

Participation in Political Crowdfunding during COVID-19 Pandemic

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Participation in the political process is the fundamental right and responsibility of a citizen. Online political participation has gained popularity as it is convenient and effective. Political crowdfunding helps political candidates and parties pledge funds, usually small, from a large population and seek support through marketing campaigns during elections.

Keywords: crowdfunding ; Elections 2020 ; COVID-19 ; intentions

1. Introduction

The main concept of crowdfunding is driven by micro-finance and crowdsourcing, with more specific usage for fundraising ([Mollick 2014](#)). Crowdfunding projects are most well known in the entrepreneurship sector because it allows entrepreneurs to raise funds from the public. Crowdfunding for political purposes gained people's attention when Barack Obama managed to secure more than USD 700 million in 2008 through what they called grassroots fundraising. However, this campaign was not the first to exploit the power of technology and communication for promotion ([Cogburn and Espinoza-Vasquez 2011](#)). However, people can relate to the Obama campaign as the most successful political crowdfunding campaign. Based on this, researchers use the term political crowdfunding to define the use of crowdfunding for political purposes. Research shows that the reliance on small donors may help democratize the electoral process by expanding the scope of political participation for citizens and level the playing field for incumbents, challengers, and open-seat candidates (e.g., [Culbertson et al. 2018](#)), especially for female candidates ([Heberlig and Larson 2020](#)). Political crowdfunding has become a widely accepted political norm, not only in the US but also in other countries. For example, John Tsang raised more than USD 500,000 within 48 h for contesting Hong Kong's leadership elections through the Kickstarter project ([The Straits Times 2017](#)).

As political crowdfunding is a new social phenomenon in the social media age, few studies have been conducted to investigate the key factors predicting people's intent to participate in political crowdfunding (e.g., [Kusumarani and Zo 2019](#); [Baber 2020](#)). The 2020 US presidential election happened when the US and the rest of the world were facing the global COVID-19 pandemic. Researchers found one study that links political support and risk perception of COVID-19, by [Barrios and Hochberg \(2020\)](#). They found that those who are in favor of Trump showed lower perceptions of risk during the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, as people's political attitudes and participation are suggested to be affected by the pandemic, these links have not gained much attention from researchers. Researchers seek to be the first to understand the intention of citizens to donate small amounts to support presidential candidate campaigns amid the COVID-19 pandemic by using the 2020 US presidential election as the main focus. Researchers believe that the present study can bring new insight into how the COVID-19 pandemic is affecting political attitudes and behavior, which can be helpful for countries that are scheduled to go for elections in the future.

To understand what factors drive citizens' intention to participate in political crowdfunding, researchers chose a robust model, named the civic voluntarism model (CVM). The CVM posits that people participate in politics because of the availability of resources, psychological engagement, and opportunities ([Verba et al. 1995](#)). This theory has been applied to different contexts, such as youth and college students' participation in politics ([Kim and Khang 2014](#); [Kirbiš et al. 2017](#)), among older adults ([Nygård and Jakobsson 2013](#)) and crisis periods ([Guo et al. 2021](#)). Furthermore, researchers found studies that used CVM to explain civic participation in different countries (e.g., [Nygård and Jakobsson 2013](#); [Sheppard 2015](#)). [Cogburn and Espinoza-Vasquez \(2011\)](#) stated that the Obama 2008 campaign, which was facilitated by social media and Web 2.0 tools, promoted active civic engagement and helped to raise money.

