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The role of social media in the participatory community of the Tea Party movement

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The role of social media in the participatory community of the Tea Party movement

From intensive activism to the simple act of voting, political participation has declined in developed democracies, particularly in the United States, for decades. The Internet opens new possibilities – and presents new challenges – for collective political action. On the one hand, new technologies have lowered barriers to participation and fostered political ties beyond the traditional barriers of time and place. On the other hand, the Internet has allowed citizens a greater degree of choice over their information consumption and social ties,

From its earliest days, some critics have framed the Tea Party as, in former Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi's words, an "astroturf" rather than a grassroots movement (Powers 2009). According to this interpretation, wealthy elites underwrote the Tea Party, brainwashing or directly paying off its adherents to protest against big government and cause trouble at Democratic politicians' town hall meetings, all the while greatly exaggerating the number of participants in the movement. But while the Tea Party is certainly influenced by longstanding Republican and corporate interests, it cannot be dismissed as the brainchild of conservative elites. Support for the movement peaked at 32% of the American public in November of 2010, around the time of the midterm election that swept 87 new Republicans into Congress. In September of 2010, 3% of Americans reported active involvement in the movement (Gallup 2012). Given that in 2008, only 4% of Americans worked on a political campaign and only 9% attended a political meeting, Tea Party activists represented a huge proportion of the American citizens who took an active role in political affairs in 2010 (American National Election Studies 2010).

The Tea Party movement is best understood as a three-layered entity comprised of established Republican and corporate operatives, young libertarian partisans, and (by far the largest group) older political neophytes with a diverse range of conservative ideological preferences and a deep sense of frustration with the political status quo. Throughout the movement's history, these groups came together in tense union with the help of both broadcast and social media. While the Tea Party relied on a populist bs 2M303 -4 (n) -5( ) (d4 (t) 4(he)

From this point forward, the Tea Party rapidly expanded into a mass movement, fueled both by young libertarian organizers and by the conservative media. In April of 2009, Tax Day protests were held in 750 towns around the country; the largest, in Atlanta, had thousands of attendees. These events were explicitly promoted on Fox News, particularly by talk show host Glenn Beck (Formisano 2012, 27-

active citizenry. As an inherently social and discursive space, social media may both enable political participation and exacerbate sectarian rifts within society.

Rational discourse between citizens is crucial to participatory democracy; without the substantive understanding of the issues at hand that comes of such discussion, mass participation is shallow and even potentially harmful to good public policy. The cornerstone of discursive democratic theory is Jürgen Habermas' conception of the public sphere (Scammell 2000, xxxvi-xxxviii). Habermas defined the idealized public sphere as a social space in which all participants spoke as equals, made rational arguments, felt free to question authority and traditional political assumptions, and had access to the same information (Calhoun 1992, 12-13). Without rational discourse, Habermas argued, the political will of the masses could not be taken as a l

houses, salons, and a shared literary culture of newspapers and journals in fostering the social platforms necessary for rational discourse (Calhoun 1992, 16).

Indeed, sociologists studying the idea of "social capital" have found empirical evidence that involvement in civic groups increases citizens' general propensity to participate in politics and decreases corruption and other threats to democracy. Bourdieu originally defined social capital as "investment in social relations with expected returns" (Lin 1999, 30). In other words, social capital represents the potential of a person or group's social relationships to yield useful information, social status, or capacity for collective action. In a landmark macro-level empirical investigation of social capital and participation, Putnam defined social capital more concretely as "social relations that sustain and promote voluntary associations and groups" (Lin 1999, 45). Putnam showed that high levels of social capital in a society are correlated with both greater participation and policy outcomes more consistent with democratic ideals. In one telling example, Putnam linked differences in quality of regional governance in Italy with regional variations in social capital. Regions with high membership i

to political participation (Calhoun 1992, 16). Habermas himself has admitted that it would be deeply regressive to return to a less inclusive form of democracy: “Any attempt at restoring the liberal public sphere through the reduction of its plebiscitarily expanded form will only serve to weaken even more the residual functions genuinely remaining within it” (Habermas, quoted in Calhoun 1992, 28). In her critique of the Habermasian public sphere, Mouffe outlines a possible alternative to a public sphere fractured into warring ideological factions. In her model of “agonistic pluralism,” the key concern for mass participatory democracy is not conformity but rather civil disagreement; in other words, ideological opponents would recognize underlying national or human unity and view each other as the loyal opposition, rather than as existential enemies. In her ideal democracy, participation and discourse would transform political opponents from antagonistic enemies into agonistic adversaries (Mouffe 1999).

