

## THE ROLE OF ONLINE SOCIAL MEDIA IN PEOPLE'S POLITICAL ORIENTATIONS AND TENDENCY TO PARTICIPATE IN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

**Abstract.** *The present study examines: (i) how online media (i.e. mobile applications, social media, and other traditional online media) influence individuals' tendency to participate in presidential elections; and (ii) their political orientation (i.e. tending towards Principalist political groups and Reformist groups) in the relationship between social media use and political participation. Multivariate analyses show that only mobile app uses are positively related to the tendency to participate in presidential elections. The results also show that mobile apps and social media and traditional online media influence political orientation among a sample of Iranians that is considered, and that online media thus attracts people's attention and adds to their tendency to support political reformist parties.*

**Keywords:** *mobile applications, social media, traditional online media, political orientation, tendency to participate in presidential elections*

### Introduction

Although the rise of the Internet and online media does not date back long, since the mid-1990s, when the use of such media became common, many discussions have looked at the performance of such media and its impacts on users (Rosenquist et al., 2011; Rosenquist et al., 2010). The influence of online media has been rampant on users' political participation and political orientation (Stieglitz and Dang-Xuan, 2012; Bakker and de Vreese, 2011).

Since the early 1990s, the Internet has impacted political phenomena via applications such as social media and blogs (Bucy and Gregson, 2001; Corrado, 1996; Grossman, 1999; Johnson and Kaye, 2003; Shah et al., 2005).

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Although there has been little consensus on the ways the new technologies impact citizens' political trends, various studies show that new media have positively influenced voters (Bakker and de Vreese, 2011; Hendricks and Denton, 2010; Adlipour et al., 2014; Harsij et al., 2013). However, while numerous studies in this area are concerned with the impact of traditional media, only a few studies have so far examined the role of online media in the formation of Iranian voters' thoughts and beliefs about political parties in the country. The present study aims to review the role of new technological media in political processes in Iran and establish how the new media are influencing both electoral participation and young citizens' views on presidential elections in the country. The presidential election in Iran is an election whereby the country's second-highest person in power (the first being the supreme leader) is elected by direct popular vote that, after the Islamic Revolution of 1979, is provided for in the Constitution (Algar, 1980). Several parties are present in Iran's official policy setting and presidential campaigns, usually being categorized as either Principalists or Reformists.

The Principalists, which some scholars consider to be almost the same as the Conservatives, are willing to maintain the status quo and oppose any fundamental change in the structure and traditional beliefs. The majority of the religious class and the clergy are Conservatives. Conservatives describe reformist intellectuals as "people who neglect religious values" and as "Westernised" as part of their criticism of them. The main discourse adopted by Principalists typically includes some critical elements of secularism, westernisation, liberalism, humanism and control over the free flow of information as they are generally inclined to view the role of religion and tradition as being significant in the socio-economic structure of society (Menashri, 2007; Ehteshami and Zweiri, 2007). On the other hand, the Reformists in Iran have their roots in that part of the political community that seeks change in society by reforming the rules and policies, and also via revolution. A true Reformist is thus one wishing for changes in the social, economic and political fabric of society, but without any change in society's foundations. Iran's leading reformist ideology is to achieve a civil society, the rule of law, access to religious democracy, freedom, reason and to pay special attention to the needs and problems of young people (Masroori, 2007; Khosrokhavar, 2004; Atwood, 2016; Wasi, 2001; Mir-Hosseini, 2002). Thus, distinctions between the Reformists and Conservatives can be seen in their observance of indicators of democracy such as freedom in electoral processes, independent parties, a free press and the free flow of information, the rule of law, civil accountability of the government, civil liberties, the right to politically participate, and political culture (Tarock, 2002).

In the present study, in order to understand the role of online media in the political process, the influence of online media on people's willingness

to participate in presidential elections is first examined. Second, the impact of online media on how citizens evaluated the Conservative and Reformist political groups in Iran's presidential election held in 2017 will be investigated.

