

Title: Coffee or Tea: The Emergence of Networks of Discourse in Two Online Political Groups

Christopher M. Mascaro, cmascaro@gmail.com

Sean P. Goggins, outdoors@acm.org

We study the Facebook groups associated with The Coffee Party and The Tea Party and the manner in which each illustrates different manifestations of political mobilization in the virtual space. The Coffee Party Facebook Group (Join the Coffee Party Movement) has over 358,000 followers and evolved from a strictly virtual presence to one that now exists in the physical world. In contrast, the Tea Party and their largest Facebook group (Tea Party Patriots) has over 657,500 followers and exists as an extension of a movement that began in the physical world. We study the time period of 25 October 2010 – 12 January 2011 as an example of a politically vibrant time in the United States. During this timeframe Join the Coffee Party Movement had 345 parent posts with 52,370 comments and Tea Party Patriots had 245 parent posts with 41,907 comments. The coding of parent posts and network analysis followed a previously established mixed method approach of analysis (Mascaro & Goggins, 2011).

Our findings illustrate three contrasting behaviors within the two groups. First, the agendas that are set through the parent posts by the administrators of each group vary significantly. Both groups utilize Facebook to mobilize, but the Coffee Party does so through bringing attention to current issues in the political system such as campaign finance and money in elections. The Tea Party uses what they explain as overspending and big government to mobilize support. Second, the characteristics of the discourse that occurs within the two groups differs significantly. Within the Coffee Party group, the administrators are the most prolific participants whereas the Tea Party Administrators only posted 12 times. Additionally, the other participants utilize varying forms of discourse strategies such as direct addressal mechanisms to engage in conversation with others in the group. Finally, social network analysis based on open and axial coding of the parent posts for salient theme illustrates that raw post count is not a valid measure of prominence in the network. Individuals with low total post counts appear to be highly central in certain categories of discussion.