Some forms of social capital may do a better job than others in promoting a worldview that includes alternative ideas and tolerates non-group members. In his defense of civic groups as a measure of the strength of a democracy, Putnam distinguishes between two types of social capital: “bonding” and “bridging” capital. Bonding capital represents “strong ties” between relatives, coreligionists, or other exclusive, closely-knit groups. Bridging capital, on the other hand, describes “weak ties” between members of large, diverse groups. As Putnam notes, both forms of capital have their place in democratic societies: bonding capital promotes

	Individualistic: You do your thing and I'll do mine *Anarchic:* War of all against all	*Civic Community:* Salem without "witches"

Some academic optimists have seen the advent of the Internet as a panacea for the broadcast system's propensity to stifle discourse. Particularly in the 1990s, the Internet was seen as a potential utopia of many-to-many communication, independent discourse and thought, grassroots political action, and even a new online social contract (Rheingold 2000; Barlow 1996; Poster 1997, Maltz 1996). Early Internet enthusiasts hoped the web could fulfil the requirements of the Habermasian public sphere: lowered entry and exit costs would allow all citizens to access information about and rationally discuss political issues as equals in "virtual coffeehouses" (Geiger 2009). As in Habermas' ideal public sphere, these

action, transcending traditional barriers of time and space to create a new "architecture of participation" (Shirky 2008, 148-153). Outside of academia, too, civic-minded entrepreneurs have envisioned the Internet as a possible incubator of social capital: for example, the founders of Meetup.com, which helps people easily set up meetings and events online, explicitly saw their site as a remedy for the decline in face-to-face interaction described in *Bowling Alone* (Wolf, 2004).

However, the tension in participatory theory between fostering rational discourse and forming inclusive social networks has been apparent in scholarly debate over the role of the Internet and social media. One persistent criticism of online discourse has been its potential to fragment society. Whereas the broadcast media has been seen as atomizing, isolating viewers in their homes, it also ensured a shared pool of information among citizens. The Internet, on the other hand, is inherently social; yet the very freedom with which Internet users can meet like-minded people online may allow them to self-filter into homogenous groups, thus excluding certain strains of information (Sunstein 2001). In his 1995 utopian vision of the future, Negroponte dreamed that the broadcast media system would evolve into a digital "Daily Me," in which citizens could personalize their information consumption

Others have defended the Internet from these allegations. In a survey of American chat-room users, Wojcieszak and Mutz showed that chat rooms often did expose participants to opinions they disagreed with, although this was more likely to happen in social or hobby chatrooms than in political, religious, or ethnic spaces (Wojcieszak and Mutz 2009). In another survey, Williams showed that time spent online correlated positively with diversity of social connections; in addition, he found that online social interactions were more likely to foster “bridging” than “bonding” social capital (Williams 2007).

Theories of participation, social capital, and the public sphere will form the framework for this investigation into the online milieu of the Tea Party movement. As seen in the discussion

Ultimately, semi-structured individual interviews were chosen as the best way to examine what Bauer et al call the “life worlds” of Tea Party activists (Bauer et al 2000, 39). The

In order to contact potential research subjects, a random sampling method was combined with a snowballing method of selection. To establish initial contact, I relied on both academic connections with Tea Party groups and cold contact via email with Tea Party leaders listed on locally-based websites. Subjects were interviewed in the following cities: Boston; Los Angeles; Chicago; Marietta, Georgia; and Spartanburg, South Carolina. These locations were chosen for the diversity of their political environments, as measured by their vote share in the 2008 presidential election: 77.5% of Bostonians, 76.2% of Chicagoans, 61.1% of Angelinos, 44.8% of Marietta voters, and 38.6% of Spartanburg voters supported Barack Obama for President in 2008 (USA Today, 2008). The initial respondents in Boston and Los Angeles were able to furnish further contacts from their local Tea Party scene, while the other three initial respondents became stand-alone subjects. This method had both advantages and disadvantages. Because it included activists from a variety of places, the selection covered Tea Party experiences from more than one local chapter and political environment; at the same time, including at least three activists in two of these locations gave a fuller picture of the social interactions and participatory environments at a local level. On the other hand, both initial contact through Tea Party websites or personal recommendations and subsequent referrals to other activists may have biased the data in favor of the most "presentable" Tea Party members. Another method, such as going to Tea Party meetings and attempting to speak with a random sample of attendees, could have ensured the inclusion of extremists or oddballs. However, the method of random contact and snowballing produced a selection of articulate and thoughtful interview subjects from a variety of geographical locations. These subjects were likely able to provide a more reliable and diverse account of the content and meaning of their activism than fringe Tea Party members would have.