### *Online media and political participation*

Two conflicting approaches are apparent concerning the role of online media in the public domain; the first contends that while certain dramatic changes have occurred in the application of democracy by the Internet entering into the social life of people, this does not lead to any broader political change (Bimber, 2001; Levine, 2003; Oser et al., 2013). In this context, Michael Margolis and David Resnick (2000) argue that in recent years that, although the political discourse has largely unfolded in cyberspace since social actors can organize themselves in the online environment, advertise and support particular parties and groups, they insist the Internet has not brought about major changes in human life and thus cannot help politically mobilize the citizens. In this regard, some thinkers even talk about the negative aspects of mass media in the process of citizens' social and political mobilisation and show the media potentially engenders the political lethargy of citizens and make them hold a simple view of political life (Czernich, 2012; Falck et al., 2014; Putnam, 1995).

However, the second view asserts that the new communication technologies are an important source of political participation for people who would not normally have access to the political sphere (Zúñiga et al., 2012; Halpern and Lee, 2011; Holt et al., 2013; Tang and Lee, 2013; Towner, 2013; Xenos et al., 2014). In this regard, four main reasons emerge for why online media are able to attract new people to participate in political activities: First, cyberspace provides many opportunities through the free discussion of political issues (Castells, 2007, Carpini and Keeter, 1996; Hale et al., 1999). Second, this new medium reduces the cost of information and participation. People with Internet access can access the news at very little cost and are therefore more likely to participate in political spheres (Tolbert and McNeal, 2003; Lupia and Philpot, 2005). Third, many researchers argue that online media are quicker and more up to date than other media (Tolbert and McNeal, 2003) and can thereby encourage participation in civic life and political debates (Hale et al., 1999). Finally, social media can enhance the effectiveness of democracy and ease the relationship between citizens and politicians (Di Gennaro and Dutton, 2006; West, 2004; Morrisett, 2003). Accordingly, these days online media are not merely new technological tools that provide Internet users with interesting features. Social media networks can also be considered as social networks that, beyond the scope

of such websites, create changes in social, cultural, economic and political structures. The challenges encountered by social media in recent years have affected these areas far beyond cyberspace.

It thus seems that many scholars believe online media have a positive impact on citizens' political participation. In relation to this, the research study by Yonghwan Kim and Hsuan-Ting Chen (2016) shows that both bloggers and social media are positively connected to political activities and have increased political participation among citizens. Lee and Chan (2015) also state that, during the political mobilization process for political actions, some citizens play the role of the movement's leaders so as to join other citizens in these activities. On the other hand, Lee and Chan's results show the impact of these networks in guiding political participation was only significant among young participants. In this respect, their research results show that use of Facebook and other online media has a huge positive impact on citizens conducting certain political activities. Further, Robin Effing, Jos van Hillegersberg and Theo Huibers (2011) argue that theories and research literature suggest that past efforts to shape the political activity of citizens by simply using the Internet have failed to meet the expectations. In this sense, the main question for these authors is whether the social media available on the Internet is able to change this trend. Their findings show that, while online media had no significant effect on local elections, during national elections those politicians who used social networks were able to attract more votes. Finally, the research findings of Homero Gil de Zúñiga, Logan Molyneux and Pei Zheng (2014), who examined social media's impact on political participation and its role as a venue for expressing political views, show that the spread of news through social networks, directly and indirectly, affected the growing willingness of people to participate in political elections.

Matthew James Kushin and Masahiro Yamamoto (2010) maintain that the popularity of online media among young people brings about different opportunities for them to participate in civic and political activities. People with strong political interests can inform their friends of these along with other political views through social networks and, on the other hand, they can react to political, social and economic issues via tweets, blogs or any other tool. For this reason, many researchers praise the potential features of social networking that expand democratic space in society and lead to their political participation in community affairs. Moreover, some researchers such as Nicole B. Ellison, Charles Steinfield and Cliff Lampe (2007) show that, by creating and strengthening weak links, online media networks make people familiar with ideas and political information, with this causing a significant effect on participation in political and electoral processes. Sebastián Valenzuela, Namsu Park and Kerk F. Kee (2009) also found evidence

indicating that the expansion of Facebook can have a positive impact on higher levels of civic and political participation.

