

“A digitally empowered
civil society could
reconnect Europeans
with democracy...”

LIKE, SHARE, VOTE

Jamie Bartlett
Jonathan Birdwell
Louis Reynolds

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Executive summary

Electoral turnout is one of the most important indicators of democratic health. Low turnout undermines our democracy.¹ In national elections across the European Union, turnout declined from an average of 77 per cent in 1990 to 68 per cent in 2013.² Turnout in European Parliament elections has fallen further, from 62 per cent in 1979 to only 43 per cent in 2014. While the entry of new states from Central and Eastern Europe accounts for some of this decline, it only partially explains it.

Part of the reason for declining voter turnout is that fewer people now trust political parties, join political parties or feel that it is their duty to vote. This is particularly true of younger generations. Yet, these trends do not necessarily suggest there is a loss of interest in politics or social issues by the public: they may instead be indicative of a shift towards new and different forms of political engagement, including online activity. Nevertheless, it is vital that efforts are made to reverse these long-term declines in voter turnout.

Social media may provide the answer. There are now almost 295 million social media users in Europe, comprising 40 per cent of the population. Facebook alone boasts 232 million active users. The average European spends around four hours online per day, much of the time on social media platforms.³ More than half of social media users use platforms like Facebook or Twitter to receive news and information.⁴

We have also seen in the past five years how social media can be used to engage citizens who feel increasingly estranged from the political system. The rise of populist groups in North America (eg the 'Tea Party') and Europe, including Beppe Grillo's Five Star Movement and other political groups such as the Occupy movement, all demonstrate the political power of social media.

Mainstream political parties and civil society organisations, particularly in North America, have also used social media for campaigning for a number of years now. Civil society organisations in Europe, on the other hand, still appear to lack the knowledge and skills to use social media to the fullest extent to influence their campaigns. This report is an effort to help address this gap. In particular, our aim is to assist third sector organisations across Europe working to increase voter turnout.

This report outlines:

- the latest trends in voter turnout in six European countries (chapter 1)
- recent evidence about social media's ability to mobilise citizens for political engagement (chapter 2)
- the capacity of third sector organisations to use social media (chapter 3)
- key techniques and tools for designing and implementing a successful social media campaign (chapter 4)
- concluding comments and recommendations

We also provide a separate and detailed 'how-to' guide accompanying this report, which has been designed to give third sector organisations the basic skills they need to take advantage of social media for voter mobilisation.

Running an effective social media campaign: key findings

Below we outline four key principles and techniques to help civil society organisations develop effective social media campaigns for voter mobilisation: understanding audiences by listening to online conversations; using quizzes and interactive approaches; micro-targeting specific groups; and coordinating online campaigns with offline voter mobilisation events.

Listen to online conversations to understand your audience

Social media not only allow activists to reach huge numbers of citizens, but they also provide an opportunity to hear the

perspectives of citizens as they debate politics and social issues. Gathering this information using new tools and techniques can help civil society organisations to design more effective campaigns. For example, Demos analysis of all the tweets containing European Union (EU)-related keywords across six European languages conducted for this report in the run-up to the European elections revealed a number of insights that could assist voter mobilisation efforts. For example, we found the following:

- Anti-EU populists dominated conversations on Twitter.
- Policies are discussed, but primarily through the lens of individual personalities.
- Humour and irony are used to frame political messages in unconventional language, which inspires positive sentiments and proactiveness.

While most social media analytic tools can be expensive, there are a number of cheap and free tools that third sector organisations can use to do this.

Use quizzes and interactive approaches to increase engagement

Tapping into existing uses of social media, through the use of online quizzes and interactive content, represents one of the greatest opportunities for activists to engage social media users. The largest study to date of social media and voter mobilisation found that interactivity and social influence must be at the heart of a successful campaign.

Across Europe, voter advice applications have demonstrated their ability to engage citizens who might otherwise not be attracted to politics. However, much more can be made of voter advice applications to maximise their use. In particular, we recommend developing a voter advice application that is designed for young people in style and content. If done correctly, such a tailored voter advice application could be a significant boost to turnout of youth voters because it taps into

two key behaviours of people on social media: love of quizzes, and doing something interactive.

Micro-target specific groups using social media advertising

Through the exploitation of commercial social media advertising tools, it is possible to 'micro-target' specific groups with campaign material tailored to the audience it is trying to reach. This ability dramatically increases the sophistication that voter mobilisation efforts can deploy. There is evidence that:

- the more personalised the message, the bigger the impact it has
- positive stories that are emotionally resonant are more likely to be shared
- appealing to how people identify themselves outside politics (eg as a student, through their favourite sport or sport team, through their support for a certain campaign), as well as the issues they are likely to care about, can help cut through the social media 'noise' and get their attention

Our research suggests that many third sector organisations still lack basic skills and knowledge around using things like social media advertising tools. In addition to the workshops we ran to provide organisations with these skills, we have also created an accompanying 'how-to' guide, designed so that even the most novice organisation can use social media advertising tools.

Coordinate online campaigns with offline voter mobilisation events

Social media are a means to an end, not an end in themselves. Using social media effectively in conjunction with and in support of offline events is vital. There are a number of excellent examples of organisations that combine online campaigns with offline events in order to maximise impact, for example Bite the Ballot and Rock the Vote in the USA. As third sector

organisations become more savvy in their ability to run social media campaigns, they must remember that purely online campaigns risk succumbing to charges of 'slactivism', and have less impact overall.

Introduction

European and national political institutions are caught in a decline of trust and confidence that has steadily eroded their ability to inspire and mobilise voters.⁵ Voter turnout in European Parliament elections has fallen year-on-year since 1979, from 62 per cent in 1979 to only 43 per cent in 2009 (although remaining stable for the 2014 election). Within these overall declines, there are also particular demographic groups that are even less likely to vote than average: young people (under 25s) and certain minority groups – including first or second generation immigrants.⁶

High electoral turnout is considered to be one of the most important indicators of the health of democratic systems.⁷ Low voter turnout – and indeed the lack of political engagement that often underpins it – undermines our democracy and diminishes the legitimacy of elected leaders.⁸ It can also impact – and skew – elections results.⁹ Over the past decade an anti-establishment political insurgency has gained prominence and momentum in many European countries, most notably political parties like Front National in France, the Five Star Movement in Italy, Jobbik in Hungary, and UK Independence Party (UKIP) in the UK. These parties are often united in their critique of the EU and their hostility to immigration and minorities. While national polls (and elections) demonstrate that the majority of citizens in these respective countries disagree with the views of these parties, the lack of voter turnout in European elections, alongside their status as second tier elections in the eyes of the populus, allows anti-establishment populist political parties to do disproportionately well.

Because low voter turnout undermines the legitimacy of our democracy and our governments, increasing voter turnout has become a preoccupation for political parties, governments

and third sector organisations. While declining voter turnout is common across the developed world and is driven to a significant degree by broad social trends, the variation between national voter turnout rates suggests that low voter turnout is a problem that can be solved by active intervention.¹⁰ This report (and accompanying guide) examines opportunities to harness social media and new technologies to reverse the trend of political disenfranchisement, in order to provide the information that third sector organisations across Europe need to bring about effective voter turnouts.

According to recent estimates, three out of four Europeans use at least one social media platform and 60 per cent use one every day.¹¹ To put that into context, more Europeans access a social media platform daily than voted in the last European elections. Because of this extraordinary reach, social media are now a key part of political campaigns, affecting the way political parties form, organise, communicate and listen to potential voters.¹²

Political parties and data analytics companies have been using social media for insight into citizens' concerns and voter mobilisation efforts for a number of years now, particularly in North America. However, these opportunities are not being exploited by civil society organisations, which often lack the technical know-how, time or resources to invest and use social media techniques. This report is an attempt to close this gap and to provide civil society organisations with the know-how and tools to use social media for their campaigns.

Method

In order to explore the potential for social media to mobilise voters, we have undertaken a comprehensive review of existing evidence. Throughout, we also drew on our own expertise, developed through the activities of the Centre for the Analysis of Social Media (CASM). In particular, we have pioneered the use of Facebook's advertising tool to promote online surveys to supporters of new, emerging populist political parties and street-based groups across the political spectrum. In 2011, we published

The New Face of Digital Populism, based on over 13,000 responses from the activists and supporters of far right, anti-immigrant groups across Europe.¹³ We have since continued these surveys, targeting supporters of far left groups and internet-based social movements. We have also developed software to analyse conversations on Twitter about various political topics. Through our research efforts on social media, we have gathered a significant amount of expertise about the most effective ways of targeting different groups of citizens effectively. We have engaged with a range of campaigners, activists and charities, and have conducted 13 interviews with social media experts and academics and reviewed over 120 papers, articles and reports.

We have also undertaken reviews about turnout rates and trends in six European countries: France, Greece, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands and the UK. In each of these countries, we have drawn on available data to determine which groups – if any – consistently display disproportionately lower levels of voter turnout. This included data drawn from European elections, as well as national elections and other supplementary academic work. An expert steering group, whose members kindly contributed their time, feedback and recommendations throughout, also guided our research.

Based on these sources, we designed workshops that aimed to build the capacity of third sector organisations to use social media in an effective manner to accomplish their aims around voter mobilisation. Between January 2014 and June 2014, we conducted 12 workshops across Europe in six countries (France, Greece, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands and the UK). In total we reached around 120 third sector organisations and campaigners.

Based on this research and practical training workshops, this report sets out:

- current trends in voter turnout across Europe, including key hard to reach groups (chapter 1)
- evidence on how social media can be used to understand voter concerns, communicate with disengaged citizens, and mobilise voters at low cost to increase voter turnout¹⁴ (chapter 2)

- current gaps in civil society capacity to use social media as a way of mobilising voters (chapter 3)
- specific techniques and (relatively cheap or free) tools that can be used to help better exploit social media, in order to improve voter turnout (chapter 4)

Social media mobilisation will become increasingly important as a method to mobilise voters in the coming elections – and for organisations to run campaigns of all types. It potentially offers a vital way to identify people's concerns, tailor messages according to their concerns and help nudge them towards the ballot box. With the right messages, platforms and know-how, this could be especially true for groups of citizens with historically low turnout. However, taking advantage of this opportunity is more difficult than it might first appear, and requires new skills, knowledge and, in some instances, software.

1 Voter turnout trends in Europe: who needs mobilising?

Across several measures, trust in formal politics in Europe has declined in recent years. Demos' 2013 report *Backsliders* described in detail the weakening of civil society in Europe, the decline in civic participation, and decreasing social and political capital.¹⁵ Part of this is due to the impact of the Eurozone crisis. Between 1999 and 2009, trust in EU institutions was relatively stable at around 45–50 per cent, but then dropped substantially from 48 per cent in summer 2009 down to 33 per cent in autumn 2012. There was also a notable increase in the percentage of Europeans who have a 'negative' image of the EU, rising from 15 per cent in 2006 to just under a third (29 per cent) in 2013.¹⁶

Politicians and political parties across Europe have experienced a wave of condemnation and distrust. In Italy and Greece, the percentage of the population who trust politicians currently stands at 15 per cent and 14 per cent respectively.¹⁷ In the UK, the number of people who trust the government 'at least most of the time' dropped from 40 per cent in 1986 to 16 per cent in 2009.¹⁸ In Germany, 64 per cent distrust political parties, compared with 89 per cent of French citizens and 79 per cent of British citizens.¹⁹ While trust levels reached new lows following the 2008 recession and Eurozone crisis, data suggest there are longer term trends of increasing distrust towards traditional party politics and declining levels of engagement. According to calculations based on Eurobarometer data, trust in political parties in the EU has fallen by an average of 0.51 per cent a year since October 2003.²⁰ Similarly, average voter turnout for European Parliament elections has dropped by 2.7 percentage points per election since 1979.²¹

Political party affiliation is also on the decline. In 1980, 4 per cent of the UK population belonged to a political party,

whereas now formal party membership stands at around 1 per cent.²² During the same time period, Italian parties lost around 1.5 million members and French parties around 1 million.²³ The Netherlands experienced a decline of around 125,000 between 1980 and 2008, not insignificant given its population size, and Hungary has lost just over 40,000 since 1990. This pattern is not uniform, however; there has been an increase in party membership in Greece of around 335,000.²⁴ These long-term trends suggest that declining political party membership is connected to broader shifts in social attitudes towards politics, the rise of issues-based politics and the advent of mass media.²⁵ In the 2013 paper, 'Virtually members', Demos explored how social media was revolutionising political party membership and engagement.²⁶ Analysing social media followers for the three main political parties in the UK, we found that there were significantly more Twitter followers for the Conservatives (430,893) and for Labour (316,237) than formal party members (under 200,000 for each). We also found that there were significantly more Facebook 'like's' for the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats than formal party members, but far fewer for Labour. Precisely how far virtual membership can replace traditional party membership remains to be seen. But as formal membership declines and virtual membership rises, it is clear that social media will become increasingly important for politics.