Five subjects were interviewed in person, and five over the phone or on Skype. This was not the ideal circumstance: in a pilot project, subjects were easier to read and more willing to engage in person than on the phone. However, since traveling to multiple locations across the country was not an option, the goal of speaking with people from diverse areas in the country had to be prioritized over in-person interviews. Subjects reviewed and signed a consent form informing them of the purpose of the research, asking their permission to record the interview and assuring them that their responses would remain anonymous. Each interview was then recorded and transcribed.

subjects seemed to see voting as the only possible form of political participation: as Nancy said, "I…did not get involved in campaigns. I didn't understand, really, that you could do that. Other people did do that, but people like me, we didn't do that. We just voted." Most of these subjects considered themselves conservative, but did not have a sophisticated understanding of politics and did not strongly identify with the Republican Party. Liz summed up the general feeling: "I never went deeper than probably the soundbites that the candidates gave…I didn't think of myself as politically anything…I didn't think of myself as a political conservative, I just thought of myself as a conservative person." There was some variation as to self-reported voting patterns: two regularly supported Republican candidates, two reported voting for Jimmy Carter but no other Democrats, and one (Mary) described voting "for who[ever] was not the incumbent." Despite their conservative preferences, though, these subjects did not feel that political participation or even further political education would have an impact, largely because they did not see a difference between the two major parties. Many shared Mary's sentiment that "it almost seems like it doesn't matter what you vote…the whole idea [of both parties] is to get the government's grubby little paws into every little corner of your lives so that you can't sneeze without some government bureaucrat assigning you a tissue." Several subjects were particularly critical of President George W. Bush, whom respondents characterized as a "huge spender" and a "progressive" and blamed for the bank bailouts of 2008.

As Putnam would have predicted, the four subjects with a history of involvement had starkly

To most activists with prior political experience, the Tea Party represented an exciting expansion of the libertarian movement and a departure from a disappointing Republican Party. Nina, Jack and Alex, longstanding Republican activists, were not brimming with enthusiasm over the GOP. Before the Tea Party movement, Nina saw the Republican Party as nothing more than a vehicle to bring libertarian ideas into mainstream politics. Jack felt that the Republicans had become more moderate since his early days of involvement, and often found himself at odds with more moderate Republican legislators. Alex saw the Party as a "good old boys club" that could use a stronger dose of libertarianism. For those with a history of libertarian involvement, the Tea Party seemed like a more exciting, popularly appealing version of the pre-existing libertarian movement, rather than a new wing of the Republican Party. Nina, for example, had a sense of being involved in "what would become the Tea Party" long before Obama's election or Santelli's speech. For her, the expansion of the Tea Party beyond the original libertarian core was exciting and empowering: "since I was a little kid, I wanted to be part of something. Now I finally felt like, this is it. This is the thing that I've been supposed to be doing forever." The outlier was David, who felt that his prior involvement was more meaningful than the Tea Party: to him, "the authentic Tea Party was probably the Ron Paul movement." By his account, this "authentic" Tea Party represented a young, diverse, ideologically pure group of libertarian partisans. The later, more popular version of the Tea Party movement was "Fox News'd out" - in other words, dumbed down for mass appeal. The average Tea Party supporter was, in his view, older, less independent, and less interested in conversation than the typical Ron Paul activist.

The Tea Party: An Online Political Awakening?

> *David*: So you go to Meetup.com, type in your city or your zip code, and type in Ron Paul or libertarian or whatever, and you meet these people. I went over to a guy's house, all by myself…and we're still friends today. We helped radicalize each other and bounce ideas off one another.

This libertarian radicalization, made possible by social media, gave David not only the intellectual tools, but also the social connections to get involved in the Tea Party movement early in 2009.

Libertarian subjects described a brewing sense of discontent within their conservative social networks in the months leading up to the beginning of the national Tea Party movement. For young libertarians like David and Nina, Rick Santelli's rant and other early moments of the Tea Party movement were merely the culmination of the political buzz developing on social media. In the following exchange, Nina described her experience on social media in the wake of President Obama's election:

> *Nina*: I had a lot of conservative and libertarian friends on Facebook. And all of a sudden, people just started getting really active. I don't actually remember before that seeing that kind of political activity on Facebook.
> *Interviewer*: So it was a sort of spontaneous – people you were friends with…started having [political] status updates or linking to articles?
> *Nina*: Yeah, exactly. It was just like a fire all of a sudden. Like whereas everyone was so apathetic about John McCain, but all of a sudden it was like there was a fire that was lit under everyone.

