procedure allowing citizens to propose law projects to Congress by means of signature collection. However, again in line with a general regional tendency, citizen lawmaking in Brazil remained limited, which is mainly attributed to the specific institutional design of the *iniciativa legislativa*: Different from direct democratic procedures in which having met a specified signature target, citizen-proposed bills automatically qualify for a popular vote (Beramendi, Ellis

et al. 2008), in Brazil, the decision to approve, reject or amend a citizen proposed bill is voted by Congress. Whether civil society groups succeed or fail in their endeavour to influence national political decision making will hence not only depend on their mobilization capacity but also to a considerable degree on congressional good will.

Despite this difficult institutional setting, between 2008 and 2010, the country saw a successful citizen initiative campaign, unprecedented in scope and impact. In April 2008, the Brazilian Movement against Electoral Corruption (MCCE), an umbrella NGO that coordinates 50 civil society organizations, launched a campaign to improve the profile of candidates running for legislative office. The Brazilian Congress has a general reputation of being particularly unruly and corrupt (Geddes and Ribeiro 1992).² Part of the reason is that the Brazilian Constitution grants an extraordinary degree of immunity to congress members, which, unlike elsewhere, extends to capital crimes committed outside a parliamentarian's official duties. Numerous reform efforts in this field had thus far been nullified by a strong legislative esprit de corps.

Under the tag line "*A vote has no price, it has consequences*" the MCCE's Ficha Limpa (clean record) bill proposed to tighten the criteria for legislative eligibility. Specifically, the bill sought to bar from election persons previously convicted or with pending court proceedings for specific crimes such as murder, drug trafficking, misuse of public funds, and vote buying. In view of the restrictions on citizen-lawmaking described above, initially, the promoters of the campaign were pessimistic about their chances of success³. Considering that an estimated 25% of sitting legislators were facing ineligibility under the new law⁴, obtaining the legislative approval necessary for the bill's passage appeared to be a scenario akin to turkeys voting for Christmas. However, the project's fate changed once the MCCE decided to use SM channels to promote the campaign.

In June 2009, a first support group was launched on Facebook, from where the campaign spilled over into other SM. In addition, several campaign videos were produced and released on YouTube. With the efforts of only a handful of unpaid volunteers, the promoters managed to build an online community of roughly 3 Million members (Panth 2011). By spring 2010, about 30.000 users were following the campaign on Facebook and 10.000 had signed up to follow campaign news on Twitter, making Ficha Limpa the most cited issue of the week on Twitter Brazil on several occasions. About 50.000 users had downloaded campaign videos from YouTube. Smaller campaign communities also formed on Orkut the major competitor to Facebook in Brazil, and Ning, a commercial SM platform which allows activists to custom tailor campaign specific social networks.

By September 2009, the MCCE had gathered 1.5 million physical signatures, thus exceeding the minimum of signatures required to introduce a citizen law project to Congress (1.3 million equivalent to 1% of the national electorate). However, the process of online mobilization did not stop there. In the run up to the bill's voting in Congress, the promoters continued to push the campaign by means of various

² In 2007, the majority of respondents in a poll assessed their legislators as self-serving, and dishonest. Two in five assessed that democracy would be better off without Congress (The Economist: *Parliament or pigsty?*, 8 February 2007).

³ Private communication with Marlón Reis, Judge, Supreme Electoral Tribunal of Brazil and member of the MCCE

⁴ Le Monde: Opération "fiches propres" au Brésil, 26 May 2010

online-promoted events. In April 2010, over 2 million citizens signed an e-petition calling for the Ficha Limpa bill to be passed by Congress. The online-petition tool was provided and promoted by AVAAZ, an advocacy group that promotes civic activism on a broad range of political and social issues via the web. 40.000 citizens responded to an e-mail call by the same organization to flood legislators' voicemails with messages to urge them to vote in favour of the bill's passage. Street protest events organized by AVAAZ and the MCCE, such as a symbolic clean-up with brooms and buckets performed outside the National Congress drew several hundred participants and attracted coverage by major television channels and newspapers⁵. In June 2010, the law was promulgated by President Lula da Silva after having been unanimously approved by Congress. Among observers of the country's political scene there is widespread consensus, that the bill's success would not have been possible without the massive online mobilization and that the campaign will have a sustainable impact on the political attitudes of Brazilian citizens:

"We believe that the success of the Ficha Limpa campaign for anti-corruption legislation in Brazil was only possible with the ad-hoc marriage of traditional and online mobilization."