2. Political Crowdfunding during COVID-19 Pandemic

Crowdfunding (CF), which was only regarded as an alternative method of financing, now triggers increased awareness in society, while it is also an effective marketing tool for campaign owners ([Konhäusner et al. 2021a](#); [Fanea-Ivanovici and Baber 2021](#)). Political marketing through digital networks has created a better level of democratic participation, civic engagement, and social activism ([Khairiza and Kusumasari 2020](#)). As the costs of paper and printing increased and the reluctance of advertisers to place ads in print publications, people shifted to independent print media using CF platforms to finance their projects ([Le Masurier 2012](#)). This implies the dynamic role of CF in helping the media for raising funds and also becoming a source of new information ([Baber and Fanea-Ivanovici 2021](#)). [Sayedi and Baghaie \(2017\)](#) even suggested that CF is now being increasingly used as a marketing tool, rather than a source of funding. Only limited research has been conducted on marketing practices, specifically crowdfunding, and their effect on the efficiency of the campaign ([Konhäusner et al. 2021b](#)). The present study will explain the effectiveness of crowdfunding as a communication channel for politicians and parties to communicate their political agenda and, at the same time, seek financial donations from the public.

2.1. Resources

People need resources to participate in civic activities ([Brady et al. 1995](#); [Verba et al. 1995](#)) in the form of finance, time, and technology. [Levin-Waldman \(2013\)](#) measured financial resources by the level of income that individuals have and found that it is related to their intention to engage in civic participation. An opposite finding of the strength of income on political participation through crowdfunding was reported by Oni, [Oni et al. \(2017\)](#), and [Kusumarani and Zo \(2019\)](#). According to the findings, resources are significant but not the most influential factor in people's decision to contribute to a political crowdfunding campaign. This is understandable because of the nature of crowdfunding, which requires less money to participate.

Even though as little as USD 1 is needed to participate in a crowdfunding campaign, the COVID-19 pandemic affected people's financial resources ([Li and Mutchler 2020](#); [Clark et al. 2021](#)). researchers argue that in the political crowdfunding context during COVID-19, financial resources will remain a significant factor, following [Igra et al. \(2021\)](#). Based on this logic, researchers argue that the form of financial resources will positively influence people's intention to participate in political crowdfunding during a pandemic. This will force people to set their priorities to fit the situation.

Time acts as a resource that is used by citizens to exercise civic participation. To participate in politics, citizens need to spare their time, such as voting, listening to debate, and consuming news. To measure time as resources, researchers can ask individuals the time allocated for political activity by hours spent ([Brady et al. 1995](#)). During the lockdown and social distancing measurement, studies reported an increase in the amount of free time that people have ([Colizzi et al. 2020](#); [Liu et al. 2020](#)), allowing people to have more time to attend online education ([Liu et al. 2020](#)). As time as a resource is required to participate in politics, researchers see that the pandemic will actually push people to participate in politics in the form of crowdfunding. The 2020 US presidential elections that were conducted during COVID-19 are unique because citizens were required to avoid public places and rallies.

In the political crowdfunding setting, technology as a skill is needed to log on to the Internet and participate in a crowdfunding campaign. This is in line with previous research, which found that Internet usage directly affects political participation ([Tolbert and McNeal 2003](#); [Bakker and De Vreese 2011](#); [Lee 2016](#); [Campante et al. 2017](#)). The availability of internet technology allows citizens to be politically knowledgeable, increase communication capability, and create a virtual public sphere, in which citizens can gather ([Polat 2005](#); [Campante et al. 2017](#)).

2.2. Political Interest

People's level of interest in politics can be briefly understood as Political Interest. This level of interest affects voting behavior, political contributions, and other political activities ([Carter 2006](#); [Ritter 2008](#); [Kirbiš et al. 2017](#)). Research on the effect of political interest in the crowdfunding context was conducted by [Kusumarani and Zo \(2019\)](#). They found that the level of political interest affects people's intention to participate in political crowdfunding. This result was then confirmed by [Baber \(2020\)](#), who used Indian adults as respondents.

A good crowdfunding campaign is characterized by the detailed information that a campaigner puts on the campaign's main page ([Koch and Siering 2019](#)). A standard crowdfunding campaign page consists of a description section, in which the campaigner can put details related to the campaign. People with political interest will be expected to find more information regarding political crowdfunding campaigns from the information being given on the crowdfunding platform and from different information sources.

