Profile Politics: Examining Polarization through Congressional Member Facebook Pages

Paper Abstract: Many observers of the Internet's effect on American political life regard it as a contributor to a polarized political climate (Sunnstien 2001, Pariser 2011). By allowing users to self-select content that reinforce one's preexisting belief, the Internet is presumed to inhibit the cross cutting dialogue vital for effective democratic deliberation (Mutz 2002). Pariser (2011) refers to this as the creation of *filter bubbles* where contrasting views are kept out of one's media diet. This paper examines the filter bubble phenomenon as applied to the Facebook pages of members of Congress. I argue that rather than create filter bubbles, Facebook creates a distinct form of polarization. This polarization is rooted in the *personalization* of politics such that political discussions are oriented around the performance of political identity and not deliberation on political issues. An examination of member pages allows me to examine whether there are partisan differences in how members present themselves on Facebook and how constituents interact with their members. I find that Facebook encourages a distinct type of political polarization, through what I call an *architecture of disclosure*, rooted in affective, affirming, identity-based politics rather than in actively ignoring contrasting views. Hence the prevalence of political communication on Facebook creates serious challenges for democratic health that are different than those posited by a *filter bubble* thesis.

Academic Biography:
Dr. Marichal is an associate professor of political science at California Lutheran University. He received his Ph.D. from the University of Colorado-Boulder in 2003 and is the author of *Facebook Democracy* (Ashgate Press, 2012). He teaches courses on the Internet and Politics, public policy, race and politics, community development and California politics. His current projects include: a study of the relationship between acquiring digital skills and feelings of trust/efficacy among Latinos and African Americans and an examination of how *civic hacking* affects power dynamics at the local level. In addition, he is founder of the blog ThickCulture, sponsored by Contexts magazine.