The Tweet Machine, Tweets, Tweeting and the Political Science Classroom[1]

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Abstract

Engagement and participation by students in research are at the centre of political science education in many Irish universities. Scholarly work shows that engagement increases political knowledge, analytical ability and critical thinking. This paper documents a social media campaign monitoring project undertaken by politics students at a national referendum in Ireland in October 2013. It provides an overview of the project and goes on to present some preliminary findings on the effects of the project on students' likelihood of engaging in political and civic action. The paper considers the degree to which 'political' social media tools increase political knowledge and critical thinking; the enjoyment/fun, if any, students gain from these social media tools; and, the relationship between student engagement with Twitter and course learning outcomes. A second wave of the project is planned for the 2016(5) general election.

1   Introduction

Engagement and participation by students in research is at the centre of political science education in many Irish universities. Scholarly work shows that engagement increases political knowledge, analytical ability and critical thinking (Buckley and Reidy, 2015, Mariani, Buckley, Reidy and Witmer, 2014). This paper documents a pilot social media campaign monitoring project undertaken by politics students at a national referendum on the abolition of Seanad Eireann (upper house of parliament) in Ireland in 2013. The project was designed to enhance the learning opportunities for students by creating a real-life dynamic reseach opportunity for them, allowing students to link the theory and practice of elections. There is a second research strand to the project which considers the longer term outcomes of the project. Drawing on Csajko and Lindman (2011) we assess whether participation in the campaign increased the chances of students engaging in political participation at a future point.

Elections are the defining feature of democracy providing events of great intensity and drama. Frequently, they are a central motivating factor in the decision by students to study political science. The study of political campaigns lies at the heart of elections and referendum research in political science. Campaign particpation, opinion formation and change, the role of the media and, campaign regulation all feature on the curriculum. Outside of the academic arena, campaigning techniques hold much interest for political practitioners – politicians, political party strategists and journalists. *Tweets, Tweeting and the Twitterati* was a campaign monitoring project designed to capitalise on the vibrancy of a referendum campaign, drawing students into practical politics and requiring them to link the theory of referendum campaigns with the practice they encountered in their data collection. Social media was used as the central plank of the campaign research because of its enormous growth internationally and its increasing relevance in elections and referendums. Significantly, Twitter has been very controversial on a number of occasions in Irish elections and referendums and there have been a number of instances where controversial tweets have been issued by commentators and politicians. In once instance, a case is before the Irish courts which is asserting that an inappropriate tweet damaged the electoral standing of a candidate in the 2011 presential election (O'Malley 2012). The design of the project allowed us to link campaign research with the emerging study of social media while presenting an opportunity for a creative teaching and learning project for Irish politics students.

In October 2013, the Irish government held a referendum to abolish the upper house of parliament. Students taking first year politics modules at University College Cork were offered the opportunity to monitor social media activity during the referendum campaign debates. Students set up their own Twitter accounts and used a custom designed debate evaluation framework to monitor the Twitter activity. Using an adaptation of the Beaumont, Ehrlich and Torney-Purta (2006) method, the prjoect assesses how far the practice of political campaign monitoring skills promoted political competence and civic engagement among students. Surveys were deployed before and after the campaign monitoring project and the central aim of this element of the project is to assess how a social media active learning project influences civic engagement and commitment among young citizens.

This paper is organised as follows. Section two provides a brief overview of the literature which shaped the design of the project as well as drawing insights from the civic engagement and political participation literatre to frame the analysis of the second strand of the research. Section three documents the detail of the project. Section four provides an overview of the education outcomes from the project while section five presents details on the preliminary findings on the civic and political action outcomes of the project. Some tentaive conclusions are provided in section six.

2   Literature

This paper draws on two sets of literature to frame the analysis. In the first instance, the Twitter project is informed by the literature on undergraduate research. The US Council on Undergraduate Research defines undergraduate research as "an inquiry or investigation conducted by an undergraduate in collaboration with a faculty mentor that makes an original intellectual or creative contribution to the discipline (Wenzel 1997: 163) and undergraduate research experiences have been identified as a "high-impact' learning practice that involves "students with actively contested questions, empirical observation, cutting-edge technologies, and the sense of excitement that comes from working to answer important questions" (Kuh 2008). Furthermore, Osborn and Karukstis (2009) argue that undergraduate research experiences, like other forms of engaged learning, are "transformational experiences for undergraduate students". European education policy and European universities replicate much of what is documented from the US experience. Healy and Jenkins (2010) conclude their article by declaring that 'Undergraduate research is a global movement' and they conclude that integrating research into undergraduate programs is a core objective of

curriculum development internationally. The Twitter project seeks to blend many of the essential components of these definitions by involving students directly in empirical data collection through the medium of new social media technologies.