While levels of trust and party affiliation are not arguably *essential* to the health of our democracies, the decline of voter turnout across Europe, at both national and European elections, cannot be ignored. In national elections across the EU, turnout gradually declined from an average of 77 per cent in 1990 to 68 per cent in 2013.²⁷ Voter turnout for the European Parliamentary elections – which has always been lower than national elections – has also continuously declined since the first election in 1979, when voter turnout stood at 62 per cent, down to 43.1 per cent in 2014.²⁸ It should be noted that part of this decline results from the reduction of the average by the entry of low turnout Eastern European countries into the EU, but that does not explain the continued – if less dramatic – decline in Western Europe. In the UK, voter turnout declined from 34.7 per cent in 2009 to 33.8

per cent, despite the significant attention the elections had in the UK press, driven by the rise of the UKIP and Nigel Farage.²⁹

There are many reasons for lower participation in the European Parliamentary elections than national elections, including the opacity of the EU's day-to-day function, the 'second-order' nature of European Parliamentary elections, a perceived lack of satisfactory representation by parties involved in the elections, and growing cynicism with regards to the institutions of the EU.³⁰ With these issues in mind, it remains vital to the legitimacy of the EU, particularly in light of its growing legislative powers, that voter turnout does not fall too low.

Rather than reflecting a decline of interest in or engagement with politics, falling voter turnout could instead reflect changes in the manner in which people participate in politics (including through social media, which we discuss further in chapter 2). Nonetheless, reversing its decline must be an essential priority for government and NGOs in particular. Doing this in a strategic manner requires an overview of voter turnout across Europe and identifying priority areas. National laws and practices can lead to substantial variations in turnout. In Belgium, for example, where voting is compulsory (but where fines are generally unenforced), turnout in the 2014 European Parliamentary elections was 89.64 per cent.³¹ In Slovakia, by contrast, turnout was 13.05 per cent, a record low in EU history.³²

Perhaps even more important to the health of our democracy is the fact that, in some countries, there can exist a significant gap between the turnout rates of certain groups where our values dictate there should not be. These gaps exist between the rich and the poor, different ethnic minorities, the genders, and those living in different regions. For this report, we conducted a comprehensive review and analysis of voter turnout trends across six different European countries and demographic groups. We discuss the key themes below.

Ethnic and religious groups

Academic research has highlighted the tendency for new immigrant groups and some ethnic minority groups to have

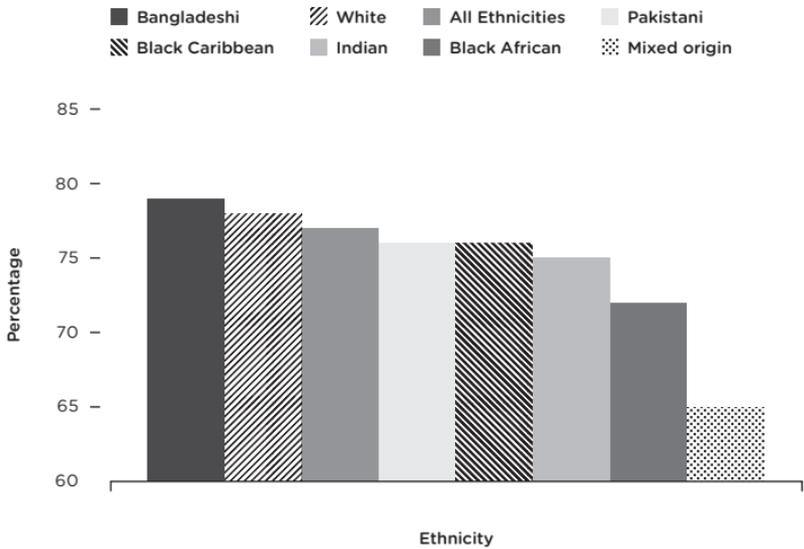
lower than average voter turnout.³³ This is often attributed to underlying characteristics – including, education, age or income – all of which increase the likelihood of voting among the majority population and are lower among minority populations in general. Cultural factors can also be at play, however, such as whether or not an individual was raised in the country, how many years they have lived in the country, their political knowledge and their social integration.³⁴ Studies of political participation among European immigrants show the influence of a lack of economic resources and lower integration.³⁵

Determining whether these trends hold true in the context of European elections can be difficult to determine: data on participation in the European Parliamentary elections by ethnicity are not provided by the EU, and many countries do not keep national data on the voting patterns of ethnic minorities. However, there are some studies that help to provide an insight into the voting behaviour of ethnic or religious minorities.

In the UK, a study by Ethnic Politics suggested that, based on self-reported turnout, certain ethnic minority groups actually have higher voter turnout rates than British white citizens. While self-reported voter turnout is very often higher than actual turnout – in this case self-reported turnout was an average of 77 per cent, against a reality of 65.1 per cent – comparing self-reported voter turnout figures gives an indication of participation by ethnicity. Mixed race citizens were the least likely to report voting, with 65 per cent turnout. Conversely, those of Bangladeshi origin had the highest reported turnout (79 per cent), statistically equitable to the white population, who reported voting at a rate of 78 per cent. Overall, the study suggested there is a total variation in reported voter turnout of 14 percentage points between the ethnic groups with the highest and lowest turnout rates respectively (figure 1).³⁶

In France, the situation appears quite different, though lack of ethnic and religious data restrict our ability to draw firm conclusions. One study highlights the variation between ethnic groups in voter turnout during the 2004 French regional elections. Using the 2003 Permanent Demographic Sample and the 2004 Survey of Electoral Participation, Maxwell found that

Figure 1 **Validated voter turnout in the UK by ethnicity in the 2010 general election**

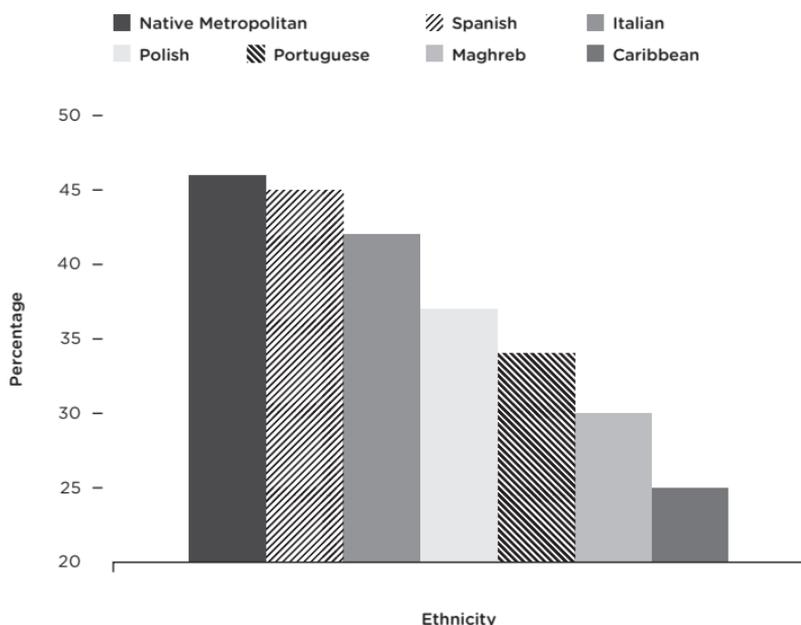


Source: Ethnic Politics, 'Voting participation'³⁷

66 per cent and 70 per cent of people whose parents were born in France with French citizenship as a whole (something Maxwell called 'Native French Metropolitan') turned out in rounds 1 and 2 of the French regional elections respectively, while only 47 per cent and 54 per cent of citizens of Caribbean origin did. This suggests a variation of 17 and 18 percentage points between the highest and lowest turnout for different ethnic groups,³⁸ a significant variation in voting rates.

It is important to recognise, as figures 1 and 2 show, that highlighting the total variation in turnout between the highest and lowest percentage can be misleading. While France and the UK have similar levels of variation (approximately 17 per cent and 14 per cent respectively), data from the 2004 French European elections suggest there is a clear discrepancy between the Native French Metropolitan population and ethnic groups from Northern Africa and the Caribbean.

Figure 2 **Percentage voter turnout by ethnicity in France in the 2004 European election**



Source: Maxwell, 'Political participation in France among non-European-origin migrants'³⁹

The situation in Hungary is very different from that in the UK, France and other Western European countries, which have higher levels of ethnic minority populations and more diversity within their populations. In Hungary, the primary focus tends to be on the sizable Roma community rather than a range of different ethnic minority groups.

According to a 2011 EU Agency for Fundamental Rights report, self-reported turnout at the 2010 Hungarian national elections was 79 per cent for people who were not members of the Roma community, and 71 per cent for members of the Roma community, an 8-percentage point difference.⁴⁰ Other research has suggested that when controlled for socioeconomic status, education and other relevant factors, the Roma rate of turnout

becomes largely the same as for other Hungarians.⁴¹ By contrast, the same 2011 survey suggests there is a major disparity between the self-reported turnout of Roma and non-Roma respondents in Italy and France.⁴² In the Netherlands, voter turnout is frequently lower among certain minority groups, a fact that is often explained as the product of lower average socioeconomic status and a lack of institutional trust.⁴³

Region

Patterns in regional variation in voter turnout are similarly complex. In some countries, there is very little variation in voter turnout by region; in others there is a significant difference. This is often due to the manner in which regions within a country map on to socioeconomic status, education, and ethnic and religious variation.⁴⁴

In the UK, for example, the further north one goes, the less likely citizens are to vote in the European elections (figure 3). During the 2009 European Parliamentary elections, there was notable regional variation: Scotland had the lowest turnout, with 29 per cent, while the South West turned out at 39 per cent. Similarly, there is a pronounced north–south divide in Italy. The Nord Occidentale and Nord Orientale regions had turnout of 72 per cent, while the Insulare region, consisting principally of Sicily and Sardinia, had a turnout of 47 per cent.⁴⁵ In Greece, the smaller island collections Ionia Nisia, Voreio Aigaio, Peloponnisos and Notio Aigaio varied from 43 per cent turnout to 49 per cent turnout, while Crete reported the highest voter turnout levels of all, at 59 per cent.⁴⁶ In Hungary, there was regional variation of up to 13 percentage points, between the 44 per cent achieved in the capital Budapest and the 30.9 per cent turnout of Jász-Nagykun-Szolnok.⁴⁷ On the other hand, there is significantly less regional variation in France and the Netherlands.⁴⁸ These regional differences should help voter mobilisation efforts to prioritise where their efforts should focus. Understanding possible regional variation is also important to ensure that improvements are measured from appropriate baselines.

