

# Opinion: Social media makes politics impossible to predict

By Helen Margetts

It's the vital question of our era, the question undergirding the success of everyone from Donald Trump to Black Lives Matter: What makes some online campaigns go viral and others flop?

Even after considerable research, it's surprisingly hard to say. We have more data on failures, since most mobilizations based on social media go nowhere. Almost all (99.9 percent) petitions to the White House's "We the People" petition platform fail to get the 100,000 signatures required for an official response, and 99 percent of petitions fail to get even 500 signatures.

The one thing we can say about successful initiatives is that once they start, they get going really quickly. All those hash tags used in campaigns against policing rise exponentially directly after the incident, and again if there is failure to indict. Successful political video clips are watched millions of times in a matter of hours. If a petition sits around with only a few signatures for more than 10 hours, it is digital dust—forgotten almost as quickly as it is posted.

Research shows that if we know something is popular, we like it more—and that applies to political initiatives, too. So petitions or campaigns or mobilizations that are popular become more popular, at the expense of the less popular. And that causes instability in political "markets," just as it does in cultural markets — where popular songs and videos are liked by millions even as most disappear without trace — or in financial markets, where a run on one stock can cause a stock

market bubble. This instability makes it very difficult to work out which initiatives will succeed and which will fail.

None of the normal drivers of political behavior explain what is going on in these settings. The way we used to predict political mobilization was through demographics—age, ethnic group, and socio-economic status, for example. The conventional wisdom was that older people were more likely to participate in politics than young people, whites were more likely to participate than blacks, and the rich were more likely to participate than the poor.

Yet today, when the costs of participation are so small, your income or other resources are less likely to shape whether you join in. Young people, the most avid users of social media, seem to be participating more, after years of commentators bemoaning their disinterest in politics. This participation can take many forms, from expressions of support for a cause on social media to circulating petitions, sharing photos of political events, taking part in elections, and even joining insurrections (as in the Arab Spring).

Participation means more than just voting, but even by that measure alone, things are changing. The presidential elections in 2004, 2008, and 2012 showed that a high voter turnout of around 50 percent is becoming the norm for the millennial generation, in contrast to the 1990s, when youth turnout was regularly less than 40 percent. Obama also brought young black people into the political process—in 2008, turnout among the black population matched that of the white population for the first time ever, and increased in 2012.

This trend of young people getting involved in the political process is growing wherever social media use is. In the U.K., Jeremy Corbyn, a left-wing backbencher, was elected Labor party leader to the amazement—and horror—of the many. How? Thanks largely to young people previously outside politics who mobilized around the hash tag #Jezwecan.

But what happens after these rapid-fire mobilizations succeed? Sustainability is a problem. Many recent mobilizations have exposed the chasm between new forms of citizens' engagement and the standard functioning of traditional institutions, particularly political parties. The challenge is how to become better at harnessing these mobilizations to sustain political change.

As exciting as they can be, digital campaigns, protests, and movements are also unstable and unpredictable. If they fail to achieve their aims, they will sink back into transient invisibility, as with the Umbrella Revolution in Hong Kong, but they could burst forth again at any point. We already know that there is no safe bet in American politics in the coming year: Look at Donald Trump, master of Twitter, and Bernie Sanders, who has gotten over 1 million online donations. The only thing we know for sure is that more unpredictability lies ahead.

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