From this perspective, online media create the public interest and expand virtual groups. Networks such as MySpace and Facebook not only do not reduce social interactions among humans, but increase them. According to the literature, people with access to the Internet are more likely to have political knowledge, political trust, and a spirit of more participation (Norris, 2002). In contrast, other scholars like Dhavan V. Shah, Hernando Rojas and Jaeho Cho (2009), instead of putting emphasis on the direct relationship between media use and political participation, provide a model in which the media, especially social media, indirectly increase citizens' political knowledge, political dialogue, political trust and political efficacy and, in addition, such media enrich the civic and participatory behaviors of citizens through the mediating variables. There is a more moderate approach to such media's influence on political participation that suggests people are both trained and confused by these media; they are both motivated and alienated (Aarts and Semetko, 2003). From this perspective, the relationship between media consumption and political attitudes strongly relates to media content and the personality traits of the audience. But, in general, it seems that online media such as social media, mobile-based applications and traditional online media can positively impact political activities. Therefore, based on a summary of the above research, it can be predicted that online media had a positive effect on political participation in the 2017 presidential elections held in Iran.

The first hypothesis is: Young people's use of (a) social media, (b) mobile-based apps, and (c) traditional online media has had a significant positive effect on their willingness to participate in elections.

### *Online media and political orientation*

Today, entering the virtual space of online media entails a new 'second life' and its impacts on political attitudes cannot be ignored. As statistics show, despite numerous prohibitions and restrictions, significant numbers of Iranians, especially young people and students, use the Internet and social media in particular (Dehghani Poude et al., 2011; Mirfardi and Valinezhad, 2015). In the meantime, many researchers believe that, on one hand, social media represent a vast and complex world based on the collective participation of individuals and groups who, building on their different attitudes and political beliefs, discuss their views and get to know each other's perspectives and comments (Tedesco, 2007). The basic objective of democracy, on the other hand, is freedom and equality that seek to expand the underlying social and political philosophy according to which all citizens in society

participate in determining their future while their country also benefits from adopting fair and serious roles. In this framework, all citizens enjoy the same rights to present their ideas and beliefs and thus participate voluntarily in the discussion and express their ideas free from any fear and restrictions by those in power. It seems this is where democracy and cyberspace come close together (Rheingold, 2000; Kellner, 1997; Bakker and de Vreese, 2011; Bennett et al., 2009).

In this respect, some social scientists believe that online media have the capacity to form a virtual public sphere via these networks and their users can engage in dialogues on various issues and help form public opinion (Losifidis, 2011; Castells 2009; Fuchs, 2013). Users can also oppose or agree on a number of political and social issues and take appropriate actions. In other words, users' comments can create a climate of dialogue among people and shape public opinion, leading to the formation of virtual civil public spheres and virtual institutions (McNair, 2011; Boyd, 2011). Hence, online media can provide a good opportunity to practice the formation of a deliberative democracy and create a situation in society whereby everyone can equally put forward their ideas and opinions, with the only ruling force over society being the power of reasoning. This is what Jürgen Habermas refers to as "democratic exchange". Thus, virtual social networks provide a space for the formation, expansion and strengthening of social relations and can be considered a suitable base for the emergence of democratic relations in which only the votes of the people are heard. In this setting, not only are minorities not removed, but the way is paved for a smoother and more complete way to establish a more comprehensive democracy (Habermas, 1984, 1987, 1991, 2006).

Concerning this, the literature shows that new communication technologies or the online media in some countries have affected the political orientation of citizens in elections and these new media have pushed most young people towards more democratic parties. For example, the results of a study by Samuel J. Best and Brian S. Krueger (2005) show that online participants in social media, even after controlling for demographic variables, held more liberal political attitudes than others, with this leading such individuals to vote for candidates who supported ideas such as freedom-seeking, reforms and equality. In addition, Emily Metzgar and Albert Maruggi (2009) believe that certain structural factors have made social media bring different effects on citizens' political attitudes. When studying the political atmosphere in the USA, he argues that the Republican Party mainly has hierarchical organizations, meaning top-down ones. These kinds of organizations offer clear and unified messages to their audiences through their powerful leaders. On the other hand, the history of the Democratic Party shows that such groups are very heterogeneous and that it is thus hard to issue unified and decisive

messages to them. This makes more democratic parties use online social networks within which different opinions are easily issued and thus have greater applicability. In other words, as Matthew James Kushin and Masahiro Yamamoto (2010) argue, the new virtual space is making citizens more familiar with political processes by providing them with increased access to information and news, with this eventually leading to the development of the fundamental values of democracy. Based on the existing research, the foregoing assumptions made in this area include:

Hypothesis 2: Young people who use (a) social media, (b) mobile-based apps, and (c) traditional online media have a stronger tendency towards liberal parties.

## **Method**

### *Data collection and sample*

To collect data and investigate the research hypotheses, we conducted telephone interviews whose questions were constructed with respect to the research concepts and theories. We first carried out the telephone interviews with 36 participants in our contact list. They varied in terms of gender, and city of residence, and were aged from 18 to 30 years. Then, after responding, they were asked to give us the phone numbers of other young people living in different cities of Iran who might participate in the interviews. Accordingly, we continued with the telephone interviews, with other colleagues helping us. The interviews continued until we had 1,157 participants, at which point we realized that the sample size was somewhat representative of the study population in the gender, income and education of the respondents. The data collection stage occurred in the period 20 September to 4 December 2017, with the sample thus consisting of 1,157 respondents. Of course, to reach this sample size, around 1,589 people were contacted, some of whom were not involved in the research process.

### *Independent variables*

Four sets of independent variables were used in the analysis. The first set taps the respondents' basic demographic characteristics. The sample included 49.8% females, the mean age was 22.40 years ( $SD = 4.65$ ) and ranged from 18 to 30 years. Education ( $M = 2.98$ ,  $SD = 0.66$ ) was measured by four categories: (1) less than high school; (2) high school graduate; (3) BA degree; and (4) postgraduate work or degree; most respondents (46.3%) held a BA. Three income categories were used ( $M = 1.99$ ,  $SD = 0.41$ ), (less than USD 5,500, USD 5,500 to USD 11,000, and more than USD 11,000); the

majority (65.7%) was in the second category. The sample overall contains an almost highly-educated, middle-income, and young population.

To measure the respondents' political predispositions, two variables were included: political knowledge and internal political efficacy. Internal political efficacy was gauged with a 4-point, Likert-type scale, ranging from extremely agree to extremely disagree, with "I consider myself to be well qualified to participate in politics" ( $M = 2.22$ ,  $SD = 0.93$ ). The questions asked of the respondents included "the name of the presidents of France and Russia". They were also asked about the disputed area in Ukraine and the name of the Iranian Interior Minister and the government spokesman for Iranian President Rouhani, which was measured by open questions. In this variable, 1 was given to correct answers and 0 to wrong answers. These items were combined and the mean values were calculated so as to form an additive index ( $M = 0.35$ ,  $SD = 0.39$ ,  $\alpha = 0.84$ ). The overall sample suggests that, while they had relatively modest internal political efficacy, their political awareness was low.

The third group of variables included different types of traditional media. To measure the third group of variables, one variable was included: Attention to traditional offline media. Four items measured the attention to traditional off-line media. The research respondents were asked, on a 4-point, Likert-type scale (never, hardly ever, sometimes, and regularly): "how much attention do you pay to cable television, print newspapers, radio, newspapers and magazines so as to become familiar with politics". We combined these items and then calculated the mean values to form an additive index ( $M = 2.09$ ,  $SD = 0.70$ ,  $\alpha = 0.76$ ).