This intensification of online political activity, made possible by pre-existing online networks, gave long-term libertarian activists hope for a potential grassroots movement.

While those with no prior history of activism eventually turned to social media to express their concerns, these subjects typically first heard of the Tea Party movement through the mainstream media, particularly Fox News. Rick Santelli's rant resonated deeply with many of these respondents, who typically saw it on Fox or heard it on a talk radio program. Nancy, for example, recalled her sense of impending doom in the months following the financial meltdown, and her frustration with what she saw as an irresponsible response on the part of elected officials; to her, Santelli was the first person to give voice to her political feelings:

> *Nancy*: It resonated with me because in the six months leading up to his rant, I had become very aware of politics…I didn't know what the heck we were going to do, I was terrified, I was scared, I was angry. It was a very dark time. And when he said what he said I remember … standing up and pointing to the TV … I go 'YEAH! THAT! THAT! THAT!' I was real excited,

> because somebody was putting into words the angst that I was feeling and didn't have the words for it.

For first-time participants like Nancy, then, social media did not serve as an initial impetus to

knowledge and understanding, some lost touch with alternative political points of view as liberal friends were weeded out of their information streams. In other words, despite its sophistication, the online information environment of the Tea Party came to resemble Sunstein's "limited argument pool" for some participants. On the other hand, despite this cyber-

Although much of libertarians' information came from traditional books or long-form blog articles, rather than social media feeds, social media did make it easier for these activists to

what's going on behind the scenes in the State House, to go to your city council meetings and school board meetings."

In sum, while the online milieu of the Tea Party in many ways represented a Balkanized "public-sphericule," subjects independently sought out debate partners, alternative points of view, and original source material. Indeed, the very enthusiasm for political affairs that kept subjects engaged in the online Tea Party social network seemed to protect them from an apathetic reliance on their one-sided social media feeds.

One important factor in determining the nature of the social capital created in the movement is subjects' level of tolerance towards non-group members. While Putnam found that members of civic groups displayed high tolerance for racial and gender equality (Putnam 2000, 356), this study is more concerned with tolerance for those of opposing political beliefs; as Mouffe pointed out, antagonism between

Nina: Exactly. Yes. In a way it was like, we need to create this net, this Facebook net all around the country. I guess it was the same thing that probably happened in Egypt when

> *Liz*: He wasn't really brought up as a real American, um, he, he was probably born in Hawaii. But his formative years were spent in Indonesia, and, Hawaii is different from the United States…. Hawaii is not like living in mainland.

However, Liz went on to off-handedly mention Herman Cain, an African-American, as her favorite candidate in the 2012 Republican presidential primary. Her objection to President Obama seemed to focus less on his race and more on what she perceived as his atypical upbringing; in other words, her comments are better understood as xenophobic than racist. A few other subjects' comments on illegal immigrants and President Obama's background indicated a similar attitude. George, for example, described President Obama's former pastor Jeremiah Wright as "a guy who's been very much anti-military, anti-America, at least to those outside of his parish that listen in." As this quote demonstrates, George saw President Obama and Reverend Wright as part of a different group than those Americans outside Wright's community. Again, thouthou5 0 0 45-2 (t) 3 mds

causal link between social media use, political enthusiasm, and attitudes towards alternative theories and ideological opponents.

As in any study relying on inductive research methodology, more data was generated for this project than could be analyzed in such a short paper. The interviews conducted for this study also revealed fascinating patterns in subjects' attitudes towards gay marriage, the mainstream media, and professional political organizers, among other topics. The Tea Party movement has proven itself to be a useful case study for scholars of the Internet, social

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	Attended and spoke at rallies; ran unsuccessfully for Congress with Tea Party support in 2010; no longer affiliated with the movement	Under 30	LA	Yes	Yes	Yes
	Attended rallies and participated in online conversations before dropping out early in the movement	Under 30	LA	No	Yes	No
	Attends Tea Party rallies; has volunteered on recent Tea Party electoral campaigns	Under 30	LA	No	Yes	Yes
	Leads monthly constitutional study groups; attends rallies and meetings; has worked on Tea Party electoral campaigns	30-50				