Undergraduate research also benefits faculty members and academic institutions in general. According to Osborn and Karukstis (2009: 4-5), undergraduate research provides an "opportunity for faculty members to deeply engage students' through mentoring and teaching, achieving research, scholarly and creative outcomes, integrating scholarship and teaching, and promoting job satisfaction and personal development.

The second strand of the research is focused on political participation and the vital role that political science education can play in preparing students for political engagement and political participation. Guided by the ideals of John Dewey that universities must lead in preparing citizens for democratic engagemnt, this work draws from Junco et al (2011) and Csako and Lindman (2011) which provide guidance on the project methodology focusing as they do on whether engaging students in the practice of politics improved their learning outcomes.

3   Project Details

In October 2013, the government held a referendum on the abolition of Seanad Eireann. The commitment to hold the referendum had been made by the Taoiseach (prime minister) as far back as 2009 and was included in the 2011 programme for government, so the referendum was widely anticipated. The early notice of the referendum date provided an opportunity to develop research and teaching projects around the event.

The referendum was especially notable for political science students as the decision before the people related to a specific aspect of political design. The government elected in 2011 made a series of political reform commitments. The origin of these was the belief that the economic crisis which began in 2008 was partly caused by a failure of democratic politics. Executive doinance, poor parliamentary oversight and parochial politics were identified as contributory factors to the institutional and economic failures (Gallagher and Marsh, 2011). There was also extensive discussion about the cost of the political system; leading to a widespread view that there were to many politicians at all levels and that they were paid too much. The decision to hold the referendum on the Seanad stemmed from the political reform

agenda but was also closely tied to ideas that the upper house was a weak and unnecessary institution. All referendums are proposed by the government in Ireland. Support for the proposal was spread across parliament and Sinn Fein, though an opposition party, also supported the proposal. The proposal was opposed by the main opposition party, Fianna Fail and a number of non party TDs (members of parliament). The No campaign were also joined by active civil society groups who included senators (members of Seanad Eireann, academics and commentators). Opinion polls had indicated that the Yes side had a reasonable lead but this was whittled down over the course of a lively campaign (MacCarthaigh and Martin, 2015). The proposal was eventually defeated on a turnout of 39.2% and by a margin of 42,500 voted.

The Twitter campaign project was focused on twitter activity during campaign debates. Students engaged in Twitter monitoring to identify the different groups who engaged in Twitter during campaign debates; campaigners, political parties, academics, journalists, political commentators and members of the public. They were also interested in the volume of activity during debates and the tone of that activity.

Two groups of students participated in the project. Both were first year groups taking Irish politics modules in different degree programmes. The choice of first year students was largely dictated by the teaching grant which was secured to fund the work. This was provided by the university for projects designed to to enhance the first year learning experience of undergraduates. In all, there were 150 students registered in the two modules involved in the projects and 120 participated at varying stages in the project.

The first four weeks of the two modules were allocated to the Twitter project. A project Twitter account (@UCC_Campaign_Monitor) was created. The account followed several hundred people including political parties, civil society campaign groups, campaigners from the political parties and civil society groups, media organisations, journalists, academics and the Referendum Commission (indepedent referendum management agency). Class time was allocated to discussions and demonstrations on Twitter and each student was encouraged to set up their own Twitter account and to use it to follow the people identified in the project account. Only a small number of students already had Twitter account.

Each student monitored twitter activity during two media debates. They used a debate evaluation framework to assess the volume, content and tone of tweets. Students then analysed the content of their data and drawing on the campaign literature. The debate evaluation framework is included in the appendix to this paper.

Over the course of the referendum campaign, there were a large number of debates. National radio and television, local radio and several civil society groups hosted events. Students were asked to monitor two debates during the campaign. They were encouraged to focus on the television debates where the highest volume of Twitter activity was anticipated but they were free to choose any debate where there was Twitter commentary and discussion taking place. The majority of students monitored the main campaign debate on the RTE 1 *Prime Time* programme and the *Vincent Browne Show* debate.

In advance of the debates, the class schedules were re-organised to cover two topics; political institutions with a focus on parliaments, and campaigns. This meant that students were introduced to theoretical aspects of the debates which underpinned the referendum as well as equipped with the skills required to assess referendum campaigns. Class time was allocated to general discussions about the Twitter activity during the debates after each major debate.

Drawing from Perkins (1993, 1994), the assessment for the module included an option to complete a report on the uses of social media during referendum campaigns using the empirical data collected by each student during the debates. While a great many students participated in the debate monitoring, there was a lower take-up of the assessment option. These reports and the student grades will be analysed in subsequent work, once a number of waves of the project have been completed. To assist students in the completion of their reports, a referendum master class and one day conference on Irish politics was held as part of the project. Prof Michael Gallagher (TCD) delivered the masterclass on referendum theory and the practice of referendums in Ireland. Again, the take-up was low but the evaluation from those who participated was excellent.