(Catholic Overseas Development Agency 2011)

"As a result, political awareness has increased amongst civil society, and a recent survey showed that 85% of the Brazilian population now know what Ficha Limpa is."

(UKaid 2011)

The brief sketch presented here suggests that SM intervened in a variety of ways at defining moments of the campaign. Yet, while the number of citizens who mobilized online to support the campaign is surely impressive, it remains to be clarified if, how, and to what extent their online behaviour affected their participation offline. For example: Would somebody who joined a campaign discussion group on Facebook have carried the debate to their family, workplace, or circle of friends? Would someone who clicked their mouse to join the e-petition organized by AVAAZ also have responded to the organisation's call to personally contact their representative? In a nutshell: Did the use of SM have a measurable impact on the offline political participation of Brazilian citizens, and, if so, were certain SM formats more apt than others to promote participatory action?

3. Conceptualizing social media: What is social media and what not?

To explore the question formulated above, we will briefly outline our conceptual understanding of SM and their potential implementation in the context of political campaigning.

The question "what is social media and what is not?" is a hotly debated one, both in scientific literature and the blogosphere. With digital media formats constantly evolving and combining ever more functionalities and applications analysts are finding it hard to keep up pace and reach conceptual consensus. The result is a flurry of competing definitions, some of them relatively narrow in scope, some of them more encompassing.

⁵Rede Globo : <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m1Bqyg4lqml>, retrieved 01. June 2011

According to (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010) for example, Social media can be defined as a group of Internet based applications that allow for the creation and exchange of *User Generated Content*, i.e. diverse forms of media that are publicly available and created by end-users. Central to this definition is the notion that content is “no longer created and published by individuals, but instead “[...] *continuously modified by all users in a participatory and collaborative fashion.*” (ibid., p. 61). In a similar vein, (Bradley 2010) identifies six core principles of SM: 1) Participation, i.e. the opportunity of users to participate in the creation of content; 2) Collectiveness, i.e. the opportunity of users to collect around a given content to contribute rather than individually create the content and distribute it 3) Transparency, i.e. the fact that users are mutually informed and aware of their contributions, 4) Independence, i.e. the ability of users to contribute anytime, anyplace and independent of other users, 5) Persistence, i.e. users’ contributions are captured in a persistent state for others to view, share and augment, 6) Emergence, i.e. in social media, social structures and information emerge in an uncontrolled fashion rather than following a fixed scheme of organisation.

These concepts are certainly convincing in terms of stringency. However, they are not adequate for the purpose of this study since the typologies that can be developed thereof exclude certain “hybrid forms” of SM which do not fulfil the full range of required criteria but can nevertheless acquire high relevance in the context of online political campaigning.

Over recent years, for instance, organized lobbying by internet advocacy groups has become an increasingly visible phenomenon in politics and different pressure groups have successfully promoted activism on a broad range of policy issues. Typically, these groups create and coordinate targeted online activism by providing certain technical solutions to facilitate the organization of collective action. They are probably best described as “*socio-technical systems whose functioning depends upon the intermingled agencies of the social and the technological*” (Chadwick 2011). While advocacy groups usually allow for participatory and collective action they tend to miss out on the criteria of transparency and uncontrolled emergence. To give one example: AVAAZ.org has been one of fastest growing organizations in the field of online advocacy over the past five years. Since its foundation in 2007 about 9 million users in 193 countries have participated in campaigns organized by AVAAZ. The organization’s campaign agenda is set up in a participatory process whereby users are invited to state their issue priorities and submit campaign ideas which are then polled and tested weekly to 10,000-member random samples. Once a campaign issue has been identified, AVAAZ’s staff invites members to participate in a range of technology supported collective activities such as mass-phone-calls to elected officials, or the signing of e- petitions. Moreover, AVAAZ’s campaign websites include hit counters indicating the number of campaign participants or live stream lists showing the names of signatories who are supporting a particular campaign. However, whether these features are suitable to increase the transparency of the process has been a matter of dispute in the past.⁶ It is also obvious, that AVAAZ’s

