Gamification in Politics

Bossetta, Michael

Gamification in Politics

Michael Bossetta (Lund University)

This is an author pre-print of the following chapter:

Abstract: Although gamification is a popular term, the concept has rarely been applied to political studies. Therefore, this chapter provides an overview of the key features of gamification and offers an adapted definition of gamification suited to the study of electoral politics. To help illustrate this definition, two examples of gamification from recent campaigns are discussed: the uCampaign mobile application and contests promoted on social media. In concluding, I suggest theoretical and methodological approaches to study gamification in politics moving forward.

Keywords: Gamification, Game Elements, Digital Campaigning, Mobile Apps, Social Media, Political Participation

Gamification is a controversial term. In recent years, gamification has become a buzzword in commercial industry, leading some scholars to criticize it as marketing term rather than a novel area of academic research (Bogost, 2015). Others argue, however, that gamification is a valuable concept to investigate the increasing application of game design elements in non-game settings (Deterding, Dixon, Khaled, & Nacke, 2011). Both arguments are valid, but they point to the same problem: current definitions of gamification are too broad, especially for political research.

Yet, as I will show in this chapter, recent political campaigns have effectively deployed gamified approaches to encourage voter mobilization during elections. By awarding points or prizes in exchange for political actions, campaigns simultaneously involve citizens in a

campaign while incentivizing them to act in ways that align with the campaign's goals (Baldwin-Philippi, 2019). Surprisingly, though, a recent meta-analysis finds that less than 1% of academic papers on gamification deal with politics, with the vast majority focusing on education and learning (Koivisto & Hamari, 2019, p. 196).

Therefore in this chapter, I offer a narrow definition of gamification suited to digital politics: *the strategic deployment of game design elements to encourage political participation*. After situating this definition within existing approaches to gamification, I provide recent empirical examples of gamification used by political actors through mobile apps and social media. I conclude by offering future pathways to study gamification across the political and communication sciences.

Gamification versus Games

The most widely used definition for gamification is the one provided by Deterding et al. (2011, p. 9): "the use of game design elements in non-game contexts." To apply this concept to a political context, we must first distinguish gamification from games themselves. Recent studies have documented the use of politically-themed computer games that promote candidates during elections (Bogost, 2011; Bossetta, 2019), but these games *are not* gamification. Rather, as Deterding et al. (2011) argue, gamification refers to when specific design elements commonly used in games – such as interfaces, rules, and goals – are adapted and applied *outside* of traditional game settings. In other words, gamification is not the study of games; games are already "gamified." Instead, gamification is the study of when specific components and process usually reserved for games are brought into non-game contexts. This distinction between gamification and games is important, because it allows researchers to isolate, study, and compare how specific components of a gamified system affect users' political perceptions or behavior. In order to identify these game elements, though, we need to ask: what is a game?

To paraphrase Juul's (2005) classic definition, games are rule-based systems with quantifiable outcomes that involve player effort and attachment. Thus, game elements are those features and processes that work to establish rules, rankings, and generate involvement from the player. Within gamification studies, the most common game elements refer to points, badges, leaderboards, and challenges (Koivisto & Hamari, 2019, p. 202), but they may also include a variety of other components relating to the specific engine, for example: avatars, quizzes, or in-game rewards. Part of the difficulty in delimiting gamification is that systems vary according to their game elements, and therefore the task of the researcher is to identify which aspects of a system are game-like and work to achieve a specific action from users.

Although the specific components and overall design of gamification systems vary, in a political context the intended goal of gamification will almost always be to generate some form of political participation from the player. Political participation refers to the actions of citizens aimed at influencing political processes, but the exact actions that count as participation are debated. Some scholars view political participation narrowly as formal, electoral participation such as voting or petitioning (Verba and Nie, 1972). Others take a broader view, considering participation to include reading about or discussing politics (Ekman & Amnå, 2012), including in online environments like social media (Dutceac Segesten & Bossetta, 2017). Since political campaigning increasingly takes place online, and the "overwhelming majority of current examples of gamification are digital" (Deterding et al., 2011, p. 11), scholars should be open to a broad range of political participation activities when studying gamification.