Figure 3 **Map of regional variation in voter turnout in the UK at the 2014 European Parliamentary elections**



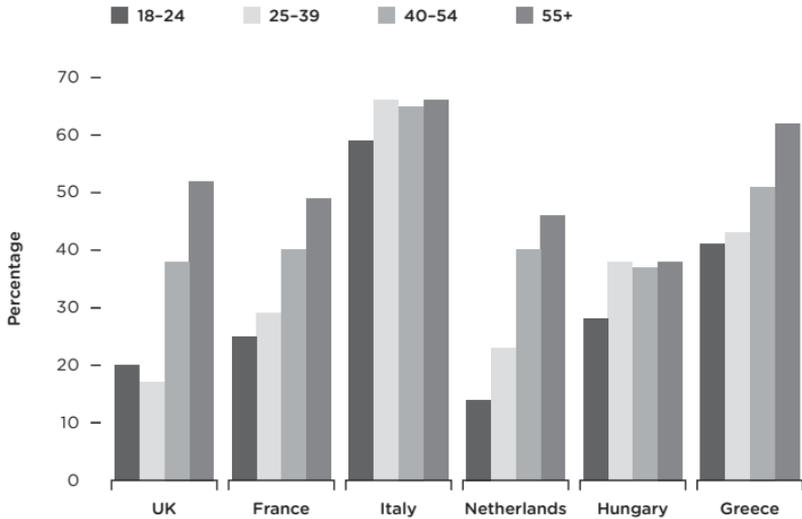
Socioeconomic group

One of the most significant factors influencing voter turnout rates is socioeconomic status. Of our target countries, the UK has the most extreme relationship between socioeconomic status and voter turnout. According to the OECD Better Life Index, voter turnout in national elections for the 20 per cent who earn the most is around 73 per cent while for the bottom 20 per cent of earners, it is 50 per cent.⁴⁹ France has the lowest income inequality when it comes to voter turnout, with the top 20 per cent of earners voting at a rate of 89 per cent, and the bottom 20 per cent at 79 per cent.⁵⁰ The difference in voter turnout between the top and bottom 20 per cent of earners in Greece, Italy, Hungary and the Netherlands is 12, 12, 19 and 19 percentage points respectively.⁵¹ As noted above, variations in voter turnout that appear to correlate with ethnicity and regional location may in fact be driven instead by differences in socioeconomic status.

Age

Another highly visible and often discussed demographic disparity when it comes to voter turnout is age. On average, turnout in the EU is lowest among those aged 22–25, at 32 per cent, and highest among those aged 70–73, at 48 per cent.⁵² This age disparity is particularly pronounced in the UK. According to the Electoral Commission's report on the administration of the 2009 European Parliamentary elections, 74 per cent of people aged 65 or over reported voting, compared with just 13 per cent of 18–24-year-olds.⁵³ Moreover, this is not just what sociologists refer to as a 'lifecycle effect' (something which characterises 'young people' of every generation), but rather there appears to be a 'cohort' effect at work in that the 'youth' vote appears to be declining from each generation to the next; the percentage of young people turning out to vote in the UK has declined significantly since the early 1990s.⁵⁴ General election turnout among 18–24-year-olds in the UK has fallen from 75.4 per cent in 1992 to 44.3 per cent in 2005, falling 5.1 percentage points from 2001 to 2005, while electoral participation increased among all other age groups.⁵⁵

Figure 4 **Voter turnout by age in the 2009 European elections**



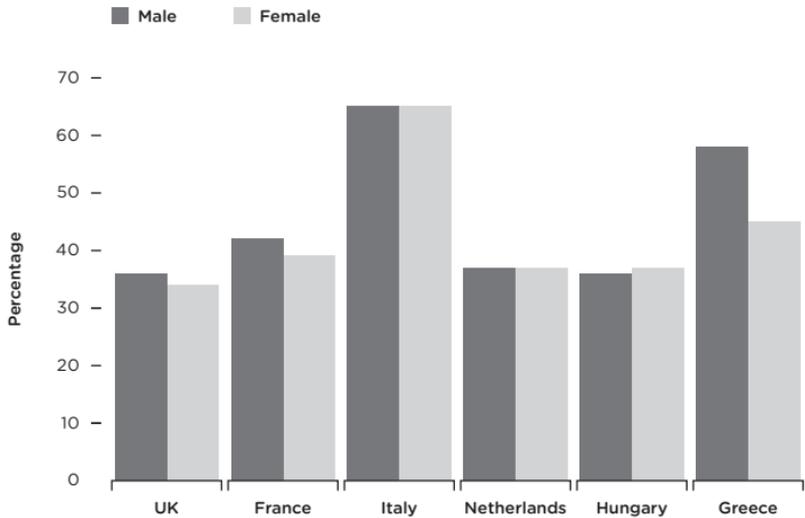
Source: European Parliament, EB71.3 European Elections 2009⁵⁶

Even this relatively uniform trend varies from country to country. For example, although during the 2009 European elections in France, Greece, Hungary, Italy and the Netherlands 18–24-year-olds were the least likely to vote, in the UK it was 25–39-year-olds who were the least likely to. In the UK, the largest gap between age groups was 32 per cent. In Italy, it was only 7 per cent.

Gender

A 2009 European Parliament survey found that men and women were equally likely to have participated in the previous national elections in respective nations, and men and women were also equally likely to have voted in the 2009 European Parliamentary elections.⁵⁷ However, our review suggests that there are differences in turnout along gender lines in some countries. Figure 5 shows the breakdown of voter turnout differences in

Figure 5 **Differences in voter turnout rates in 2009 European elections based on gender**



Source: European Parliament, EB71.3 European Elections 2009⁵⁹

European elections across the six countries we analysed. For example, in Greece men commonly outvote women by around 10 percentage points in national elections. Thus, organisations working on voter turnout in Greece may want to prioritise their efforts on women. In Hungary by contrast, women outvote men by 1 per cent.⁵⁸

Summary

Increasing voter participation in aggregate is not the only goal that we should aspire to. Just as important is ensuring that the electorate is representative of the population at large and does not systematically under-represent certain groups.⁶⁰ In many countries across Europe, to varying degrees, a number of minority and marginalised groups are less likely to vote. If a democratic institution seeks to represent a multicultural society,

or even the needs of a society as a whole, it should pursue an inclusive electorate. Prominent voter turnout variations between different groups to differing extents warp the shape of the electorate and ultimately reduce the representative value of a government, as well as our collective confidence in it. In the next chapter we look at the possibility social media hold for redressing these imbalances in voter turnout.

2 Social media and voter mobilisation: does it work?

Every new technology – from polling, to radio, television and email – has been picked up by political strategists and campaigners to reach voters and mobilise them to vote. In the 2004, 2008 and 2012 US presidential elections, mass mailings became virtual as political campaigns made extensive use of emails to communicate with supporters and potential voters. In 2008 and 2012, Facebook, Twitter and other social media sites became electoral battlegrounds. In addition to providing a direct and potentially cheap way to communicate with voters directly, social media sites are valuable because they are key arenas where citizens have discussions about political parties, candidates and specific issues. These conversations can provide a source of valuable information for political campaigns if they can be tapped into. While many campaigners continue to stress the importance of face-to-face communication, new technologies and social media are now vital to campaigns – including the facilitation of face-to-face engagement.

In the 2000 US presidential elections, it was demonstrated that elections could be won and lost with very small percentage changes of certain key demographics or voters.⁶¹ In 2004, the Republican Party introduced the micro-targeting techniques that had been developed in market research into politics. Political micro-targeting involves creating large databases of information on individual voters that combines voting histories, contact information, and demographic and consumer information to form complex profiles. These data are then analysed through statistical modelling in order to understand the political preferences and attitudes of individual voters, and to prioritise resources towards persuadable voters and facilitate the personalisation of messaging delivered to them.⁶²

Micro-targeting allowed the Republicans to make better use of their resources, avoiding those voters unlikely to support the Republican ticket and instead deliver personalised messages to likely voters.⁶³ By the 2008 election, the Democrats had followed suit and surpassed the micro-targeting efforts of the Republicans.

The 2008 and 2012 US elections are considered watershed events in the use of digital technologies for micro-targeting. The Obama campaign ran a so-called ‘cave’ headquarters in Chicago comprising teams of data scientists who fused conventional polling with online and offline data to produce a series of predictions for how every American voter would act on Election Day. (Quite how Obama’s campaign succeeded in this dramatic fertilisation of politics with big data was a closely guarded secret.)⁶⁴ Although micro-targeting has been an important electoral technique since the early 2000s, it became increasingly important in the 2008 and 2012 US elections. In the 2008 presidential election, Republicans and Democrats spent a combined \$20 million dollars on social media. In the 2012 election, that sum had risen to \$78 million.

Although solid evidence of social media strategies in politics outside the USA is fairly limited, there are signs that certain European parties are looking to follow the American example. In 2013, for instance, Labour hired Matthew McGregor, Obama’s ‘digital attack dog’ in the 2012 election. McGregor was known for producing slick videos exploiting gaffes made by Republicans – often within minutes or hours of them being reported. These videos were published and shared on Facebook and Twitter and reached millions of Americans. The UK Conservatives are revamping a big database called ‘Merlin’, while Labour have ‘Nation Builder’ and Blue State Digital Tools, and the Liberal Democrats have VAN (‘Voter Activation Network’). The data comprising these databases are gathered from a variety of sources, including the electoral register, local party activists and public and commercial sources.⁶⁵

Box 1

Obama 2012 and the network effect

In the final weeks of Obama's 2012 re-election campaign, Obama's digital team realised that approximately half of their targeted swing-state voters under the age of 29 had no listed phone number. So in response, Obama's digital team developed a Facebook app that more than 1 million people would eventually sign up for. These users gave the Obama campaign permission to look at their Facebook friend lists, granting them access to previously unseen voters. Around 85 per cent of people without a registered phone number could be found on these Facebook friend lists. Obama's team called this 'targeted sharing', and in the final weeks of the campaign they bombarded subscribers with requests to share online content at the click of a mouse. Over 600,000 users did so, reaching over 5 million contacts. People were asked to vote or register to vote, donate or simply watch an Obama campaign video. The nature of the appeals changed according to the potential voter's profile.

According to Time magazine, initial tests of this strategy found that it resulted in statistically significant changes in voter behaviour.⁶⁶ People whose friends sent them requests to vote, for example, were more likely to do so. This confirmed the results of earlier studies: that people tend to respond better to messages from friends and contacts than to official bodies and campaign groups.

Social media are increasingly vital to campaigns, political or otherwise, because they allow campaign managers to better understand voter concerns and preferences, to circulate campaign content and messages, and thus to better reach and mobilise voters. Recently, we have seen how social media can be used to engage citizens who feel increasingly estranged from the political system, through a more organic, less hierarchical social media model more characteristic of social movements. This type of social media exploitation has played a critical role in the rise of populist groups in North America (eg the 'Tea

Party’) and Europe, including the likes of Beppe Grillo’s Five Star Movement.

Social media and issues-based activism

Social media may also be contributing to and shaping changes to political habits of many European citizens. In particular, as noted above, voters and non-voters alike are increasingly non-partisan: less likely to be bound by tightly defined political ideology or even a defined identification with one party or another. With the internet providing more information on a range of different issues, citizens may feel more empowered to come to their own views about various issues, rather than simply subscribing to a political party’s manifesto.

Moreover, social media have diversified the spectrum of political engagement, allowing for engagement that could best be described as ‘micro-activism’: small-scale, issues-led, many-to-many political communication.⁶⁷ According to Jose Marichal, users of social media platforms can now use the technology to explore and define their political identities in a more nuanced manner, outside traditional political frameworks. Through commenting on news stories, signing petitions, engaging in debates, re-sharing opinions and liking groups or pages, social media users both define their own political identity and publicly display it to their peers.⁶⁸ According to Marichal, social networking sites can even ‘help encourage the formation of political identities that may force users to reflect more deeply on themselves as civic beings’.⁶⁹

While online political action is sometimes derided as ‘slacktivism’, research shows that online activity can stimulate offline political activity and collective action.⁷⁰ Evidence suggests that a high level of political engagement among young people online is correlated with engagement in offline activities.⁷¹

In this project we wanted to explore how well suited social media was at involving those at the margins of the voting process: the young, recent immigrants and ethnic minorities, many of whom tend to be active users of social media.

Social media topography and use among target groups

With every passing year, social media become more engrained into our lives. There are almost 295 million social media users in Europe, 40 per cent of Europe's population. Facebook alone boasts 232 million active users. The average European now spends around four hours online per day, much of the time on social media platforms.⁷² In the Netherlands the average time spent on social media per day is just over an hour and a quarter. In the UK and France, it is over one and a half hours a day, and in Italy, two hours.⁷³

The ubiquity of the internet and social media is changing the way people get their news. With newspapers migrating online, over three out of four British internet users turn to the internet in order to access news information. Even more importantly, more than half of social media users use social media sites like Facebook or Twitter to receive news and information.⁷⁴

European studies on demographics and political engagement online have shown that young people are more strongly represented on social media than other groups, and that young people respond particularly well to political engagement on social media.⁷⁵

There is some variation by gender across platforms, but women use social media at roughly the same volume as men. Statistics vary, but the Oxford Internet Institute's 2013 figures suggested that women use Facebook and YouTube very slightly less than men, but Twitter significantly more.⁷⁶

It is sometimes argued that access to the internet – the divide between the 'haves' and 'have-nots' – could exacerbate the democratic deficit that affects people from lower socioeconomic groups. If the political world gravitates to the internet, those without internet access can be cut off from politics. Yet recent research published in the *Social Science Computer Review* has suggested that greater levels of internet access and engagement online increases political participation much more effectively for members of lower income groups than it does for those in higher income groups.⁷⁷ This study highlighted correlations between high levels of internet access, socioeconomic status and levels of political engagement. However, the study also found that groups

from lower socioeconomic backgrounds experienced the largest increase in political involvement and knowledge the more their access to internet increases.⁷⁸ In other words, despite access limitations, it appears that the internet may be helping to close the gap that has always existed between social class and political involvement.