⁶ In November 2010 AVAAZ campaigned against plans by the Canadian Sun News Network to establish a rightwing news channel. In the context of the campaign, fraudulent and fake signatures such as “Homer Simpson” or “Snuffleupagus from the Sesame Street” appeared en masse. While critics took the incident as a proof of the organization’s lack of seriousness, AVAAZ determined that all

campaigns do not evolve in an uncontrolled way as a result of unfettered interaction between independent users, but are subject to rigorous management by a team of trained campaign specialists.

Rather than to operate with a fixed typology of SM, we therefore disaggregate existing SM *formats* into SM *features* that can be attributed to five categories of cause related campaign activities as listed in Table 1.

Table 1: SM features in the context of cause related campaigning and their offline equivalents

Categories of campaign activities	Online features for cause related campaigning	Equivalent offline activity
1. Consuming campaign information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Visit campaign websites • Read posts or blog entries • Subscribe to RSS feed of campaign websites or blogs • View campaign related pictures or videos 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Read print media • Follow campaign news on TV or radio
2. Circulating campaign material	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Share campaign content by expressing approval (Like-Button) • Post links to campaign content to other users' profiles 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Distribute campaign material among friends, family and colleagues
3. Discussing campaign news	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Comment on campaign content provided by others • Exchange with others in life chats about campaign 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discuss campaign face to face or on the phone with friends, relatives or colleagues
4. Lobbying or Protesting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Join an online petition • Contact an official by mail 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sign a petition • Contact an official by phone or in person • Participate in public protest events
5. Producing campaign material	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Write campaign related posts or blog entries • Create and upload campaign related pictures and videos 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Write newspaper articles or letters to the editor • Produce TV or radio features

It is obvious that not only do offline activities involve higher transaction costs than their online counterparts but that transaction costs also vary significantly among the different available online activities. Some of them, as for instance the mere consumption of campaign content or expressing approval of content by clicking on a “like” button, hardly involve any time and effort. Others in turn, such as maintaining a campaign blog or creating and uploading visual material are certainly more demanding. It is intuitive to assume that engaging in online activities that involve higher transaction costs relates to higher degrees of political interest and commitment and should thus contribute positively towards offline political participation.

of the fake signatures had been sent from the same IP address in a short amount of time and hence clearly constituted an attempt to discredit their reputation.

Overall, we expect a person's offline participation in a political campaign to be a combined function of their pattern of use of SM-features and a number of intervening factors that will be briefly discussed in the following section.

4) Discussion and operationalization of variables⁷

Political participation online and offline

Different from campaign-oriented forms of participation which focus on the selection of government personnel and influencing the actions they take through political parties (Verba, Nie et al. 1978; Brady, Verba et al. 1995), cause-oriented participation focuses primarily on influencing decision making on specific issues and policies (Norris and Curtice 2006). To promote social causes NGOs and social movements often adopt a mixed action strategy that combines and reinforces the traditional cause-related campaign repertoire (lobbying representatives, raising an issue in the news media, organizing street protests etc.) with a variety of alternative online modes of participation.

To measure respondents' participation in both dimensions, we first drew a list of possible activities in cause-related campaigning and matched each offline activity with its nearest online equivalent (Diani 2000; Mobbs 2000; Klotz 2005; Klotz 2007; Della Porta, Kriesi et al. 2009). In a second step, interviews were conducted with key campaigners in order to ensure that the listed activities had actually been available in the context of the campaign under study here.⁸ As a result, we included a set of 22 questions enquiring respondents about the online and offline activities they had been partaking in, in the context of the Ficha Limpa campaign.