There were a number of feedback strategies used for the project. In the first instance, students submitted their debate evaluation frameworks, These serve as evidence of participation and will be analaysed subsequently as part of a political debates study which is also being conducted in the department. The second strand of evaluation is the one that is pertinent to

this paper. Students completed pre and post project questionnaires in which they answered questions relating to political knowledge, sources of political information, trust and liklihood of engaging in political action.

Finally, there was formal and informal feedback collected from the students over the course of the module. All students are asked to complete a module evaluation and in the case of both modules, the survey was tailored to include the Twitter campaign project. Informal feedback was collected from students at the end of lectures, during the special assistance sessions held on Twitter and at the referendum master class.

4   Results - Tweets and Tweeting

Student evaluations of the project were overwhelmingly favourable. Both the formal module evaluations and informal feedback indicates that students found the project to be intellectually stimulating and enjoyable. It was particularly notable in the informal feedback that the students appreciated being involved in research on the referendum. It provided them with great reassurance that political science research had a direct relevance to real world politics as well as being a subject that would equip them with valuable skills that could be applied beyond the university. Some of the students were still a little unsure about their degree and module choices and the project served to reassure them about their decisions. Of course, there was a strong novelty factor to the project and this also came across in the feedback. Many of the students persuaded their friends to join Twitter as well and, somewhat worryingly in terms of the data colection, Twitter debate parties were held.

However, there are some caveats. In the final module evaluations, there were a handful of students who reported that they believed the project was a waste of class time and it would have been better if the focus had been on information delivery – a variation on the standard *why don't you just give us the notes!* We greatly overestimated the social media capabilities of our students. Less than 20% of the students had Twitter accounts before they started the modules. Owing to the frequent Twitter controversies in Irish politics, all were aware of it but few were proficient tweeters. This meant that far more time had to be allocated over to the social media preparation elements than had been planned in the design of the project. Unsurprisingly, mature students needed more support although, they often were amongst the most enthusiastic about the project.

There was also an unexpected technical problem. In the first week of term, most of the students set up their Twitter accounts and followed the list of people on the @UCC_Campiagn _Monitor account. Several of the students found themselves suspended from Twitter because of aggressive following. Twitter algorithms picked them up as suspicious activity. We then had to make contact with Twitter and explain the content of the project. It gave the students a small sense of notoriety which from the informal feedback appears to have enhanced the experience for some of them. A further positive side effect of the aggressive following is that many of the journalists and politicians who were followed by the students began to engage with the main project Twitter account as well as some of the individual students. This gave the project great national profile and it was mentioned in radio coverage of the referendum as well as a few newspaper articles.

The multi-tasking requirements of the project featured in the feedback as well. Most especially for the first debate, students found it difficult to watch the debate, monitor Twitter and also complete the debate evaluation framework. The evaluation form required students to give an impression of activity and not record exact information but many found the experience of trying to do all three a little overwhelming. Inevitably with these things, there were also a small number of students for whom the internet feed was interrupted or took a while to get going. The main debates covered in the project took place at night usually after 9pm. Consequently, most students were not on the university network while the debates were taking place. The final point is that this is a real time project. It is not possible to repeat the experience as the Twitter feed is live. Students could monitor any debate so long as there was Twitter activity. It was essential that the project had a long lead in and there were many debates as small technical problems or unfamiliarity with the medium meant that a number of students had trial runs before they completed the two evaluation forms that they submitted.

5   Results – More Active and Engaged Citizens

Two hundred and one completed debate evaluation framework forms were submitted as part of the project. Most students completed two but a small number completed just one. One hundred and seventeen students completed the pre-project questionnaire but just 58 students completed the post project questionnaire. This tells us more about the variable attendance rates of university students in the Irish system than anything else.

The pre and post project questionnaires included questions on political knowledge, information on the referendum, media consumption. In this paper, we focus on voting and look at the effect that the project had on students views on voting at both referendums and elections. First, in table one, we see that a considerable majority of the students consider that voting is a duty and that there is very little change in the overall percentages before and after the project. The belief that voting is a duty is widely held in Ireland and considered extensively by Sinnott (for a wide discussion see 1997).

Table 1

How strongly do you feel that voting is a duty?			
	Very Strongly	Somewhat Strongly	Not Very Strongly
Pre Project	65.3	26.3	7.8
Post project	67.8	22.0	6.8

Figures reported are percetages

Next we look to the aftermath of the project and we present the summary information from the post project questions. There are several caveats to go along with these data. First, there is a well documented positive bias when dealing with intention to vote questions and second, the information below is drawn from the most enthusiastic students, those who completed the entire project. That being said, we notice an overall positive effect with the same relatively high percentage reporting that they would be more likely to vote as a result of participating in the project. The figure is somewhat lower for the question on engaging in political activity with just over half reporting that they would be more likely to become involved politically.