The new 'big data' analytics

There are a growing number of academic and commercial efforts to make sense of social media data sets for research or (more typically) advertising and marketing purposes through big data analytics – the analysis of data sets so large and complex that they are difficult to process and analyse through traditional means.⁷⁹ Increasingly, big data analytics are a critical element of election campaigns. This involves the collection of large data sets about citizens' views and behaviour to give politicians a more detailed picture of voters' attitudes, beliefs and behaviour. According to the UK National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts (Nesta), 'what had once been done with pen and pencil is now being done in real time and at a staggering pace thanks to innovative data technologies'.⁸⁰ Although some of it is quite sophisticated (and expensive), there are a growing number of free or cheap tools that can be useful for gaining insight into voters' concerns and attitudes.

Micro-targeting and personalisation

The most important aspect of social media campaigning is its ability to conduct 'micro-targeting', and in doing so personalise content. The Yale Institute for Social and Policy Studies observed that 'across a number of mobilisation experiments, one consistent finding is that more personalised messages are more effective in mobilising voters'.⁸¹ The more closely crafted to an individual identity the message is, the more likely that people who self-identify with that group will pay attention to the campaign. A generic message, on the other hand, is less likely to be clicked on.

Social media are extremely useful for micro-targeting efforts. First, they allow advertisers to reach people directly based on particular demographic and belief characteristics. Users of social media often willingly provide demographic information, such as age, gender, education and marital status. Geo-location data can also pinpoint a user's location. Moreover, users often 'like' various products, movies, books, political parties and other campaigns. Conversations and comments can be searched for, analysed and traced back to specific social media users. In other words, there is more information than ever before at the fingertips of advertisers – or election strategists – to understand different audiences. This regular personalisation of messaging is ethically sensitive, raising important questions relating to informed consent. Advertising tools can also allow groups to be targeted with adverts based on this information – with the potential for highly personalised messages.

Second, recent research into voter turnout has found that social pressure is a significant motivating force on citizen behaviour; for example, if you believe your neighbours or friends voted, then you are more likely to.⁸² Social media provide a useful vehicle for such social pressure, because they allow people to show others that they have voted, thereby increasing the sense of social duty that others feel about voting. A recent example of the exploitation of this social pressure – as well as of social network-facilitated information distribution – played a role in the Scottish referendum. Facebook, which a few days before the vote claimed to have had over 10 million comments, likes and posts related to it on their platform, introduced an interactive 'I'm a voter' button for the Scottish referendum.⁸³ Appearing at the head of Scottish users' news feeds on referendum day, it gave the option for users to either access more information about the vote, or share with their Facebook friends that they had voted. Perhaps more innovatively, the month before the vote Facebook launched a 'registered to vote' live event to encourage users to register in time for the referendum.⁸⁴

Applying this insight to the task of voter mobilisation, it could be argued that the key is mobilising a few people within networks that tend to have low voter turnout. If a sufficient

number of people can be convinced to vote and broadcast the fact that they are voting through their networks, it could encourage others in their networks to get involved as well.

However, social media are not only useful for micro-targeting voters directly. Social media platforms and analysis tools also offer ways to create community groups, run campaigns or reach out to people at low or zero cost. For example, in 2000, Rock the Vote's voter registration application, an online tool to facilitate voter registration, registered almost 165,000 new voters. In 2004, 1.2 million voter registration forms were downloaded from their site, and by 2008 it was 2.5 million.⁸⁵ In February 2014, Bite the Ballot launched the UK's first ever National Voter Registration Day (NVRD), in a digital campaign that stretched across YouTube, Google+, Facebook and Twitter. Bite the Ballot's campaign led to the registration of around 35,000 young people.⁸⁶

Making the most of social media's potential

The political potential of social media in Europe is not sufficiently exploited. According to Alberto Nardelli, who runs technology and news company Tweetminster and the *Guardian's* Data Blog, 'social media has the potential to mobilise people in terms of turnout and that potential is linked to the context of a country; it is a potential that is not always realised'.⁸⁷ Similarly, Mike Sani, head of the voter mobilisation group Bite the Ballot affirms this potential, and argues that 'our democracy needs to evolve at the pace that our technology and more importantly our communication has evolved'.

Although social media are becoming a huge part of political life across Europe, there are not many examples of it being used in any meaningful way for voter mobilisation efforts. In probably the most notable example, Beppe Grillo used social media to recruit and organise 'meet-up groups', which led to his new party going from its founding in 2009 to winning a quarter of seats in the Italian Parliament at the last election. Meet-up groups are free online chat groups that can be set up by anyone to coordinate offline activities. Using social media to set up

meet-up groups, Grillo was able to create a large network of supporters across the country, who were then committed to campaigning for him during the election. In total, Grillo had over 1,400 meet-up groups worldwide, comprising at least 170,000 people.⁸⁸

One of the more sophisticated efforts at engaging young voters has been the Dutch Verkiezings app, which is deployed on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. The app displays at a glance where the major parties stand on issues that the user cares about, and provides news and information related to the election. Social media users receive 'push notifications' as the election approaches with details of the precise timings of the election. The application also facilitates issues-based political meet-ups. The app is designed to be run by municipal councils, regional and national governmental bodies, and provides detailed feedback regarding page views, young people reached and election reminders distributed. A September 2012 pilot scheme in the municipality of Doetinchem suggested some success, notwithstanding some notable difficulties demonstrating an actual effect and a causal relationship between the social media campaign and increases in voter turnout.⁸⁹

Compared with the USA, the use of social media by third sector organisations and governmental institutions in Europe is still small scale. According to Nick Anstead, co-author of 'The 2008 digital campaign in the USA: the real lessons for British parties',⁹⁰ 'social media changes the game' but 'there is room for extensive innovation in European politics', particularly in light of the failure of institutions to adapt to social media and the political practices of twenty-first-century citizens.⁹¹

Summary

Social media offer a potentially valuable and useful new way to mobilise voters. While not a panacea to decreasing levels of political engagement, if used carefully and thoughtfully, they could provide a cheap and effective supplement to campaigns that aim to encourage political engagement. In particular, there are a number of free and easy to use tools that can be employed

by third sector organisations to improve the way they reach out to and connect with voters. These tools – and how to use them – are explained in the ‘how-to’ guide that accompanies this report. In the next chapter we outline the workshops that we conducted with NGOs and activists in six European countries. These workshops provide a window into capacity levels of NGOs in Europe trying to grapple with the challenge of making effective use of social media and the internet.

3 The capability gap: making the third sector media savvy

In March and April 2014, Demos delivered 12 workshops in France, Greece, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands and the UK (as well as a workshop in Barcelona, Spain) on voter turnout and social media. In total, we presented to over 120 NGOs, campaigners and activists who are working on voter mobilisation, countering xenophobia and racism, and supporting migrant and marginalised groups across Europe. The majority of the organisations who attended our workshops are conducting campaigns following our training or are extending ongoing campaigns.

In some instances, the organisation representatives who attended the workshop specialised in social media, while others had only a passing knowledge or familiarity. The workshops were designed to be useful and informative for all levels of social media expertise. You do not need to be an IT expert or social media aficionado to make effective use of the tools that social media have to offer. Too often older activists dismiss social media as key to their efforts through bias or a perceived lack of knowledge. Our 'how-to' guide is written with these social media sceptics and novices in mind.

Workshop design

The workshops were designed to help these organisations improve their ability to mobilise voters and run campaigns using social media. However, the workshops also provided an opportunity for the Demos research team to investigate and explore the current capabilities of third sector organisations to undertake social media campaigns and what sort of assistance they require. The results of these investigations informed the focus of the accompanying guide.

The workshops were designed to include presentations from Demos researchers, as well as practical exercises for participants to make use of social media advertising in particular. The content of the workshops included:

- the overall electoral landscape in each country, including trends in voter turnout, mobilisation levels and specific problem areas (presented in chapter 1)
- the potential uses of social media, including national penetration levels and targeted advertising tools that are available at low cost (presented in chapter 2)
- CASM's analysis of political and social discourse on Twitter, providing an insight into the concerns and priorities of the public and a means by which to inform messaging and campaigning efforts (available in the annex to this report)
- a detailed overview of how to use Facebook and YouTube advertising, DIY social media toolkits and voter advice applications (presented in chapter 4 and the 'how-to' guide)

In each workshop we divided participants into three or four groups and gave them a practical exercise: we assigned each group a theoretical population to target with the tools we provided (eg young men from ethnic minority backgrounds living in large cities). We provided a series of questions for them to consider while targeting their assigned group, for example:

- Which tool or social media platform is the best to reach your groups?
- What regional areas should you target?
- What interests would you target?
- What are the interests, key words and demographics that seem most suited to reach your audience?
- Which images would you use?
- What would your message(s) be?
- How much does it cost – and how does this compare with alternative methods?

Using Facebook to target voters using geography, imagery and interests

Facebook allows users to run campaigns that target users on the basis of demographic and interest-based subjects. Thus, a key component of the workshops involved teaching participants how to use Facebook's advertising tool to find hard to reach citizens who traditionally do not vote.

In order to choose which geographical areas to focus on, workshop groups had to conduct desk-based research using various sources, including their country's census data and the Facebook advertising tool. For example, election studies could be used to determine which areas had the lowest levels of voter turnout, or a preponderance of a certain target group; Facebook's advertising tool can be used to identify which cities contain the largest number of young men who say they are interested in Islam.

When it came to selecting images that might appeal to these target groups, the groups were able to draw on the insights from the research we presented (eg the importance of human faces, and appealing to specific identities) and their own experience, and to be more creative in selecting a range of different images which could be A/B tested (this is called 'split testing') for effectiveness. In the Netherlands, for example, the workshop group who were targeting young, Dutch Muslim men chose images that ranged from a picture of intertwined Dutch and Moroccan flags, to a picture of the European flag, a picture of a famous Dutch Moroccan football player, and a picture of a young Dutch Moroccan holding his Dutch passport. As we explain in more detail in the accompanying guide, Facebook's advertising tool then measures which image receives the most clicks, allowing the user to further refine the effectiveness of their advert by adding similar versions of the most effective images.

Choosing the interests to target allowed the participants to see the benefits of the Facebook advertising tool. For example, once the first group identified their demographic targets, they selected those within the demographic group who were interested in 'Islam' or the 'Quran'. The Facebook advertising tool then immediately suggested a number of additional interests that were correlated with those characteristics already selected.

In this instance, the top correlated interest was ‘boxing’. Armed with this insight, the organisation running the advert could ensure that some of the images used in the targeted advert included images of boxers (specifically Dutch Moroccan boxers). Moreover, it could also suggest that a voter mobilisation campaign targeting this group should seek to complement their online efforts with events or posters placed around boxing gyms in cities like Amsterdam, Rotterdam and Utrecht.

What are third sector organisations doing at the moment?

The workshops allowed us to get a sense of just how savvy small- to medium-sized third sector organisations are at using social media to support their work. Many organisations exhibit significant technical competence in social media campaigning and organisational focus on it, while others are far less active on social media. Nevertheless, across the third sector organisations in our six target countries, broad similarities and trends were apparent.

Almost all the participants in our workshops had a presence on Facebook, Twitter or both, with a wide variation in levels of activity and interactivity on these sites. It appeared that use of social media was an incidental activity as opposed to a part of the wider strategy of many organisations. A significant minority of organisations did not actively use social media. A few had no substantive online presence. Some were pursuing (or had previously pursued) active social media campaigns involving relatively sophisticated digital tools, like online quizzes or voter advice applications.