Since political activism is a multidimensional phenomenon (Verba, Nie et al. 1978; Verba, Lehman Schlozman et al. 1995; Norris and Curtice 2006) we expect the impact of SM on cause-oriented forms of participation to be also heavily influenced by the prior social and political characteristics of Internet users. We therefore included two further sets of control variables which will be briefly discussed in the following section.

Sociodemographics

Age and gender are frequently employed control variables in studies of political participation. Specifically, non-institutionalised forms of participation have long been related to younger age cohorts (Barnes and Kaase 1979) Empirical studies found actionist political participation to peak in mid-adolescence (17 to 18 years), remain relatively high through the 20's and decline rapidly thereafter (Watts 1999; Watts 2001). With regard to the relation between online and offline political behaviour, young people are thought to be more easily influenced by the Internet, as they have yet to develop firmly entrenched political habits and are therefore more open to influences by new experiences. The participation patterns of older age cohorts, by contrast, were developed in a pre-Internet period and are therefore thought to be only marginally affected by the introduction of new media. (Quintelier and Vissers 2008). In Western democracies, unconventional political participation has been found to be somewhat more frequent among males than females (Jennings and van Deth 1990).

⁷ For full description of variables and wording of questions see the code book attached in Annex A.

⁸ Private communication with Marlón Reis, Isabela Nogueira da Gama, and Simone Palma

Another well established control variable when studying political participation is the level of formal education. (Verba, Lehman Schlozman et al. 1995; Gidengil, Blais et al. 2004).

Individual attitudinal factors

Besides standard socio economic factors, past work on political participation has identified individual attitudes towards the political system to be important predictors of how citizens engage in the political process (Verba, Nie et al. 1978; Dalton 2002; Fieldhouse, Tranmer et al. 2007). In this paper we concentrate on political efficacy, which is defined as “*the feeling that political and social change is possible and that the individual citizen can play a part in bringing about this change*” (Campbell, Gurin et al. 1954), p. 187, and has long been identified as an important determinant of conventional political participation (Abramson and Aldrich 1982). The construct is split into two dimensions. While *internal efficacy* refers to the confidence of individuals in their own capacity to understand politics and to act politically, *external efficacy* constitutes an individual’s belief in the responsiveness of the political system (Converse 1972; Balch 1974). In this study, we will focus on external efficacy. It is largely assumed that individuals who feel that government is responsive to their concerns and demands and that their involvement in collective political decision making, such as representative elections, will make a difference are more motivated to participate individually. Concerning unconventional political participation, however, an inverse relation might be anticipated: Citizens with a low level of external political efficacy, who feel that the government is irresponsive to demands voiced through conventional channels of political participation may have a greater motivation to protest or engage in other forms of unconventional participation to make themselves heard (Klesner 2007; Tessler, Amaney et al. 2008)

5) Methodology, Data and Model specifications

To measure the impact of individuals’ online activities on their offline participation in the Ficha Limpa campaign, while controlling for the intervening factors described above, between 5th June and 30th August 2011 a web survey was conducted. The survey drew a total of 1.768 responses. The web software *SurveyMonkey* was used to administer the survey. The survey was conducted in Brazilian Portuguese and was pilot tested for comprehensiveness and ease of use among native Brazilian speakers prior to its launch.

Participation in the survey was promoted via the same channels that were used to build the online support community of the Ficha Limpa campaign: The survey was advertised as an event on Facebook and invitations were sent per personal message to the followers of the Ficha Limpa support groups on that network. Key campaigners furthermore placed an invitation to participate on their personal profiles on Orkut and Twitter. Furthermore, invitations were sent via e-mail and personal message on Facebook to 350 Brazilian civil society groups from diverse backgrounds and interests. The MCCE placed an invitation to participate in the survey on its website and instructed the leaders of its 50 member associations to circulate the invitation among their members via e-mail. Three weeks after the launch of the survey a reminder was sent to these primary contacts. The actual invitation letter contained

the survey's URL and a brief description of its academic purpose. No monetary or other material incentive was offered to respondents.