Defining Gamification for Politics

As we will see, campaigns have used gamification to encourage actions that fall under both narrow and broad typologies of political participation. Whether to encourage attending a rally in-person or liking a politician's post on Facebook, political actors strategically use principles of game design to motivate supporters to take political actions. Thus, we can adapt existing

conceptions of gamification to a political context by defining gamification as: *the strategic deployment of game design elements to encourage political participation.*

Taking each part of the definition in turn, gamification is strategic because it aims to encourage specific actions that align with a political actor's goals (Baldwin-Philippi, 2019). Although gamification has been criticized as a marketing tactic (Bogost, 2015), political actors increasingly outsource their campaigning to professional marketing consultants (Kreiss, 2012). These consultants *strategically deploy* marketing processes in the political space to persuade and mobilize citizens.

Game design elements refer to the components of a rule-based system that work to achieve the political actor's goals by encouraging player action. These elements include the rules of the system, tasks for advancement that create player affect (e.g., performing actions, challenges, quizzes), and how the rewards for completing these tasks are displayed by the interface (e.g., points, leaderboards, badges, and avatars). Importantly, game design elements can be built into a self-contained digital infrastructure like a mobile app, or integrated with the rules and protocols of existing platforms, like Facebook, Instagram, or Twitter.

Finally, these game design elements are strategically deployed to encourage *political participation*: the range of activities citizens can undertake to influence political processes. The increasing shift toward digital campaigning opens up new forms of online participation that can influence politics indirectly. Citizens can, for example, share a political message across their networks on social media, or they can upload their list of phone contacts to assist a campaign with data collection. Although recent examples of gamification in politics typically focus on amplifying the reach of a politician's message on social media, campaigns have used gamified approaches to encourage actions that, while having an online component, fall under more formal examples of participation. Supporters can "check-in" at a polling station to show they've

voted, message friends or political accounts directly, or donate to a campaign through a hyperlink.

Example Case: uCampaign Mobile Application

uCampaign is an American technology company that builds mobile applications for right-wing campaigns and advocacy groups. In the US, some of their previous clients include the campaigns of Donald Trump, Ted Cruz, Rand Paul, and the National Rifle Association. Outside the US, their apps have been used by the Vote Leave campaign in the 2016 Brexit referendum and at least in 10 other countries including Germany, Australia, and the Dominican Republic. In order to encourage and coordinate supporters to take political actions aligning with the campaigns' goals, the app incorporates a gamification engine consisting of several game design elements: challenges, points, badges, and leaderboards. In addition, the app contains its own social networking space modelled from Facebook, where the app's users can interact with another and view messages posted by the campaign. Figure 1 depicts the uCampaign apps for the Trump (left) and Vote Leave (right) campaigns in 2016.
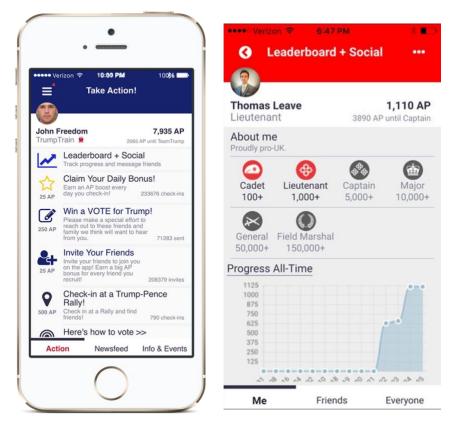
Figure 1: uCampaign Gamification Examples from Trump and Vote Leave campaigns (Source: Peters, 2016).

Once users download the app and register with a social media account or email address, they are presented with a series of tasks – or challenges – that users can complete in exchange for "Action Points" (or "AP"). As users complete these tasks and collect Action Points, they are rewarded with badges that are displayed alongside the users' picture and presented in a leaderboard that highlights the app's top AP earners. These badges provide a series of goals that users can work towards achieving, while also displaying a graphical depiction of a users' investment in the campaign on the app's social network.