The final set of variables gauged how frequently (never, hardly ever, sometimes, and regularly) the respondents engaged in the following online activities: attention to traditional online media and attention to social media and mobile app use. According to previous literature (Kushin and Yamamoto, 2010), attention to social media was measured by an additive index of four items, including how much attention individuals paid to social network websites (e.g. Facebook), video-sharing websites, discussion boards, Twitter, and social news websites in order to learn about the election ( $M = 2.33$ ,  $SD = 0.85$ ,  $\alpha = 0.80$ ). On the other hand, based on previous literature (Yamamoto et al., 2015), four items were constructed to measure smartphone app use for political information. Respondents were asked: "how often are you engaged in each of the following: using a news media outlet's smartphone app to learn about the election; using a candidate's smartphone app to stay up to date with the election; using a smartphone app that supports a particular political party, a cause or ideology (e.g. conservative, liberal); and receiving alerts on a smartphone about election-related news or events". These items were combined and then the



mean values were calculated to form an additive index ( $M = 2.29$ ,  $SD = 0.88$ ,  $\alpha = 0.79$ ). On the other hand, traditional online media was gauged with a 4-point, Likert-type scale: never through to regularly. For measuring attention to traditional online media, four items were used. Questions asked of the respondents were: “how much attention do you pay to online newspapers, radio websites, television websites, and news portal sites”. These items were combined and the mean values calculated to establish an additive index ( $M = 2.09$ ,  $SD = 0.77$ ,  $\alpha = 0.82$ ).

### *Dependent variables*

To test the impact on political participation, a measure of the voters' likelihood of attending Iran's 2017 presidential election was used – a 4-point, Likert-type scale “definitely will not attend, probably will not attend, probably will attend, and definitely will attend the caucus” ( $M = 2.55$ ,  $SD = 1.33$ ). The second set of dependent variables included an evaluation of the image of reformist political groups in Iran. Respondents were asked to think about reformist political groups in Iran and then report whether the phrase “I think the Reformist political campaign, in comparison with the Principalist political groups, is more appropriate for the country's political development” describes their viewpoint “not well at all, not too well, quite well, or extremely well”.

### *Analytical procedures*

The analyses used in the present study employ a hierarchical ordinary least squares (OLS) regression. A total of regression models was estimated with variables that were entered according to their assumed causal order. The first block includes the set of demographic variables that are, in the second block, followed by the political predisposition variables, traditional media use in the third block and, in the last block, by online media use.

## **Results**

The first hypothesis predicted that a higher frequency of online media use increases the likelihood of a person participating in a presidential election. Table 1, Model 4, shows the regression results for this hypothesis.

First, looking at the demographic block of variables, all demographic variables emerge as significant predictors of participation. In other words, Age ( $\beta = 0.05$ ) was positively associated with presidential political involvement, with older respondents being more involved in the election. Sex ( $\beta = .33$ ) was a significant predictor, showing male respondents to be more politically

efficacious. Income emerges as a significant predictor of participation ( $\beta = -.17$ ), with those in the lower income group being more likely to attend the voting. The second model adds the political predisposition variables and shows that only political knowledge is highly significant. Not surprisingly, it is more likely that those who possess a high level of political knowledge participated in the presidential election ( $\beta = .41$ ).

Table 1: PREDICTING THE LIKELIHOOD OF PARTICIPATING IN A PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION (ORDINARY LEAST SQUARES)

|                             | Model 1     | Model 2     | Model 3     | Model 4     |
|-----------------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| Constant                    | -.32(.29)   | -.17(.30)   | -.41(.31)   | -.54(.31)   |
| Age                         | .05***(.00) | .04***(.00) | .04***(.00) | .04***(.00) |
| Gender                      | .33***(.07) | .25***(.07) | .27***(.07) | .22**(.07)  |
| Education                   | .52***(.05) | .47***(.05) | .46***(.05) | .43***(.05) |
| Income                      | -.17*(.08)  | -.17*(.08)  | -.17*(.08)  | -.19*(.08)  |
| Political knowledge         |             | .41***(.09) | .35***(.09) | .20*(.10)   |
| Internal political efficacy |             | .00(.03)    | -.01(.03)   | -.04(.03)   |
| Traditional offline media   |             |             | .19***(.05) | .12*(.05)   |
| Social media                |             |             |             | .08(.06)    |
| Mobile apps                 |             |             |             | .10*(.05)   |
| Traditional online media    |             |             |             | .06(.06)    |
| R2                          | .16***      | .18***      | .19***      | .20***      |
| N                           | 1157        | 1157        | 1157        | 1157        |

The table reports the results of a hierarchical ordinary least squares regression analysis. Estimates are unstandardized regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$

Source: The authors' own analysis.