Table Two

As a consequence of your involvement with the twitter monitoring project, are you more likely to vote at future referendums?	
Yes	67.8%
No	28.8%
As a consequence of your involvement with the twitter campaign monitoring project, are you more likely to vote at a future election?	
Yes	67.8%

No   28.8%

As a consequence of your involvement with the twitter campaign monitoring project, are you more likely to engage in other forms of political activity such as participating in a campaign, signing a petition, attending a demonstration?

Yes   50.8%

No   44.1%

Figures reported are percetages

Tables three (a,b,c) provide an overview of the gender breakdown of the voting and political activity questions. With males accounting for slightly more than half the class, we see that in all three cases, men reported they were more likley to engage in voting or political activity in higher numbers than their female colleagues.

Table 3A - More likely to vote in future referendums

| | | | Gender | | |
			Male	Female	Total
more likely to vote in future ref	Yes	Count	25	15	40
		% within more likely to vote in future ref	62.5%	37.5%	100.0%
		% within Gender	73.5%	62.5%	69.0%
		% of Total	43.1%	25.9%	69.0%
	No	Count	8	9	17
		% within more likely to vote in future ref	47.1%	52.9%	100.0%
		% within Gender	23.5%	37.5%	29.3%
		% of Total	13.8%	15.5%	29.3%

Table 3B - More likely to vote in future elections

| | | | Gender | | |
			Male	Female	Total
More likely to vote in future elect	Yes	Count	26	14	40
		% within More likely to vote in future elect	65.0%	35.0%	100.0%
		% within Gender	76.5%	58.3%	69.0%

			Male	Female	Total
		% of Total	44.8%	24.1%	69.0%
	No	Count	7	10	17
		% within More likely to vote in future elect	41.2%	58.8%	100.0%
		% within Gender	20.6%	41.7%	29.3%
		% of Total	12.1%	17.2%	29.3%

Table 3C - More likely to be politically active

			Gender		
			Male	Female	Total
More likely to be politically active	Yes	Count	19	11	30
		% within More likely to be politically active	63.3%	36.7%	100.0%
		% within Gender	55.9%	45.8%	51.7%
		% of Total	32.8%	19.0%	51.7%
	No	Count	14	12	26
		% within More likely to be politically active	53.8%	46.2%	100.0%
		% within Gender	41.2%	50.0%	44.8%
		% of Total	24.1%	20.7%	44.8%
	41	Count	0	1	1
		% within More likely to be politically active	0.0%	100.0%	100.0%
		% within Gender	0.0%	4.2%	1.7%
		% of Total	0.0%	1.7%	1.7%

The preliminary exploration of the data suggests that participation in the project makes the students more likely to vote (at both referendums and elections) by a small margin but there is a great deal of caution that must be applied to this because of question bias.

Conclusions

This paper has reported on the pilot of the twitter monitoring project. We have documented the considerable enthusiasm which greeted the project among the student body but as can be seen from the summary statistics presented, we faced problems of considerable project fall off over the duration of the project. The initial application has also provided insights into

improvements needed in the evaluation surveys used to ensure better quality data at the next round.

The next wave of the project will take place in 2016(5) at the general election. There will be at least one debate among the leaders of the political parties and an adapted version of the project will be deployed for this.

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Debate Evaluation Framework

Name _____

Student Number_____

Debate_____

Station/Location_____

Time_____

Date_____

Place just ONE tick in each box.

	0 – 10 mins	11 – 20 mins	21 – 30 mins	31- 40 mir
Who is tweeting during the debate?				
Political Parties				
Politicians				
Campaign Groups				

Referendum Commission				
Academics				
Journalists				
Your friends				
Anyone Else				
NO TWITTER ACTIVITY				

What do they tweet?	**0 – 10 mins**	**11 – 20 mins**	**21 – 30 mins**	**31- 40 mi**
Views on debate content				
Views on debate participants				
Replies to other contributors				
Retweets				

What Hashtags are used?	**0 – 10 mins**	**11 – 20 mins**	**21 – 30 mins**	**31- 40 mi**
#seanad				
#seanadref				
#vinb				
#rtept				
#abolition				

What was the overall tone of the message from each of these participants over the entire debate	**Positive**	**Neutral**	**Negative**	
Political Parties				
Politicians				
Campaign Groups				
Referendum Commission				

Academics				
Journalists				
Your friends				
Anyone Else				

In your opinion, was the tv/radio debate informative?

Please Circle the answer.

YES

NO

Who (politician, journalist, campaigner) did you find most persuasive?

_____

_____

What arguments did you find most persuasive?

_____

_____

_____