I interviewed uCampaign's CEO, Thomas Peters, in an episode of the Social Media and Politics Podcast. Peters described gamification as "the breadcrumbs that show people what they're supposed to do…and the points show progress and also create investment" (Bossetta, 2018). For Peters, gamification serves three purposes: guiding people to actions the campaign wants them to take, displaying progress for completing those actions, and working to create a longer-term relationship with the campaign outside of a single action. These three purposes each align

with key elements of a game outlined above: setting rules (i.e., complete actions in exchange for points), rankings (through displaying points, badge status, and leaderboards), and generating involvement from the player. Let's discuss each in turn.

In a political context, the rules of gamification system primarily correspond to the task-reward structure that incentivize and reward participation. In the uCampaign app, campaigns assign tasks in exchange for Action Points. According to Peters, higher points are awarded to the actions that the client prioritizes. For campaigns that want to grow their support base, higher points would be awarded for inviting a friend to download the app than in a campaign primarily seeking to turnout crowds to a campaign event. In the Trump example in Figure 1, for example, checking into a rally earns the user 500 AP compared to checking into the app, which only earns 25 AP. Thus, the specific rules of the system create a task-reward structure – which are set by the campaign – that aims to channel users' actions to align with the particular goals of a campaign (in Trump's case, turning out large crowds to rallies).

Rankings, meanwhile, work to simultaneously reward users for taking an action while creating incentive structures for sustained and repeated political participation. In particular, Peters noted badges as a powerful ranking system when combined with the app's social network. A user's highest badge is displayed alongside their posts in the social network, and Peters noted how this social signal had powerful knock-on effects for other users in the app:

> "It's pretty easy, when you get to the news feed, to see who the top people on the app are. So these are people who have earned so many points by investing in furthering the [campaign's] cause so much. They're the top dogs, and so they get respect from other people in the community. It's called social capital, and it motivates other people to want to unlock those badges to show that 'I really believe in this cause, and I'm putting in the work as well.'"

Within the uCampaign app, users can 'level-up' through completing political actions and earning badges. Badges reward repeated actions while providing a visible signal of one's political commitment to other users within the app's social network. While visible forms of political expression have long been a staple of campaigning – from the wearing of political t-

shirts to newer, digital manifestations such adding a badge to one's profile picture on Facebook (Penney, 2017) – badges awarded by a gamification system are different in that they are tiered, updatable, and quantify one's level of effort to display for others. Whereas buying a political t-shirt or changing one's profile picture shows support for a campaign, these one-off actions do not also carry with them a displayable measure for the level of commitment over time. Thus, the types of rankings and badges offered by gamification appear particularly powerful in promoting participation, precisely because they provide users who complete political actions with a visual signifier to showcase their status level to peers. This generates user investment in the system to increase one's status by completing more actions, benefitting the campaign in the process.

Gamification through Social Media

The uCampaign app provides an excellent example of gamification in a political context, since it applies widely recognizable game elements – points, badges, leaderboards, and challenges – that are clearly promoted to the user through the interface. More commonly, political actors use fewer game elements to promote participation, and often these elements integrate into already established social media platforms. However, in using an existing social media platform, political actors must design their game elements in ways that fit the features and functions of that platform.

For example, in the 2018 Italian and 2019 European elections, Lega Norde party leader Matteo Salvini used gamification to amplify the reach of his social media messages across Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram through an initiative called "Vinci Salvini!". The rules and tasks were simple: users registered their Facebook account through a campaign website and were asked to like the campaigns post on Facebook and Instagram, as well as retweet on Twitter, as quickly as possible. As a reward, weekly winners would meet Salvini and have a selfie broadcast across the politician's social media channels, and the top winner would receive a personalized phone

call. The purpose of including these game elements into the campaign's online strategy was to amplify the reach of Salvini's post on social media. Preliminary analysis of the initiative on Twitter provides evidence that the gamified approach was successful: retweets to Salvini's posts increased after the initiative, and citizens created new Twitter accounts that were active only during the period of the contest (Grisolia & Martella, 2019). Thus, it appears that some supporters created Twitter accounts almost exclusively to engage with the campaign's posts there in order to collect points.