In order to increase the response rate, participants were encouraged not only to complete the survey themselves, but to also forward the invitation to their colleagues, relatives and friends and to post the survey's URL on their social network profiles. This respondent driven sampling technique is similar to the "snowball" or "chain-referral" sampling methods which have been previously used in social science research to contact difficult-to-reach populations such as drug users or sex workers (Salganik and Heckathorn 2004). The "*pass-along effect*" (Norman and Russell 2006) involved with this technique is helpful in increasing sample size and reducing the transaction cost of response collection. Previous critiques of these methods have targeted the fact that sample members are not selected from a probability sample frame, which may eventually produce selection biases in the resulting sample. In our particular case, however, the risk of a selection bias is considered to be minimal for the following reason: By using exactly the same channels of communication as the promoters of the Ficha Limpa campaign for the distribution of our survey, our snowball strategy closely emulates the way in which the original online support community "grew". The structure of our sample should therefore not differ substantially from that of the target population, i.e. Brazilian citizens with internet access that participated online in the Ficha Limpa campaign

After cleaning the dataset and excluding missing values we were left with a sample of 736 observations on which complete case analysis could be performed.

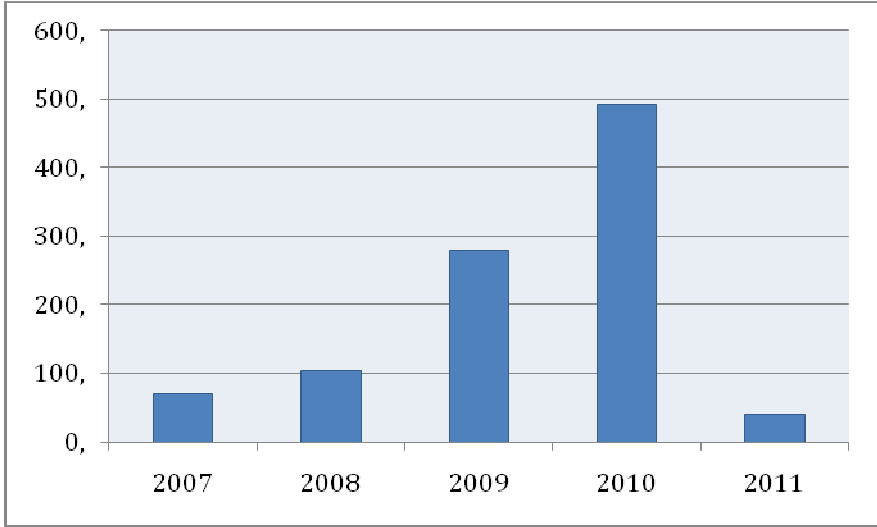
Out of the nine offline activities of participation measured in our survey (see Annex A: Codebook) we chose to concentrate on the following three:

1) Discussing the Campaign face-to-face, 2) Signing the official petition form, and 3) Contacting an official.

However, after a preliminary check on the statistics of these dependent variables we had to exclude 1) and 2) for the following reasons: 1) displayed minimal variation given that the vast majority of respondents in that sample (79%) reported high levels of discussing the campaign face to face.

The case of 2) is more complex. As can be seen from Figure 1, Out of the complete sample, close to 50% of respondents reported to have become aware of the campaign only in 2010 that is after the official signature collection campaign had already been completed.

Figure 1: Temporal trend of campaign awareness by year



We will therefore, at a later stage, perform an analysis on a reduced sample of We will therefore, at a later stage, perform an analysis on a reduced sample of respondents who reported to have been aware of the campaign prior September 2009, i.e. the date on which physical signatures were submitted to Congress.

We therefore concentrated on “*Contacting an official*” as the dependent variable.

The effects of three different types of explanatory variables were considered: social-demographics, individual attitudinal factors, and online participation.