The total of all traditional media sources included in Model 3 is significant ( $\beta = .19$ ). The positive beta coefficient shows that, after controlling for all other factors, those who make use of media news are more likely to attend the presidential election. The final model includes the online media variables. The result indicates that only mobile apps are statistically significant at the .05 level ( $\beta = .10$ ). Thus, we are unable to confirm the first hypothesis for all online media.

When considering the overall explanatory power of the models, the modest  $R^2$  of .20 for the final model can be observed.  $F$ -change statistics show that for each of the four models each block of variables is significant as a whole, with the online media block explaining an additional 1% of the variation in presidential election attendance. The individual variables that remain statistically significant in the final regression model are age, gender, income, political knowledge, education, traditional offline media, and mobile apps (see Table 1).

Table 2: EFFECTS ON A CANDIDATE'S POLITICAL ORIENTATION (ORDINARY LEAST SQUARES)

|                             | Model 1   | Model 2      | Model 3      | Model 4      |
|-----------------------------|-----------|--------------|--------------|--------------|
| Constant                    | 1.93***   | 1.49***      | 1.50***      | 1.36***      |
| Age                         | .00(.00)  | .00(.00)     | .00(.00)     | .00(.00)     |
| Gender                      | .08(.05)  | .01(.05)     | .01(.05)     | -.05(.05)    |
| Education                   | -.00(.04) | -.02(.04)    | -.02(.04)    | -.05(.04)    |
| Income                      | -.01(.06) | -.01(.06)    | -.00(.06)    | -.03(.06)    |
| Political knowledge         |           | .23*** (.06) | .23*** (.07) | .06(.07)     |
| Internal political efficacy |           | .23*** (.02) | .23*** (.02) | .20*** (.02) |
| Traditional offline media   |           |              | -.01(.03)    | -.10** (.04) |
| Social media                |           |              |              | .08* (.04)   |
| Mobile apps                 |           |              |              | .12*** (.03) |
| Traditional online media    |           |              |              | .09* (.04)   |
| R2                          | .00       | .08***       | .08***       | .12***       |
| N                           | 1157      | 1157         | 1157         | 1157         |

The table reports unstandardized ordinary least squares regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. Only full regression models are reported.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$

Source: The authors' own analysis.

The next set of hypotheses predicted that voter political orientation significantly influences online media use. The results show that none of the demographic variables has a significant impact. The political predisposition variables are added by the second model which shows that both are highly significant. Respondents who possess a high level of political knowledge ( $\beta = .23$ ) and internal political efficacy ( $\beta = .23$ ) are more likely to vote for democratic groups. The third model shows that traditional offline media does not have a significant effect on political orientation.

The final model includes the online media variables. The result shows that all online media are statistically significant. Social media ( $\beta = .08$ ), mobile apps ( $\beta = .12$ ) and traditional online media ( $\beta = .09$ ) were positively associated with political attitude, showing that above and beyond all the other variables those respondents who paid more attention to online media were more politically reformist than those who paid less attention. Moreover, the results for the final model indicate that traditional offline media have a statistically significant effect on political attitude. However, unlike online media, traditional offline media was negatively related to political attitude ( $\beta = -.10$ ). This suggests that traditional offline media lead people who use such media types towards conservative political groups.

Looking at the models' overall explanatory power, one can observe a modest  $R^2$  of .12 for the final model.  $F$ -change statistics indicate that the final block of variables is significant as a whole for each of the four models, with the online media block explaining an additional 4% of the variation in political

orientation. The individual variables that remain statistically significant in the final regression model are internal political efficacy, traditional offline media, social media, mobile apps and traditional online media (see Table 2).