Very few organisations and participants had ever used an advertising tool for any purpose, or used any more sophisticated tool or application. Almost none had used any type of social media analysis to understand their target audience.

Despite the relatively low level of this activity, activists almost universally acknowledged the potential utility of social media efforts, and often expressed a strong desire to ‘upskill’ in that regard. When taught the core dynamics of social media

advertising, the key principles of a successful campaign and the basic technical skills required to undertake social media advertising, activists were keen to advance their own social media campaigns, and often discussed at length their plans for innovative online efforts.

It appeared that many representatives from the organisations we worked with appreciated the usefulness of social media advertising but needed a significant amount of time for practical exercises in order to derive concrete insights into its use for their own campaigns. This suggests that embedding best practice in using social media would require an extended period of practical exercises. Running a social media advertising campaign that is effectively targeted is a resource-intensive commitment, even though it can also be highly cost-effective. In order for organisations to conclude that it would be in their interest to invest the needed resources, further sustained work and support is needed to help them develop a familiarity with the tools and get a sense of their effectiveness.

Some campaigners expressed concerns regarding their ability to undertake social media campaigning in a more significant manner. This was predominantly for two reasons. First, though social media advertising is a relatively inexpensive means of promoting a campaign, it still costs something, and a number of campaigners had no budget at all, often campaigning in their spare time and without payment. Second, some were worried they would struggle to find time for social media campaigning. It demands brief yet regular periods of time for management, and though this time demand can be reduced through free management tools, it was a commitment that many could not meet.

Where do third sector organisations need further support?

We identified four key areas where organisations needed training and support – using cost-effective cheap or free tools, measuring success, making the most of events and having two-way conversations – which we discuss below.

Using cost-effective and cheap or free tools

The most common type of feedback from participants related to the availability of free tools. Many participants complained that, although they knew of excellent and sophisticated techniques to collect or analyse social media data sets, or run campaigns, these tended to be too expensive. There was a feeling among participants that there were free or cheap tools available that could be useful, but no single resource where third sector organisations can find them, and learn how to use them effectively. Although we demonstrated to workshop participants that effectively designed adverts (those that receive a lot of clicks) could be extremely cost-effective, managing these campaigns can be resource intensive, and may require too much time management for small NGOs.

Measuring success

The second most frequently asked question we received related to measuring success beyond 'likes' and 'retweets'. Indeed, most companies, organisations and even politicians are asking this question in this new era of social media. How does clicking 'like' – or 'retweeting' something – relate to purchasing a product, taking the extra step to demonstrate for a cause or even voting in elections? Almost all of the organisations solely measured the success of their social media campaigns on the basis of 'likes', 'shares' or 'retweets'. There was little to no understanding of how these social media measures translated to success in the 'real', offline world. This is not an easy question to answer. Further research is needed to answer it because in the absence of robust measures, small charities and NGOs will inevitably limit the levels of investment they will devote to social media campaigns.

Making the most of events

As we highlight elsewhere in this report, particularly with respect to Twitter, conversations are primarily organised around high profile events. This could be a random, unexpected event – such as a politician's gaffe or the revelation of a scandal – or a planned event, such as a political debate or street demonstration. It is in

the context of these events that people take to Twitter to comment and make their views known. Thus, these events offer an excellent opportunity for charities and campaigners to tap into waves of public opinion to promote their own causes. One example from the Netherlands illustrates this point. On 19 March 2014, a video of Geert Wilders giving a speech in a pub went viral. The video showed scenes that many found distasteful – and at worst, reminiscent of xenophobia. As the video went viral, a number of social media campaigns were devised and rose up in response. One example was the Twitter campaign #bornhere, where Dutch Moroccans uploaded pictures of themselves with their Dutch passports onto Twitter to counter the assertion that Wilders makes that Moroccans cannot be Dutch and should ‘go home’. Others mobilised to press charges against Wilders for hate speech. Within a day, over 51,000 people liked a Facebook page called ‘I will press charges against Geert Wilders.’⁹²

These kinds of spontaneous social media campaigns can provide an excellent opportunity for NGOs and campaigners to highlight their work, come up with their own campaigns, or identify people who share their views and who might be interested in volunteering to support their causes. When such events occur, social media savvy NGOs cannot just sit back and enjoy the show; but rather it is precisely in these instances when they need to step up and maximise their efforts.

Having two-way conversations

It is extremely important to have two-way conversations on social media, rather than simply use social media as a one-way information dissemination tool. This is a common trap that politicians, organisations and campaigns fall into when using social media. The key aspect of social media is the fact that it is *social*: for example, any Twitter user can comment on and engage anyone else in a conversation, no matter how high profile. This naturally poses a dilemma for some social media users: you cannot engage with everyone, so how do you decide who and who not to respond to? What is the best way to deal with users

who disagree with you or – worse – who write insulting and abusive comments? Many organisations were fearful of these types of engagement, and expressed uncertainty about how best to respond. This can be a greater problem on certain platforms than others. For example, communication on Twitter cannot be moderated to the extent that communication on Facebook can. This hesitancy and fear often prevents organisations from making full use of social media tools.

Summary

Our workshops provided a snapshot of third sector use of social media (particularly advertising tools) in six European countries. Overall we found that NGOs and third sector organisations have a lot of room for improvement, but also potentially stand a lot to gain by improving their capabilities. Our workshops were a first attempt to do this. In particular, we found that the practical exercise that we provided was extremely valuable to participants. Ultimately, it seemed that organisations need the time, guidance and budget to experiment with a series of practical challenges if they are to become truly proficient in using social media advertising. We hope that the majority of the organisations we worked with are continuing to trial the tools and approaches that we taught them, and are finding the space to experiment with what works and what does not. Recognising social media's value, prioritising them in their campaigns and taking the time to experiment with them are the three essential ingredients to help radically increase the capacity of third sector organisations.

4 Principles and techniques of running a social media voter campaign

At its simplest, a social media campaign is the exploitation of social media platforms and applications as a means of accomplishing a marketing objective.⁹³ Such efforts often centre on the creation or distribution of content that promotes the campaign and encourages readers to spread awareness regarding the campaign within their social networks.

Social media campaigns have become a significant part of any civic engagement effort, whether pursued by government departments or third sector organisations. As with all marketing attempts, social media efforts have to contribute in a meaningful way to a substantive action or campaign outcome. The creation of a Facebook page and a Twitter account does not constitute an effective voter turnout strategy, unless it can be proven that its activities actually led to more people voting.⁹⁴

This chapter outlines four ways in which social media can be employed to help with various mobilisation efforts run by third sector organisations. These methods have been selected on the basis of the results of our workshops, as well as an extensive review of current capabilities and available software. For each, we set out what is currently possible, free or cheap software that can be employed, and specific principles that can help maximise its potential. More detailed guidance for the approaches discussed here are available in the accompanying guide.

Technique 1: listen to the online conversation to understand your audience

Overview

Social media allow campaigners not only to reach potentially huge numbers of citizens but also to hear the perspectives of those citizens. This not only grounds a campaign in issues and

themes that matter to the target population; at its best, it provides grassroots guidance for the messaging of a campaign, and directly engages ‘the people formerly known as the audience’ in the direction of the overall voter turnout effort.

Available tools

There are a number of ways of analysing and managing interaction with the audience or potential audience of a social media vote mobilisation campaign. These range from using applications to understand the social media landscape surrounding a topic in general, to understanding what content is most well received by an audience, to managing interactions with an audience. There are three distinct categories, which we discuss in turn.

Measuring overall conversations via keywords

First, the broadest type of analysis, and what might be regarded as a first step, is the analysis of conversations on social media relating to a subject as a whole. This involves examining and understanding how certain subjects are discussed on social media and by whom. Demos’ CASM specialises in this approach through its bespoke Method51 software.

For this project, we conducted a series of analyses of conversations on Twitter that pertained to the European Union (including anti-EU parties in some instances) using Method51. The full results of these analyses are presented in the annex. For example, in the UK, we collected 24,639 tweets over seven days relating to the political party UKIP, and analysed them according to the subjects discussed and the attitudes expressed. Revealingly, only 22 per cent of tweets mentioned ‘Europe’ or were explicitly related to Europe, a low percentage given that UKIP’s sole focus has historically been the EU. Instead, the majority of tweets (78 per cent) were related to immigration, the economy and personalities in UKIP. While only a snapshot, this supports the idea that UKIP’s success may in part be based on speaking primarily about these issues, which are frequently cited among the biggest concerns of Britons, rather than the EU,

which is not a frequently cited concern. The salience of these issues – rather than the EU specifically – can help third sector organisations tailor their messages accordingly.

Our analysis also derived a number of insights from the other countries we studied, and overall. For example, in Greece, we found Twitter posts largely mirroring the real world situation in that tweets were overwhelmingly confrontational in nature, reflecting the difficult and adversarial situation in Greece. Even tweets that were classified as ‘positive’ in sentiment were used to attack ideological rivals. In the Netherlands, our analysis revealed that the two most popular arguments against the EU were lack of democracy and cost. While some may assume that immigration would dominate discussions, in fact it was these other topics that seemed to really fire up Dutch Twitter users. This kind of information is useful for third sector organisations trying to engage citizens in debates about the EU. Finally, our analysis in Italy showed the success certain campaigns had when they used humour and irony to frame a political message in unconventional language. This approach seemed to inspire positive sentiments and proactiveness, and to appeal to some voters’ cultural identity. Again, armed with this insight, third sector organisations could design their own campaigns in a similar tone and manner.

In more general terms, we discovered that:

- in conversations on Twitter related to the EU, anti-EU populists tend to be most active
- policies were discussed on Twitter but this was often through the lens of individual personalities

While Demos’ CASM has developed Method51 to conduct sophisticated analysis, there are a number of free tools that can help campaigners gain insight. Using tools like SocialMention a campaigner can search for certain key words or phrases across multiple platforms, from YouTube to Twitter, Facebook to FriendFeed.⁹⁵ This keyword search results in a large quantity of relevant information, revealing how certain subjects are discussed, keywords related to a topic, some of the most

significant online voices in conversations related to those keywords, and the hashtags most commonly associated with them. Other free tools, like Mention (which is free for a limited time period⁹⁶), can be a useful way of understanding discourse as it changes in real time, as well as a way of identifying key themes and social media accounts engaged in the discussion. Because these tools are free and relatively basic, they only expose the dynamics and content of a discourse in a rudimentary manner. Nonetheless, such efforts are a useful first step in understanding the social media landscape as it is relevant to an area of campaigning.

Measuring engagement with immediate audience

The second type of analysis relates to a campaign's immediate audience, which could include Facebook fans, Twitter followers, or the people who engage with campaign material whatever the platform. By understanding what an audience is interested in, what content they share, and how and when they share it, it is possible to improve the effectiveness of content. Applications like Twazzup, a free tool, provides a comprehensive breakdown of the common keywords related to an account, or to a hashtag or keyword. It also presents the top influencers in an audience, most active followers, and the most recent tweets containing any given keyword, account or hashtag.⁹⁷ SocialBro provides a similar service for Twitter.⁹⁸ These tools can provide campaigners with a detailed knowledge of an audience, facilitating the creation and targeting of relevant content.

Managing real-time interactions

The third type of social media tool available to campaigners is that which relates to the management of real-time interaction with audiences across social media platforms. This is distinct from the analysis of social media audiences, and instead could be more accurately described as the 'curation' of social media followers or fans. For example, the Twitter management application HootSuite allows users to schedule tweets for various times in the day in order to minimise the time spent managing

the account and exploit peak times.⁹⁹ At the same time, it facilitates the real-time monitoring of social media activity and speedy reply to social media users. Mention, on the other hand, allows users to create keyword detection lists that operate across multiple platforms to create real-time ‘feeds’ of social media information. This allows campaigners not only to reply to social media followers, but to interact with people discussing certain subjects across social media.