2.3. Political Efficacy

Political efficacy is a concept that represents a measure of efficacy related to actions within the current political system (Tausch et al. 2011). Clarke and Acock (1989) use the definition of political efficacy as “how individuals feel that their political action does have, or can have, an impact upon the political process”. There are two types of political efficacy that researchers explore: internal and external efficacy. Internal efficacy is how politically skillful a citizen is to influence the political system, while external efficacy is how citizens see governments responding to political issues (Clarke and Acock 1989).

The availability of Internet technology is suggested to be related to a citizen's political efficacy (Kenski and Stroud 2006). The reason for this is that the Internet allows citizens to find information about political events and issues. The perceived political efficacy of individuals can affect the way people are more critical of certain politicians because they think that they could do a better job (Rico et al. 2020). Political efficacy has been consistently shown to be a significant, positive predictor of online/offline political participation (Yang and DeHart 2016) and voting intent/behavior (Um 2018).

2.4. Political Awareness

Political awareness or knowledge is the degree to which people are deliberately exposing themselves to political issues, become knowledgeable of and/or understand the political institutions, processes, issues, events, and actors (Ran et al. 2016). Researchers gauged both the objective and subjective political knowledge of the participants by asking two factual questions and three questions of self-assessment, as exemplified by previous studies (e.g., Leonhard et al. 2020). Political marketing is more effective to the target audience who are politically aware and knowledgeable. In fact, highly knowledgeable individuals utilize the information better, share with other people, and aid in their decision making (Falkowski and Jabłońska 2019).

Most scholars agree that people's political knowledge is derived from online and offline news media uses (e.g., Eveland et al. 2005; Pasek et al. 2006). After testing six different models on two-wave panel data, Eveland et al. (2005) concluded that American participants' news use and political discussion led to their political knowledge. Pasek et al. (2006) explored the influences of 12 different uses of mass media and political awareness on civic activity. Their study found that political awareness is highly associated with exposure to informational media. People with higher civic activities are also found to have a higher awareness of politics.

2.5. Online Community Engagement

Citizens generally surround themselves with individuals who share similar political opinions and attitudes (Huckfeldt et al. 2004). The presence of the Internet has allowed the creation of various platforms for citizens to engage with one another as a community with similar interests; for example, Facebook, which has risen to be the most well-known social media platform, in which people can encounter like-minded individuals to discuss politics (Kushin and Kitchener 2009; Vesnic-Alujevic 2012; Enli and Skogerbo 2013). Towner and Muñoz (2016) suggested that social media platforms are positively linked to Baby Boomers' political engagement in an online environment.

Engagement to an online community can be defined as the passion of people to contribute as an act that is perceived as beneficial to oneself (Ray et al. 2014). When people are engaged in the community, either online or offline, they are also opening up opportunities for increased knowledge and awareness (Ryu et al. 2005; Malik and Haidar 2020). People are known to be motivated to join the online community because of the shared interest they have with other members (Ridings and Gefen 2006), as well as to acquire and exchange knowledge (Apostolou et al. 2017).

The effect of community engagement has been shown to have an effect on political participation (Conroy et al. 2012; Visser and Stolle 2014; Hyun and Kim 2015; Kim and Chen 2016). For instance, exposure to like-minded individuals is found to be affecting the political participation of active blog users (Kim and Chen 2016). Using Facebook and Twitter users in South Korea, Hyun and Kim (2015) reported a link between interactive social media use with offline political participation. During the pandemic, young people turned to social media, both as consumers and producers of political content (Booth et al. 2020).

2.6. Attitude

Attitude is defined as an appraisal measurement that represents a person's evaluation of the entity in question (Fishbein and Ajzen 1977). Attitude towards crowdfunding plays an important role when people decide whether or not to contribute to a crowdfunding campaign (Kochenash 2016). The relationship between attitude and behavioral intentions has been confirmed by various studies (e.g., Vabø and Hansen 2016) and particularly, in the technology usage intention

(e.g., [Luqman et al. 2018](#)). [Lacan and Desmet \(2017\)](#) suggested a positive attitude towards the crowdfunding platform significantly increased respondents' intentions to participate in the campaigns. [Shneor and Munim \(2019\)](#) found that attitude strongly influenced the financial contribution intention in reward-based crowdfunding. [Baber \(2019a\)](#) found that the experience of computer and technology, financial market experience, and influence of reference groups positively contributed to Indians' attitude towards crowdfunding. [Chen et al. \(2019\)](#) suggested that attitude towards crowdfunding has a positive relationship with the money donations in crowdfunding.