Sociodemographics:

Age cohorts were categorized into four distinct groups: participants born in the 80s or after, participants born in the 70s, participants born in the 60s, and participants born in the 50s or before.

Education was first divided into three levels. Low, medium, and high. However, since the number of participants in the lowest level was next to zero (4), so the low and medium level were collapsed and the comparison was done between high and rest.

In case of gender, 2 sexes were considered. Male and Female

Attitudinal Factors

To measure external political efficacy, we used the level of agreement to the statement “*In Brazil, people like me do not have any say about what the government does*”.

Online participation

Out of 15 items of online participation measured by our survey (see Annex A: Codebook), we concentrated on nine that emulate offline participation activities in the context of cause related campaigning. We furthermore allocated these to three categories according to the level of transaction costs involved with them:

Table 2: Online activities according to level of transaction costs (TAC)

Online activities	TAC-Level
Consuming/viewing content Liking content Sharing/forwarding content	Low – “slactivist”
Commenting on content Chatting about content Uploading content pictures Uploading videos	Medium
Produce Online Articles/Blog entries Participate in AVAAZ e-petition	High – “activist”

The mere consumption of content, “liking” content, and sharing content are considered to involve low transaction costs, since users can perform these activities without leaving the original interface and, in case of the latter two, with a single mouse click.

Commenting on and chatting about content as well as uploading content is considered to involve medium transaction costs. While these activities can usually be performed without having to switch between different media formats they require the production of short texts and/or the opening of an additional window in case of the former two, or to perform several clicks in case of the latter two.

Participating in the e-petition of AVAAZ and the production of online articles or blog posts are involved with the highest transaction cost. In case of the former, the user will normally be contacted by the organization if he is already a registered member of AVAAZ. He will then have to switch to the organizations website where he will have to indicate his e-mail data. If the user is not yet a registered member and has learnt about the petition through an e-mail or link forwarded by a friend, he will, in addition, have to register by indicating basic personal data (Name, e-mail, country, phone number) prior to subscribing to the petition. On the other hand, the production of an online article or blog entry, obviously requires the production of longer and more carefully edited texts than chatting or commenting on content.

We employed a binary logit model in which the base decision is not to contact the official. The model then estimates the parameters for the probability of contacting the official, considering the three types of explanatory variables described above.

6. Discussion of estimation results

We employed a binary logit model in which the base decision is not to contact the official. The model then estimates the parameters for the probability of contacting the official, considering the three types of explanatory variables described above.

		Beta	Std_Err	Z-Stat	p-val	
TAC Level	Constant	-3.83	0.476	-8.05	0.000	****
	DOB_70s	0.34	0.273	1.23	0.220	*
	DOB_60s	0.49	0.244	2.02	0.043	***
	DOB_50sB	0.84	0.234	3.59	0.000	****
	Education_High	0.34	0.188	1.78	0.074	***
	Gender_Male	0.38	0.183	2.09	0.036	***
	Efficacy_Low	0.32	0.189	1.67	0.094	**
Low	ContentConsumpt_High	0.41	0.359	1.15	0.250	*
	Liking_High	0.33	0.207	1.61	0.108	**
	ContSharing_High	0.52	0.260	2.00	0.045	***
Medium	Chatting_High	0.17	0.233	0.73	0.468	.
	Commenting_High	0.42	0.253	1.65	0.098	**
	PictUpl_High	0.13	0.199	0.64	0.523	.
High	Bloggng_High	0.69	0.197	3.50	0.000	****
	AVAAZ Petition_Part	0.84	0.204	4.13	0.000	****

In terms of model fit the AIC value for a constant only model was 980.78 while the final model has an AIC value of 680.87, which is a significant improvement in terms of explanation power of the model. In terms of Chi-sqr test the model comes out to be highly significant at 95% confidence.

In case of age we see that older people are more likely to contact an official than people born in the 80s. This effect gets stronger and more significant with the age. This contradicts the findings of previous studies on the relation of age and non-institutionalised forms of participation as well as the hypotheses according to which the political behavior of young people should be easier influenced by the Internet than that of older age cohorts.