Key principles

Using social media as a form of insight and research is a new and experimental area of work. Unlike traditional and more established research methods, there are no agreed standards or methods when using them. This poses new challenges for the type and rigour of insight available, which may not always be of the same quality as other approaches (although in many respects they will offer new *types* of insight). Generally speaking it is important for researchers or campaigners using social media as a form of insight to bear in mind the following principles:

- Social media data sets are not representative of broader populations, and although valuable should not be viewed in the same way as nationally representative polls. They offer new, but very different types of data.
- Understand how social media data are collected, as this will provide a useful insight into the strengths and weaknesses of the data. Sampling on social media is often based on words used, and this creates significant biases.
- Be wary of automated ‘dashboard’ offers, which provide the end user with little information about sampling, analysis methods or rigour. There are a lot of analytics tools for sale, but it is important to learn as much as possible about how the system works, and have as much control as possible over how data are collected and analysed.
- Simplistic ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ sentiment analysis about a given subject on social media is very rarely the most effective or appropriate way to collect and analyse a data set.

- Research ethics are important. Social science research follows a number of strict guidelines about minimising harm to research subjects, respecting people's privacy and gaining informed consent. These principles are also relevant online.

Technique 2: use quizzes and interactive approaches to increase engagement

Overview

One way of making effective use of social media for political engagement is to tap into the broader patterns of social media use. For example, as most Facebook users will recognise, many people on social media websites like to take quizzes and share the results with their friends. As noted in the case study below, one of the most ambitious studies to date of social media and voter mobilisation was run by Facebook and University of California. The study showed that interactivity – being able to click on a button, which then listed you as ‘having voted’ to your friends – is essential to increasing voter turnout.

Box 2

The importance of social influence and interactivity in voter mobilisation: case study

A 2010 study of around 61 million participants by the University of California San Diego demonstrated the value of social influence, or ‘social contagion’, in social-media-based voter turnout efforts.¹⁰⁰ The study showed that around one-third of a million more people showed up at the ballot box in the USA during the 2010 mid-term election as a result of a Facebook message encouraging users to vote, and to share the fact that they had voted with their Facebook friends. More importantly, it showed that merely using social media advertisements was ineffective; what mattered was ‘social influence’.

Test subjects drawn from the general Facebook population were assigned to one of three groups:

- 60 million people on Facebook saw a non-partisan 'get out the vote' message, which had an 'I Voted' button, and listed friends who had already voted; pressing the 'I voted button' shared that the user had voted with their peers.
- 600,000 people got a purely informative message, which performed the same function and had an 'I Voted' button, but did not list or present pictures of friends who had voted.
- 600,000 received no message.

Users who received no message voted at approximately the same rate as those who received the purely informative message. Users who received the social message were 2.1 per cent more likely to report that they had voted, and 0.4 per cent more likely to have voted according to validated voting observation, than those in the control group or the information message group. This change in behaviour generated around 340,000 additional votes nationwide. Directly, 60,000 more votes were cast as a result of users seeing the message. Indirectly, 280,000 votes were cast as a result of friends of friends being motivated to vote through 'social contagion'. Though this number is small compared with the overall turnout figures (90.7 million), the sample only covered a portion of the American population, and could potentially have changed the outcome in individual states.¹⁰¹ Moreover, the report demonstrated on a large scale the underlying logic of social media voter turnout efforts.

The lead author of the report, Professor James Fowler, concluded:

Our study suggests that social influence may be the best way to increase voter turnout. Just as importantly, we show that what happens online matters a lot for the real world... Social influence made all the difference in political mobilization. It's not the 'I Voted' button, or the lapel sticker we have all seen, that gets out the vote. It's the person attached to it.... Behaviors changed not only because people were directly affected, but also because their friends (and friends of friends) were affected.¹⁰²

Available tools

Voter advice applications are online political quizzes that help users determine their political or party preferences through a series of issues-based questions. They are an interactive, engaging and often very popular means of reconnecting citizens' political positions to the act of voting and are particularly prominent in many continental European countries. For example, the state-sponsored Wahl-O-Mat in Germany was used 13.3 million times during the 2013 elections, and 3.9 million times in the run-up to the European elections.¹⁰³ Even more impressively, the Dutch StemWijzer voter advice application was used by approximately half of the population in the 2012 national elections.¹⁰⁴

Voter advice applications are effective because they can help citizens decide what the different parties stand for and which party best represents them. Given that lack of knowledge about differences between political parties is a frequently cited barrier to voting,¹⁰⁵ there is evidence suggesting that voter advice applications can help to increase voter turnout. Research on voter turnout in Finland in 2007 found that even after controlling for demographic variables, men were 21 per cent more likely to vote, and women 23 per cent more likely, as a result of their use of a voter advice application.¹⁰⁶ In self-assessment surveys in Germany after the 2005 election and in the Netherlands after the 2003 election, 8 per cent and 12 per cent of voter advice application users respectively considered voting as a result of their use of a voter advice application.¹⁰⁷ In Switzerland, they have become part of the national political landscape.¹⁰⁸ Of surveyed users of the application SmartVote who voted in 2007 but not 2003 (though they were eligible), 41.1 per cent stated that they were motivated by SmartVote use. On social media, voter advice applications can spread rapidly and have a wide reach. Through projects like VoteMatch Europe, the value of these applications has been recognised and their spread between European states facilitated.¹⁰⁹

While voter advice applications have been successful in many countries, their potential remains under-used, particularly in the UK. For example, many voter advice applications fail to include a link to online voter registration (especially at the end

of the test). Moreover, they should be designed to target different groups of citizens. For example, a voter advice application targeted at young people would deliberately appeal to their style and aesthetics, and present information to them in an accessible way to demonstrate the relevance of policy and politics to their lives.

Voter advice applications are not the only model of digital tool designed to encourage popular political participation. There are informative and facilitative political apps like iCitizen, a new mobile app launching in the USA that combines live news feeds, legislation tracking and polling data, together with the opportunity to participate in real-time polls on a number of key issues.¹¹⁰ In doing so, iCitizen helps reconnect the issues-based politics which drive popular political debate within the legislative process. iCitizen in particular pursues the commendable aim of engaging users not only during an election but continually, fostering political participation as a constant habit.

In order to exploit voter advice applications for a voter turnout campaign, it is not necessary to create your own, which would require coding and web design. There are voter advice applications available in many European states in the approach to national or European elections, which a voter turnout campaign can promote. Many voter advice applications can be embedded relatively easy in a voter turnout campaign's website. Often, embedding such tools is as easy as inserting a few lines of HTML code, and the organisations that create voter advice applications are often willing to help voter turnout campaigns exploit them. For example, the Greek HelpMeVote Votematch tool, used in the 2014 European elections, could be embedded in a page by using a single line of HTML code.¹¹¹

Good practice

Voter advice applications are almost always created for the purposes of a particular election, which is where they tend to work best. They are rapidly evolving and improving in quality; the latest have useful features like buttons that allow users easily to share their results with their peers using social media. The use

of a voter advice application comes with a large amount of social responsibility. For example, a key motivation of Unlocking Democracy's voter advice application project VoteMatch, the largest in the UK, is to increase political engagement and voter turnout. However, as well as these abstract and party-politically neutral influences, a widely used voter advice application has the potential to influence which party people vote for; indeed in 2010, VoteMatch garnered in excess of 1.2 million unique visits. Guaranteeing the neutrality and thus the credibility of a voter advice application is critical from an ethical perspective. This is often achieved through involving political parties, political scientists and academics in various stages of the development process. It is also important that a voter advice application created for a specific election focuses on issues that are relevant to that election. For example, one designed for the 2014 European Parliamentary election should not cover questions relating to issues outside the influence of the European Parliament.

Technique 3: micro-target groups using social media advertising

Overview

As noted above, one of the virtues of social media is the ability to ensure that a personalised campaign message reaches the right target demographic. Commercial social media advertising tools, such as AdWords on YouTube and Google and Facebook advertising, are a relatively low cost and potentially highly effective means of promoting and supporting a campaign. Moreover, the flexibility and capacity for detail of such tools supports a number of the key concepts behind successful social media campaigns, such as the targeting of people based on their expressed preferences and localised messaging. Using social media advertising, campaigners can survey target audiences, promote offline events, recruit volunteers, circulate important information and generate engagement with campaign material.

Available tools

Social media advertising on Google, YouTube, Facebook and other platforms promotes material at groups based on demographics and internet browsing activity. On YouTube, video adverts can be targeted at users who search certain keywords for videos (such as ‘debate’, ‘Barack Obama’ or ‘European Union’). On Facebook, adverts can be targeted at users who fit certain demographic categories, or who have ‘liked’ certain pages. In this way, it is possible to craft messages that target the groups you wish to engage with in the campaign and to advertise only to them. The accompanying guide to this report sets out advice on how to do this effectively.

Good practice

Social media allow advertisers to target very specific subgroups of the population directly. However, there are risks to micro-targeting in partisan political campaigning. Voters who are shown messages crafted to a group they do not belong to – something called mistargeting – might ‘punish’ campaigns as a result of being presented with material that does not agree with their outlook. A 2012 study concluded that in the context of American politics, mistargeted messaging could have a significant influence on the outcome of an electoral contest. This is less relevant to third sector campaigning, where misdirected calls to action are less likely to provoke negative action.¹¹² Some academics, for example computer scientist Solon Barocas, have even argued that micro-targeting undermines democracy: focusing politics on the needs and desires of particular groups as opposed to the whole can lead to an unhealthy ‘pandering’, a propensity to engage more readily with issues that are divisive in the public forum, and a trend towards message manipulation and single issue politics.¹¹³ This problem might be more problematic when targeting is most strongly incentivised, for example in first-past-the-post political systems.¹¹⁴

When targeting specific groups it is important that the messages are designed in a way to maximise audience engagement. The preferred tone of messaging in voter turnout campaigns is a subject of significant debate. While the context of

a message or item of content is critical, general trends in how certain words or phrases influence the resonance of a message are often sought. When social media are considered specifically, the dynamics of resonance – in digital terms, ‘sharing content’ – change significantly.

A number of thorough studies have demonstrated that though there may be a marginal advantage to negative political messaging in the stimulation of voter turnout, it is statistically insignificant.¹¹⁵ A 2012 American Marketing Association study on media content suggested that, even controlling for frequency and other variables, ‘while common wisdom suggest that people tend to pass along negative news more than positive news, our results indicated that positive news is actually more viral’.¹¹⁶ More importantly, the paper suggested that it was not positive or negative emotional association with content that dictated the extent to which it was shared, but the level of emotional response (high-arousal or low-arousal) derived from the material that mattered. High-arousal content was shared more.¹¹⁷

Arousing an emotional response from a member of a target audience can therefore increase the chance that they will share content. Accordingly, people are frequently ‘more likely to vote when voting is a representation as an expression of self – as symbolic of a person’s fundamental character – rather than simply as a behavior’.¹¹⁸ A seminal study of voter behaviour by the Stanford Department of Psychology found that in the 2008 presidential election, the turnout rate was 96 per cent among registered voters who filled out a survey asking ‘how important is it for you to be a voter?’ compared with about 82 per cent who were asked ‘how important is it to you to vote?’¹¹⁹

Finally, it is important to engage potential voters in an issues-led manner, and not necessarily in the context of party politics. Because political discourse online is predominantly issues led, it is frequently event driven, and conversations around popular topics – civil rights, internet privacy, immigration and so on – often peak and trough in line with media coverage and relevant incidents. Aligning voter mobilisation efforts with these issues can therefore have a potentially significant impact.

Technique 4: coordinate online campaigns with offline voter mobilisation events

Overview

Ultimately, social media are a means to an end, not an end in themselves. Social media efforts must contribute to, or be coordinated with, offline results or events. One of the great strengths of social media is the ability to distribute information – like the location of polling stations or the date of an election – rapidly and at very low cost. This also makes social media an excellent tool for the coordination of events, activities and meetings, which is a critical use for third sector organisations.¹²⁰

Available tools

Meetup is a social networking tool that facilitates offline group meetings around the world.¹²¹ It allows communities of interest, defined online, to meet together for offline events. These meet-ups have been critical to the success of the Five Star Movement since its genesis, particularly in the early days, as a means of linking together grassroots supporters in Italy and worldwide.¹²² They form not an appendage to but a cornerstone of both the movement and the campaign. Beppe Grillo took the idea of basing his campaign on meet-ups from American Democrat Howard Dean's pioneering of internet-based grassroots fundraising and organising.¹²³ Today, there are 1,442 registered Beppe Grillo meet-up groups on Meetup.com, with almost 172,000 members.