Researching Gamification going Forward

While these examples are interesting and demonstrate how political actors are using gamification to generate political participation, scholars need better empirical evidence regarding the effectiveness of gamification for politics. One sorely avenue for research is understanding the *actors* who both deploy and participate in gamification. In terms of deployment, which political actors use gamification: how, when, and why? And for participators, who are the supporters who participate in political gamification, and why do they do so? Observational approaches such as the analysis of digital trace data, or ethnographic approaches such as interviews and participant observation, could help answer these questions.

There is also a need to isolate and empirically investigate the *effects* of specific game elements on voters' political attitudes, behavior, and efficacy. For example: what effects does gamification have on voter mobilization? Does gamification increase electoral support for parties or causes? Does participating in gamification make voters feel more involved in the democratic process? Here, experiments isolating and testing the effects of specific game elements on such participatory outcomes are crucial.

Since early evidence suggests that gamification is effective in a political context, it is likely that political actors will increase the strategic deployment of game elements to encourage political participation in new and creative ways. Scholars and students interested in political

gamification should therefore focus on identifying which game elements are deployed, for what

purpose, and with what effect on the democratic process.

References

Baldwin-Philippi, J. (2019). The technological performance of populism. *New Media & Society*, *21*(2), 376-397.

Bogost, I. (2015). Why gamification is bullshit. In S. Walz & S. Deterding (Eds.), *The Gameful World: Approaches, Issues, Applications* (pp. 65-79).

Bossetta, M. (2019). Political campaigning games: Digital campaigning with computer games in European national elections. *International Journal of Communication*, *13*(1), 22.

Bossetta, M. (Producer). (2018, March 25). Mobile apps for political campaigns and advocacy, with Thomas Peters (No. 43) [Audio podcast episode]. *Social Media and Politics*. https://socialmediaandpolitics.org/mobile-apps-political-campaigns-advocacy-ucampaign/

Deterding, S., Dixon, D., Khaled, R., & Nacke, L. (2011, September). From game design elements to gamefulness: Defining "gamification". In *Proceedings of the 15th international academic MindTrek conference: Envisioning future media environments* (pp. 9-15).

Dutceac Segesten, A. & Bossetta, M. (2017). A typology of political participation online: How citizens used Twitter to mobilize during the 2015 British general elections. *Information, Communication & Society*, *20*(11), 1625-1643.

Ekman, J., & Amnå, E. (2012). Political participation and civic engagement: Towards a new typology. *Human Affairs, 22*(3), 283-300.

Grisolia, F. & Martella, A. (2019). Devoted users: EU elections and gamification on Twitter. *Sage Ocean*. https://ocean.sagepub.com/about-us

Juul, J. (2005). *Half Real: Video Games between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Koivisto, J., & Hamari, J. (2019). The rise of motivational information systems: A review of gamification research. *International Journal of Information Management*, *45*(1), 191-210.

Kreiss, D. (2012). *Taking our Country Back: The Crafting of Networked Politics from Howard Dean to Barack Obama*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Penney, J. (2017). *The Citizen Marketer: Promoting Political Opinion in the Social Media Age*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Peters, T. (2016, December 20). *Trump and Brexit used a new digital organizing tool to help achieve their surprise victories*. Medium. https://medium.com/@uCampaignCEO/how-trump-and-brexit-used-a-new-digital-organizing-tool-to-win-their-surprise-victories-ceca7c720b3

Verba, S. & Nie, N. (1972). *Participation in America: Political Democracy and Social Equality*. New York: Harper and Row.