Figure 2. Histogram of Age



The age histogram shown in Figure 2, displays a peak for people born in the 1960s and another one for those born in the 1980s. Rather than a problem of selection bias, this appears to reflect the prominent role of Facebook in the Ficha Campaign and the particular age structure of this network in Brazil. Worldwide, the social media sphere is dominated by persons aged 35 – 44 (25%), which is the generation of people who were in their 20s as the Web took off in the mid '90s. An analysis of age distribution for the 19 most popular social net working sites places Facebook in the group of the “older” sites: The average Facebook user is 38 years old (Pingdom.com 2010). In Brazil, the dominant group on Facebook is even slightly older; here, persons aged 45-55 are 141 % more likely to view content on Facebook than the average SM user (comScore 2010).

Males turned out more are likely to contact officials than females thus confirming previous findings on the relation between gender and unconventional political participation. The same applies for the relation between education and participation, given that those with a higher level of education turned out to be more likely to

contact an official. Low levels of political efficacy contributed positively towards contacting an official confirming our hypotheses that, different from conventional participation, frustration with government irresponsiveness may act as a motivating catalyst for engaging in unconventional participation.

All of the online participation modes considered in this model came out to be positively contributing towards the probability of contacting an official. However, and as hypothesized, this effect was only marginally significant for those activities categorized as “slactivist” and low in transaction costs (consuming, sharing, and liking of content). The parameter values in this group are close to each other and have little variation among them.

Among the online activities associated with medium level transaction costs (chatting about the campaign, commenting on content and uploading pictures) only commenting came out to be reasonably significant (note that the explanatory variable “uploading videos” was excluded from the model since the number of respondents who had engaged in this activity was next to zero). The variation of parameter values is highest in this category. Further tests will have to be carried out in order to discern the origin of this effect.

As hypothesized, the modes of online participation associated with the highest transaction costs (participating in e-petitions and producing online articles or blog entries) came out to be most significant and have the highest parameter value – thus contributing most to the probability of contacting an official.

7. Conclusions

The case of the Campanha Ficha Limpa provides several interesting lessons with regard to the ongoing debate on the potential of social media to increase political participation and to add to the effectiveness of political campaigning.

First, and maybe most importantly, it invites us to revise the popular notion that generally dismisses online political participation as “feelgood activism” that will produce little effect other than increasing the satisfaction of the person engaged in it.

At system level - and thinking in terms of counterfactuals - the campaign can clearly be rated as a success story of Web 2.0. Considering that previous attempts to combat electoral corruption that went unaccompanied by major citizen mobilization were frustrated, it appears reasonable to assume that the massive online support of the Ficha Limpa Bill was a crucial element in tipping the balance towards electoral reform.

At the individual level and concerning the question whether social media use can increase a person’s propensity to engage in offline political activity the results are more complex. On the one hand, our analysis indicates that, in general, online participation contributes positively towards the probability of offline participation. However, distinctions have to be made. Simple features of online communication that involve little transaction costs for the user, constitute the core offer of popular social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter. Our analysis indicates that such

“one-click-solutions” are less effective in promoting offline participation than those that involve higher transaction costs, such as blogging or participating in e-petitions.

For one thing, we may find it hardly surprising that those who actually invest time, effort and thought into supporting a political cause online will be more likely to participate offline than those who merely consume campaign information as a by-product of their online entertainment activities. However, the implications of this finding go beyond circular reasoning.

While social media may do little to achieve the normative democratic goal of integrating the political apathetic into the political process, the careful choice of adequate formats may do a lot to increase the effectiveness of mobilization efforts. It appears that campaigners wishing to give the final, decisive nudge to those that already have a positive predisposition to participate, would be well advised to concentrate on two types of SM formats: a) socio-technical systems that provide technical solutions specifically designed to support civic mobilization (e.g. advocacy groups) and b) communication platforms dedicated to fostering elaborate exchange on socially relevant topics (e.g. political community blogs).

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