The use of meet-up groups in the USA and Italy have proved an excellent way of harnessing online support for coordinated offline action, and demonstrate the potential effect of such efforts. In the context of a voter turnout campaign, Meetup and platforms like it present a potentially very powerful tool for voter turnout campaigners seeking to create grassroots campaigns.

Good practice

One example of an effective coordination between online and offline activities in the context of a campaign is Bite the Ballot's

NVRD initiative. In 2013, there were 400 NVRD events held across the UK, run by local organisers, which generated an online ‘reach’ – the number of people who were shown information about the event – of over 10.2 million. In total, 35,000 people registered as a direct consequence of the campaign, at a per-registration cost (registrations against campaign cost) of 25 pence per registration. This cost compares with a per registration cost for the Electoral Commission (by Bite the Ballot’s calculation) of between £6 and £84 between 2005 and 2013 in various campaigns.¹²⁴ These registrations took place mainly in physical locations (supermarkets, schools, student unions) but also through a great deal of downloads of voter registration forms.

More innovative efforts to integrate online and offline campaigning activities have also been successful. In 2012, Rock the Vote produced quick response (QR) code-scannable T-shirts and distributed them on university campuses across the USA. The codes, when scanned, would instantly take smartphone users to a voter registration tool on the Rock the Vote website. In combination with this effort, the hashtag #scantovote was used to promote the campaign. Where online voter registration was not allowed, the Rock the Vote websites automatically filled out a paper form based on a voter’s inputs, and emailed it to each user.¹²⁵ In its first 24 hours, the #scantovote generated over 1,200 mentions on Twitter, with many celebrity endorsements boosting its reach.¹²⁶

Conclusion and recommendations

The rise of social media use in Europe – in the number of people using social media and the prominence of it in our lives – offers a potential means by which to engage Europeans in the formal political process. This potential has been successfully exploited by a number of European social and political movements, not least the Five Star Movement in Italy. Social media platforms are a new and increasingly important digital public space that political institutions cannot afford to ignore.

More particularly, as this report documents, they are demonstrably effective in increasing voter turnout. In order to properly harness social media in voter turnout campaigns, smaller third sector organisations need the resources and training to use social media effectively and affordably, and in a manner that achieves tangible offline results. Our experience in this project has suggested that while many organisations do not operate effective digital strategies, there is a broad awareness of social media's potential, and a desire to upskill in order to access it.

In this report we have addressed four key areas where charities and third sector organisations need guidance: information on and access to free or low cost digital tools; more effective means of measuring success in social media efforts; reactive social media capabilities to allow them to exploit political and social events rapidly online; and more interactive approaches to day-to-day social media engagement. We have also explained four techniques civil society organisations can use to build sophisticated and effective online voter turnout campaigns – and indeed social action campaigns more generally: how to listen to online conversations and understand your audience; how to use quizzes and interactive approaches to increase engagement; how to use social media advertising to micro-target

specific groups; and how to coordinate online campaigns with offline events effectively.

The development and application of these kinds of digital skills is critical. Social media are now one of the most important tools in most Europeans' daily social and political lives. A more digitally empowered civil society in Europe could play an important role in reconnecting European citizens to the political processes and institutions from which we are collectively becoming increasingly estranged.

Annex: how did Twitter talk about the European Parliamentary elections?

In order to inform the workshops, Demos undertook a series of short studies examining how Twitter users spoke about the European Parliamentary elections in English, Dutch, Greek, Hungarian and Italian.¹²⁷ These were not intended as comprehensive studies, but rather short analyses into how the social media platform was employed.

Method

The data were collected using the publicly available live Twitter feed, either via its ‘stream’ application programming interface, which allows researchers to collect data directly from Twitter as they are published, or the ‘search’ application programming interface, which allows researchers to collect data from the previous seven days.

We collected several data sets of tweets for each country case study based on key word matches. This entailed collecting all tweets that contained a word or group of words selected by the researcher based on a manual review of Twitter conversations prior to data collection. A native speaker of the country in question, who had expertise in the political landscape of each country, conducted all the query search terms and data analysis.

The data were collected between January and March 2014 (depending on the country). All of the messages in our samples were publicly available to any Twitter user as a live comment (at the time the tweet is published) if the user was either a follower of the sender, or if the user was searching Twitter using keywords and the tweet contained one of those keywords.

We used three types of analysis, which covered both automated and manual methods:

- trend analysis: examining the general volume of tweets over the time period
- content analysis: examining the nature and type of tweets over time, usually using both automated classifiers and manual analysis
- manual analysis: collecting a small number of tweets and analysing them manually

In each case study (usually for the content analysis) we used an automated approach involving natural language processing (NLP). This allows researchers to build models (called ‘classifiers’) that detect patterns in language use that can be used to undertake meaning-based analysis of large data sets. Classifiers are built through researchers training an algorithm to automatically recognise patterns in the text through annotating examples (this is based on linguistic, grammatical and rules-based patterns – not simply word matches). The classifiers then begin to recognise certain patterns and can automatically spot the same patterns in much larger data sets. NLP is widely used in the analysis of language in ‘big data’ sets, which are too big for humans to analyse manually, for example, to perform sentiment analysis.

The research team built several classifiers and tested how well they performed against human analyst decisions. We discuss the performance of the classifiers in each case study below. Manual analysis of smaller, random samples of the data was undertaken for more detailed insight into the tweet texts and the tweeter’s profiles.

Below is a summary of the results in each country. A detailed discussion of the strengths and weaknesses in this type of methodology is available in the Demos paper *Vox Digitas*, which is freely downloadable from the Demos website.¹²⁸

Results

United Kingdom

In the UK, we collected 24,639 tweets over 7 days using a series of key word matches that mentioned ‘UKIP’.

Interestingly, only 22 per cent (5,404) of the total tweets collected mentioned ‘Europe’ or were European focused. The majority of tweets – 78 per cent (19,235 tweets) – consisted of debates concerning immigration, the economy and personalities (conversations relating to individual politicians). Men were more active than women in these Twitter conversations, possibly because almost 60 per cent of UKIP’s electorate is male.¹²⁹

To examine the UKIP data where Europe was mentioned, we looked at a random sample of 357 tweets (as calculated by an automated system based on the number of total tweets collected) (table 1).

Table 1

| Tweets | UKIP | | |
|------------|----------|----------|---------|
| | Positive | Negative | Neutral |
| Number | 112 | 78 | 102 |
| Percentage | 19.89 | 13.85 | 18.12 |
| Tweets | EU | | |
| | Positive | Negative | Neutral |
| Number | 22 | 57 | 71 |
| Percentage | 3.91 | 10.12 | 12.61 |
| Tweets | Other | | |
| | Positive | Negative | Neutral |
| Number | 6 | 67 | 48 |
| Percentage | 1.07 | 11.90 | 8.53 |
| Tweets | Total | | |
| | UKIP | EU | Other |
| Total no | 292 | 150 | 121 |

Analysis of this sample showed that while there is some engagement with specific policies (to praise some and condemn others), in general, the conversations tended to focus on individuals: certain MPs, MEPs and other party members who were either praised or blamed.

We also examined why people were talking about the EU. Again, the results showed that the majority of people talking about Europe anchor their claims on conversations about individuals (table 2). The individuals at the forefront of these conversations were Farage, Clegg, Cameron, Miliband and Merkel.

Table 2

| UKIP | | | |
|--------------|--|-----------------------|------------|
| Tweets | People | Policy | Propaganda |
| Number | 94 | 23 | 74 |
| Percentage | 21.70 | 5.31 | 17.09 |
| EU | | | |
| Tweets | Problems (economic, social, political) | Germany and the EU | Other |
| Number | 75 | 11 | 11 |
| Percentage | 17.32 | 2.54 | 2.54 |
| Other | | | |
| Tweets | Clegg or Farage | LibLabCon | Misc |
| Number | 6 | 71 | 68 |
| Percentage | 1.39 | 16.40 | 15.70 |

Netherlands

In the Netherlands, we collected a total of 6,903 tweets and then a further 178,701 following controversial remarks made by Geert

Wilders. Two big domestic political events took place in the Netherlands during the collection period: nationwide local elections on 19 March 2014, and the controversial comments about Moroccans made by Geert Wilders on the same day at an election rally in The Hague.

An analysis of the user accounts that these tweets originated from showed that 3,338 users were responsible for these 6,903 tweets. Of these, approximately half (49 per cent) were Twitter accounts of Dutch citizens as opposed to Twitter accounts of political parties, news outlets and civil society organisations.

The biggest spike of activity on Twitter about the European elections took place between 19 March and 25 March (the end of the collection period). This was driven mostly by non-citizen accounts, in particular increased activity by the official Dutch account of the European Parliament (@EPinNL). This account was responsible for 782 of the total 1,319 tweets that day and was almost exclusively directed at users who had tweeted that they voted, to remind them to vote again on 22 May.

The citizen tweets were predominantly sharing news stories, with very few expressing political attitudes which could be categorised as positive or negative in sentiment. Where this was the case, they were sent primarily by supporters of the parties predicted to win, voicing hope that these parties would do equally well in the European elections.

The third spike from 20 March onwards came partly from Wilders' controversial remarks, and partly in response to the results of the local elections: 35 per cent of tweets in this period directly mentioned Wilders or the Partij voor de Vrijheid (PVV; Party for Freedom), and close to half of these mentioned their intention to vote for the party in the European elections, and/or actively called on others to do so. Some pointed to recent developments in Turkey and suggested that voting PVV was the best way to ensure it would never join the EU. A smaller number were critical of the party, some pointing out the high salaries PVV MEPs receive without almost ever voting.

A separate dataset was collected in the days after the remarks by Wilders, totalling 178,701 tweets in five days, indicating the extent to which these events dominated the news

cycle and online conversation in this period. Europe was mentioned explicitly in at least 1,327 of these tweets. In the immediate aftermath of the event, many commented on Wilders' statement that the end of the local elections are the 'kick-off to the European elections', speculating that the provocative speech was a deliberate attempt to dominate the headlines in the run-up to the elections. Some suggested that Wilders might want to leave the Dutch Parliament in order to sit in the European Parliament himself. While the comments about Moroccans were widely criticised on Twitter in the hours following the events (the defence of Wilders' comments only came later after the offline criticism reached a peak), almost all tweets that referred to his Europe comments (wanting 'less EU') were supportive of his position. Some both criticised the Moroccans comments and praised the EU comments at the same time.

Many of the citizen accounts had either clearly anti-EU ('Pro Europe, against EU', 'Out of EU') or pro-EU ('European citizen') slogans in their account descriptions, indicating that the Dutch debate about the European elections on Twitter is dominated by those who already have clearly formed opinions on the matter.

A classifier was trained (63 per cent accuracy rate) to recognise and filter tweets that expressed either positive or negative attitudes about the European elections. Applying this classifier to the core dataset found that 71 per cent of tweets contained no obvious attitude, 15 per cent contained a positive attitude, and 15 per cent a negative attitude.

Among the negative tweets, three themes were recurrent. The first was lack of democracy in the EU, with many tweets referring to it as 'EUSSR' or the 'European dictatorship' and to European politicians as 'Eurocrats'. The idea of democratic European elections was denoted as a 'sham'. Tweets insinuated that voting in these elections was useless, and would not change anything, and that normal voters have no influence over what gets decided in Brussels.

The second dominant theme was money. The cost of the EU was frequently cited, with the EU described as a 'money-gobbling' institution, and European leaders referred to as

‘fraudulent’ or ‘profiteers’. This happened especially in connection with the news that came out around 10 March that EU officials were granted a wage increase that had previously been scrapped. Frequent references were also made to the bailout of Greece and the planned aid package for Ukraine.

The third big theme was the crisis in Ukraine. The country was most often referred to in the context of the decision by the EU to offer it a €11 billion aid package, which was seen as a waste of ‘our hard-earned money’, and one made without democratic backing. Moreover, many held the EU responsible for the political crisis in Ukraine and the economic fallout it would have in the Netherlands and the rest of Europe.

Greece

In Greece, the data collection took place throughout March 2014 and 10,564 tweets on the EU were collected. Of these, 1,930 (28 per cent) were automated (newsfeeds, announcements, shares) and 8,634 (81 per cent) contained users’ comments.

The overwhelming majority of the tweets we analysed were confrontational in nature. Even users who referred to positive news employed their facts to attack their ideological opponents online. In fact, it was impossible to establish a ‘positive’ classifier in our datasets, as the number of tweets not directly attacking one ideological faction or another was very small.