2.7. Subjective Norm

Subjective norms are people's perceptions of social pressure from significant others to perform a behavior ([Sheeran et al. 1999](#)). The major source of social influence comes from close reference members, such as family members, friends, and neighbors ([Wan et al. 2017](#)). Subjective norms are a strong predictor of behavioral intention, working along with attitude ([de Vries et al. 1988](#)). [Moon and Hwang \(2018\)](#) defined subjective norm as the extent of influence of an individual's close reference members on individuals' decision to participate in crowdfunding. [Towner and Muñoz \(2016\)](#) found that even in virtual relationships and observing the political activities of their reference groups on social media, Baby Boomers no longer feel isolated from online politics and, instead, feel more associated. [Baber \(2019b\)](#) found the influence of family and friend reference groups strongly influences the behavioral intention of an individual to participate in crowdfunding. Some studies established the role of social influence on the judgment to participate in crowdfunding projects ([Cecere et al. 2017](#)). So far, the results about the relationship between subjective norms and participation in crowdfunding campaigns are mixed. For example, studies from [Moon and Hwang \(2018\)](#) and [Shneor and Munim \(2019\)](#) found a positive significant relationship between subjective norms and intention, which contradicts with the results of [Chen et al. \(2019\)](#), in the case of donation-based crowdfunding.

2.8. Perceived Behavioral Control

Perceived behavioral control signifies a subjective degree of control over an action of the behavior itself in the situation and is regarded as the direct predictor of behavioral intention ([Ajzen 2002](#)). When a person has significant control over their actions, the individual will have strong intentions to complete a particular behavior ([Webb et al. 2013](#)). Self-efficacy and perceived behavioral control can be interchangeably used, both operationally and conceptually, and can strongly predict the intention of an individual ([Lee and Kim 2017](#)). [Baber \(2020\)](#) found perceived behavior control insignificant in predicting the intentions of Indian citizens to participate in political crowdfunding. [Stevenson et al. \(2019\)](#) suggested a negative relationship between self-efficacy and the funder's decision-making performance through the funder's searching efforts. However, self-efficacy has been found as a significant determinant of financial contribution intention in crowdfunding projects ([Shneor and Munim 2019](#)).

2.9. Social Distancing during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Infectious viruses spread in the community through close contact with infectious persons ([Fong et al. 2020](#)). Social distancing and lockdown reduce the transmission and delay the peak by spreading the cases over a long period to relieve stress on the healthcare system ([Fong et al. 2020](#)). [Lewnard and Lo \(2020\)](#) stated that it is the responsibility of politicians and state administration to enforce social distancing measures and not to discriminate against anyone for following the public safety rules. However, it is a useful strategy until a vaccine is developed. Social distancing measures include the closing of schools, malls, workplaces, and other gathering places and events ([Fong et al. 2020](#)). [Krimmer et al. \(2020\)](#) suggested that elections during the pandemic could increase the number of infections in the population by promoting social interaction in closed spaces. Online set-up during the pre-electoral process is the best solution to mitigate the risk of virus spread ([Landman and Splendore 2020](#)).

A survey conducted during national lockdown in 15 European countries revealed that the lockdown increased people's voting intention ([Bol et al. 2021](#)). This is understandable, because during the elections, moving to remote voting is one of the best options available and changes should be made to the electoral process to adapt to a pandemic situation ([James 2020](#)). Hence, researchers believe that social distancing norms in place will enhance the attitude of people towards crowdfunding so that they do not have to participate in offline pre-electoral activities.

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