## Conclusion

As mentioned, the Iranian revolutionary forces are usually defined as Reformists and Principalists. When it comes to citizens' political participation in elections, it seems that the traditional notification methods, including radio, TV and newspapers, still play the most important role in motivating Iranian society to become involved. Certain factors explain the poor role of online media, and the important role of traditional media, in motivating society for political participation in Iran. In this regard, today in Iran the political activities of the traditional groups, who are more willing to take part in elections, mainly occur via the traditional media, especially radio and television broadcasting. Thus, given the history of this traditional group, it is first, observed that some citizens view political participation as an important religious task; second, given that the traditional media is primarily used by such traditional groups and also that such groups mainly focus on the legal and religious aspects of elections, the consumers of the traditional media are most likely to participate in elections (Fairbanks, 1998). In addition, Iran has introduced cyberspace rules that limit certain online media such as Facebook, Twitter etc.; namely, these websites are filtered by government officials (Granick, 2005). Accordingly, consumers of such media sometimes have little access to their preferred websites, thereby reducing the impact of these new media. Of course, this does not mean that online media have not affected people's willingness to participate in elections, but the results show that both structural gaps, such as age, gender, income and education, and traditional media are better at explaining political participation than online media. However, as shown in Table 1, mobile-based applications can explain part of the increased willingness to participate in elections, albeit not as much as the structural gaps and traditional media. One reason for the growing importance of mobile-based apps is that, according to official Iranian government statistics,<sup>1</sup> 59% of Iranians use various news applications via their mobile phones. In addition, by early 2017 about 602,368 Iranian users had subscribed to the BBC Persian channel via the Telegram service, highlighting the rising importance of mobile-based and computer-based media in Iran in recent years.<sup>2</sup> Thus, today's mobile-based

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<sup>1</sup> Accessible at <http://www.ion.ir/News/164013.html>, 17. 9. 2106.

<sup>2</sup> The BBC Persian Telegram channel members, has risen to more than 1 million and 150 thousand people by September 14, 2018. Accessible at <https://www.telegram.me/bbcpersian>, 17. 9. 2016.

applications are not the only new technological tools that provide users with interesting features. In today's Iran, mobile-based applications may be considered media that have created social, cultural, economic and political changes beyond the actual websites. Social networks have faced challenges in recent years with effects reaching beyond the cyberspace. Mobile-based applications, as one kind of online media, have provided Internet users with significant facilities and thus increased citizens' participation in political processes, including at elections.

Further, the results for the second hypothesis indicate that the younger, post-revolution generation in Iran may be leaning more towards the Reformist political orientation, with this being largely due to online media. It seems that several important factors can nourish reformist political attitudes among the Iranian youth who use online media. First, in recent years in Iran, the expansion of educational institutions and influence of the consequences of globalization has triggered among the newly emerging middle-class common demands like political development, civil liberties and an emphasis on the ideals of democracy (Ansari, 2000). These very factors are present in Iran to a greater extent in the virtual world, and in virtual media more than in traditional media. Therefore, the new media's stress on democratic demands can be expected to increase reformist tendencies among Iran's young people. In addition, the nature of online media builds on the interests of individuals and groups within the community and on public participation (Tolbert and McNeal, 2003). The next important aspect of bringing democracy to fruition is public participation, which these days can also be encouraged in the cyberspace context. A fundamental purpose of democracy is to develop and protect the rights of the citizens and thus provide social and political conditions wherein all citizens of the community can determine the destination of both the public and country and play serious roles in this endeavor. In such a framework, all people have the right to put forward their ideas and beliefs, volunteer comments on different areas and even impose their demands on government authorities that hold the central power and thereby carve out their own share of the political circle. Here the tendency of the reformist party and the new media spaces becoming even closer may well continue to grow, as reformists can achieve their goals via the new media tools; namely, making political change in society so as to establish a democratic atmosphere. This is likely to occur in societies such as Iran where the traditional media and political parties have, for whatever reason, not been fully successful in their efforts. Finally, given that there are more than 100 million mobile phones in Iran, exceeding the circulation of newspapers several times, it is not unreasonable to consider the new elements of online media as a source of spreading

democracy in Iran. With a different approach and broader facilities, these new media tools can strengthen democracy by developing people's interest in political reforms of society.

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