Opinions in Greece about the EU are overwhelmingly negative. Out of the 8,000+ tweets that contained user comments, 3,000 mentioned the EU in a negative tone, 152 were neutral, and just 118 were classified as positive.

Interestingly, the situation in the Ukraine took up a significant portion of the commentary, triggered by events as they unfolded. As in the Netherlands, virtually all comments on the Ukrainian situation were related to the EU and its perceived poor handling of the situation.

Criticism on the EU and its political initiatives most commonly referred to double standards over democracy, international intervention and human rights; the EU was portrayed as a hypocritical and inefficient organisation that is

willing to collaborate with extremists to promote its agenda. The major perception was that of an EU too weak to antagonise Russia and too dependent on a Russian gas supply.

The topic that appears to have caused the greatest spike in Twitter activity in March 2014 was an incident involving a prison scandal. On 9 March, #Kolastirio trended on Twitter, with retweets in several languages, denoting the sensitivity of the Greek public for issues related to democratic practices, good governance and the Greek justice mechanism. Negotiations with the Troika and the concerns over sovereignty, Greek businesses and living standards were also frequently discussed topics.

Overall, Twitter discussions in Greece are marked by polarisation in the political debate, with most tweets targeting shortcomings of one party or another. It was impossible to identify users who publicly declared their unwillingness to vote in the upcoming elections and no tweets were found implying that their authors had not yet decided on their vote.

Hungary

Data collection started in Hungary on 26 February 2014, yet because market penetration of Twitter in Hungary is markedly lower than in the other countries we studied, we also collected and analysed data from Facebook. To do this, we identified relevant Facebook groups and pages and collected relevant posts and comments for approximately two weeks.

We collected data from the Facebook pages of groups for young people: Londoni Fiatalok Csoportja, Hallgatói Hálózat, Politológus Aréna, Fidelitas, Fivosz, Societas, IDE and Iksz (table 3).

We did the same research for the Facebook pages of opposition leaders Attila Mesterházy, Ferenc Gyurcsány, Gábor Fodor and Gordon Bajnai, and Prime Minister Viktor Orbán (table 4).

Table 3 **The subjects of tweets from people using Facebook pages of groups for young people in Hungary, two weeks in spring 2014**

| No | Education | Corruption | Ukraine (democracy) | Entrepreneurship | Group name in Hungarian | In English | Notes |
|----|-----------|------------|---------------------|------------------|-------------------------|---|----------------------------------|
| 39 | 100% | - | - | - | Hallgatói Hálózat | Student Network | |
| 84 | - | 52.4% | 47.6% | - | Politológus Aréna | Political Scientists' Arena | Links to mainstream media, memes |
| 26 | - | - | - | 100% | Fivosz | Young Entrepreneurs' Alliance | |
| 6 | 50% | 50% | - | - | Societas | Youth Organisation of the Hungarian Socialist Party | |
| 2 | 50% | - | - | 50% | Iksz | Youth Organisation of Christian Democrats | |
| 6 | 16.6% | 83.4% | - | - | IDE | Youth Organisation of the Democratic Coalition | |

Table 4 **The subjects of tweets from people using Facebook pages of opposition leaders in Hungary, two weeks in spring 2014**

| No | Children (poverty, access to nurseries) | Economy (jobs, state debt) | Corruption | Country-side | Hungarian identity | Group name | In English |
|-------|---|----------------------------|------------|--------------|--------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| 1,447 | 20.2% | 33.6% | 29% | 17.2% | - | Mesterházy Attila | Opposition leader |
| 806 | - | 38% | 34.7% | - | 27.2% | Gyurcsány Ferenc | Opposition leader |
| 1,146 | - | 68.8% | 31.2% | - | - | Bajnai Gordon | Opposition leader |
| 200 | 9% | 64.5% | 26.5% | - | - | Fodor Gábor | Opposition leader |

Note: Orbán Viktor and Londoni Fiatalok Csoportja were excluded because of lack of relevant content

Our analysis revealed four main topics of discussion:

- concerns about immigration; in particular the number of Hungarians working abroad in Europe because of unsatisfactory living conditions and job opportunities in Hungary
- Russia's political pressure on and then annexation of Ukraine; nearly all the discussions were implicitly or explicitly in favour of the West, and therefore the EU
- the Jobbik party; while our Twitter analysis was unable to uncover Roma groups or users, on Facebook we found a number of groups with relevant discussions where the most common discussion topic was a fear of Jobbik
- the EU being seen as a threat to national sovereignty; although the least prevalent topic, it was still visible particularly among Fidesz followers and to a lesser degree among Magyar Szocialista Párt (MSZP; Hungarian Socialist Party) followers

The most widely discussed four topics of non-EU relevant information we collected were, in order: economy, corruption, and children and countryside (the negligence towards it). However, young people's groups were slightly different, with education, corruption and entrepreneurship being the top three discussed items.

Italy

In Italy, we set up three different searches or streams of tweets. The first search or stream collected all tweets that were broadly relevant to the European elections; we collected 27,739 tweets between 20 and 24 March. In the second search or stream we collected 43,057 tweets between 20 February and 18 March with a focus on euro-sceptic sentiment generally and in particular that of Lega Nord supporters shortly before, during and after a rally they held in Milan. In the third search or stream set up on 26 March we targeted all tweets relevant to the electoral list Lista Tsipras, picking up a total of 9,921 tweets.

First stream: European elections

Three evident themes emerged from the data we collected in our first stream on the European elections in general. The first was the enduring socioeconomic effects of the crisis and the failings of austerity politics. Conversations on Twitter suggested that this is an area of great concern, with many Italians holding the EU responsible. The Fiscal Compact was frequently invoked as the immediate cause of a slow recovery in Italy along with general comments directed at the alleged enslavement of the Union to 'banks and business lobbies'. Many tweets questioned the continued viability of the single currency.

The overwhelming impression conveyed by these tweets is the belief that the EU has little time for the plight of the average citizen. It is clear that organisations working to mobilise voter turnout need to address these concerns, perhaps by insisting on the benefits to democratic debate on these issues, stressing constructive action over resignation. Spokesmen of the Italian agricultural sector were particularly vocal in lamenting the EU's

alleged mishandling of the crisis and in asking for help, and thus it would also be advisable that vote mobilisation efforts address their concerns and target them. These are two clear examples where listening to conversations on Twitter can help provide insights to NGOs and campaigners working on voter mobilisation.

The second theme was the Five Star Movement, about which there was a high frequency of tweets. The hashtag #vinciamonoi ('we're going to win') featured often in tweets by or about the movement. Indeed, from the data it appears that the eurosceptic parties tend to count the most assiduous of Twitter users among the electorate, so it is important to bear in mind that the results might be slightly skewed in their favour.

The third and most significant theme was Matteo Renzi or Angela Merkel, or both. The many comments on these politicians ranged from endorsements of the new Prime Minister Renzi to satirical commentary of the latter's official visit to the German Chancellor in March. Twitter activity explicitly about the elections rested at a level of roughly a few tens of tweets a day, with a small peak on 9 and 10 March before swiftly escalating around 18 March. This was true for Renzi and Merkel tweets and for all tweets about the elections in general. The sudden climb in tweets was likely prompted by Renzi's visit to Merkel on 17 March, which naturally lent itself to comment on Twitter after receiving extensive media coverage.

In line with this, of the tweets that were explicitly about the meeting, many were essentially personal criticisms directed at the prime minister in an attempt to belittle his credentials as a reformer and a 'man of action'. The hashtag #RenzieRispondi was created as a wordplay on Renzi and 'Fonzie', the character from the American TV series *Happy Days*, whose look the prime minister tried to appropriate in a infamous photoshoot in 2013. This hashtag was used to call on the prime minister to explain why Marco Carrai – a friend and adviser to Renzi when he was the Mayor of Florence – paid his rent on a house in Florence during his mayorship, frequently featured alongside tweets ridiculing Renzi's subservience to Merkel. It was also used to

point to the elements of continuity that marked this visit with visits by former Italian prime ministers or again insisting that nothing good could come out of their alliance.

Second stream: euro-scepticism and Lega Nord

Closely related to this theme is one highlighted by the second collection of tweets demonstrating eurosceptic sentiment. Aside from the numerous tweets that called for the abolishment of the euro – many of them very desperate in tone, for example:

@matteosalvini please help me I'm desperately seeking for work¹³⁰

#SALVINI With the EURO there is no work, no future, no freedom and no hope! #BASTAEURO)

what stands out from these tweets is the frequent use of catastrophic imagery, for example (all tweets translated),

Euro marks the death of Europe and of the European dream! Scalfarotto can't detect the difference between the Euro and Europe! #bastaeuro #lineanotte [aimed at the vice-president of the Democratic Party, Ivan Scalfarotto]

#bastaeuro Salvini, the common currency is a weapon that wants to kill our origins, like immigration wanted by Brussels

Salvini@bastaeuro Tour. Are you men or consumers? Europe is attempting to erase diversity and identity

and to match it, the heroic ethos and spirit of martyrdom evoked by Lega Nord Militants, for example,

Milano, #bastaeuro tour. The venue is completely full and many are crowded outside. Forward, alone against the eurocracy!¹³¹

#SALVINI compared to twelve years ago we have lost our rights, our pensions, businesses. Saying it is a revolutionary act #Lega #Bastaeuro

The Lega Nord Rally held in Milan on 22 February 2014 sparked a considerable amount of Twitter activity and more generally a high volume of eurosceptic tweets that employed catastrophic imagery. What is of interest here is the Lega Nord's ability to mobilise voters or at least to provoke discussion by rousing a fighting spirit in the electorate.

Third stream: Lista Tsipras

The Lista Tsipras (L'altra Europa con Tsipras; Another Europe With Tsipras) has run its campaign on irony: its electoral campaign video pokes fun at the Italian left's penchant for schism and its own status as a left-wing splinter group, distinct from the main party on the left (the Partito Democratico; PD). Certainly its appeal to humour and to 'intelligent opinion' has had a hand in helping it win a substantial portion of the vote (up to 5 per cent) in a relatively short time.

Tweets from or about the movement tend to be ironic in tone and are filled with jokes from the campaign video, illustrating again how framing a political message in unconventional language that inspires positive sentiments and proactiveness, and crucially that appeals to voters' cultural identity, can be very successful in increasing political participation.

The striking characteristic of the tweets collected with the third and final search or stream (aimed at the Lista Tsipras) is the humanistic idealism that permeates them, many focusing on the importance of strengthening democracy and securing the civil rights of European citizens, for example (all tweets translated):

#Tsipras @NFratoianni: we need @adifferenteurope that concerns itself with civil #rights and the suffering of those worst affected by the #crisis #Sel

We have to abandon a Ptolemaic conception of the market and create an alternative vision for the world

An endorsement for the #ListaTsipras @adifferenteurope is an endorsement of democracy, as well as against #austerity. Calling to #valledaosta³²

as well as the championing of values (like cosmopolitanism) which had long disappeared from the political scene in Italy and which in the tweets in question are often cloaked in vaguely romantic language, for example:

Signature drive for #tsipras here at the Ponte Bianco-Rome. Enthusiasm and tiredness in the middle of the Mediterranean

Notes

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Across Europe, low voter turnout in European and national elections is a growing concern. Many citizens are disengaged from the political process, threatening the health of our democracies. At the same time, the increasingly prominent role that social media plays in our lives and its function as a new digital public space offers new opportunities to re-engage non-voters.

This report explores the potential for social media to support efforts to get out the vote. It lays out which groups need to be the focus of voter mobilisation efforts, and makes the case for using social media campaigning as a core part of our voter mobilisation efforts. The research draws on a series of social media voter mobilisation workshops run by Demos with small third sector organisations in six target countries across Europe, as well as expert interviews, literature review and social media analysis.

Having affirmed the need for and utility of social media voter turnout efforts, *Like, Share, Vote* establishes key principles and techniques for a successful social media campaign: how to listen to the digital discourse of your audience, how to use quizzes and interactive approaches, how to micro-target specific groups and how to coordinate offline events with online campaigns. This report concludes that, with more of our social and political lives taking place online than ever before, failing to use social media to reinvigorate our democracy would be a real missed opportunity.

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