Campaigning in the Digital Age: How Social Media Changed the Framework of Elections

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Campaigning in the Digital Age: How Social Media Changed the Framework of Elections

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Introduction

Throughout the 21st century, it is normal for social media users to see politics on virtually every platform an individual uses, ranging from LinkedIn to TikTok. Broadcast news, including television and radio have always aired political discussions, as mass communication became the most common and favorable way for politicians to communicate with constituents. However, politics were not a prominent aspect of social media use until less than a decade and a half ago. As the internet became further integrated into our daily lives, through radio, television, and cellular or smart phones, we found ourselves invested in politics at a previously unheard-of level. Knowing that most politicians and candidates currently use social media for themselves, it is vital to discuss the history of how exactly social media became so intertwined with politics, why it is so important, and how exactly it can and should be utilized for specific elections. There are several factors that go into voter turnout and engagement, and it’s important to know what future candidates can do to set themselves apart from others. With an extreme number of politicians utilizing social media for their campaign and bigger picture motives, understanding just how to use and what to do on each site is important for anyone who seeks to understand how to use social media and reap its potential benefits. This paper focuses on just how expansive and inclusive social media has become, how it came to be that way, and the most necessary and beneficial ways politicians at various levels can utilize the tools and algorithms that each platform offers. Beginning with a dive into the history of public broadcasting for campaigns then examining and explaining the origins and eventual explosion
of using social media in politics. Following the history of mass media, an analysis and comparison of both the 2016 and 2020 elections will occur. Finding the similarities and differences in marketing, candidate portrayal and how one can control their own narrative, as well as how social media enables civil engagement. Finally, the last portion of this paper will cover what social media algorithms are, the different tools each platform provides, as well as what platforms can be the most useful to audience engagement, and lastly, how to utilize these algorithms and tools.

The Beginning of Mass Media and Politics

While politics and elections were always discussed nationwide, history lacked the direct and instant communications and connections our politicians have today. Historically, newspapers would cover political affairs, but even with newspaper coverage the engagement was not as instantaneous or easy to access. As early as 1916, political affairs began making their way through mass media, beginning with broadcasting announcements and election news over radio stations. These broadcasts even became international as early as 1921. Since using radio to broadcast political announcements or candidacy was unfamiliar to many at this time, it was welcomed with mixed results and mixed approaches. The Republican party seemed to grasp the concept of using radio broadcasting to their advantage much quicker than the Democratic party (Carpini, 1993: 12). The effects of radio broadcasting were recognized very quickly, “they saw that radio provided greater flexibility to campaign strategy and allowed for a “big push” late in the campaign” and recognized that Republicans caught onto this and outspent the Democratic
party 3-to-1 and were on the air three to four times more than Democrats (12). Throughout the late 1920s, 1930s, and into the 1940s the use of radio broadcasting became the norm for public communication and became the dominant medium for political or public announcements (Carpini, 1993, p.18). It is important to add now, as it will be reflected later within the paper that despite Republicans adapting quicker and recognizing trends more than the Democratic party, their “big push” strategy still could not compare or counter the authenticity Franklin D. Roosevelt provided during his fewer broadcasts. However, it is important to remember that politicians historically have and continue to care about appearance, meaning it is hard to gauge true authenticity in a politician. That being said, for the purpose of this paper, ‘authenticity’ can be defined as what voters may feel to be genuine. A politician can portray themselves as authentic to the public, by seemingly acting in accordance with their values. Again, true authenticity can be hard to gauge and will be referred to as the ‘feeling of appearing genuine’, which is exactly what Franklin D. Roosevelt was able to do. The people believed he was authentic, they felt as if he meant what he said, and as if he would follow through on the promises he made. This feeling of authenticity voters got from Roosevelt made them feel connected to him, and made him a trustworthy candidate.

As the 1950’s rolled around, political broadcasting moved from radio to television. 1952 is the first year that television is credited for playing a significant role in political campaigns (Abrams and Settle, 1976, p.1). As it should be noted, there is a seemingly clear correlation between the increased use of TV or radio broadcasting and the amount of money candidates spend on advertising. The more one spends on advertising their candidacy, the higher interest they seem to generate for the election, creating a greater voter turnout. (Abrams, Settle, 1976,
p.8). It was immediately and broadly assumed that the amount of money spent on campaigns was productive and created a positive outcome. In 1960, the first televised presidential debate between Kennedy and Nixon occurred, and the effects of viewers watching it on television versus listening on the radio was dramatic. “A majority of radio listeners thought Richard Nixon clearly “won” the debate, but television news, apparently reacting to Nixon’s sweating brow, darting eyes and inappropriately colored suit, thought the “cooler” John F. Kennedy carried the day.” (Carpini, 1993, p.19). This debate alone highlights the way political campaigns and announcements would change from that day forward. It was no longer about speaking the right words, but about an individual’s presentation, their ability to handle the way television showed their vulnerabilities and their behavior wide open to interpretation. The introduction of television provided a new means of transparency between voters and candidates, changing interactions and responses from these voters, candidates and politicians alike. Transparency, throughout this essay, is used in reference to voters' perceptions, not fact. Complete transparency between candidates and the public is nearly impossible, but the perception of transparency helps voters trust not only a specific candidate, but the government and legislative process as a whole. Campaigning was no longer purely about policy, but the individual running, their composure, ability to handle pressure, and their personal authenticity. This gradual adaption of politics to mass media, from newspapers to television to now social media, created new ages of transparency, accountability and forever changed the way politicians sought to run campaigns and connect with voters.
How Obama and MyBO Transformed Political Campaigns

Prior to the 2008 election Barack Obama was not well known; he was simply a Senator running for president. Many presidential candidates are given an advantage of being well-known and can benefit from name recognition alone. However, Obama was not given this advantage by any means and needed to set himself apart from other candidates. Names like Clinton, Trump, McCain, or even Sanders are not hard to get on a ballot and are able to ease into being political candidates as they already have such a large following. The 2008 presidential election resulted in Obama winning the presidency by 200 Electoral College votes and about 8.5 million popular votes, quite a large win for his candidacy. And so, the question remains, how did Obama do it? How, in just under 2 years, did Obama go from a “little-known senator” to a historic politician? Obama’s initial presidential campaign and eventual win changed the way politicians viewed social media and used it to interact with voters from then on.

Obama’s campaign team was able to set him apart from other candidates and use non-traditional forms of campaigning to integrate volunteers, launch various dialogues, and utilize authenticity to promote Obama’s policies and potential presidency. However, Obama is not the only trailblazer for using social media. The use of social media technology was previously implemented in Howard Dean’s run for presidential nomination in 2003, but ultimately failed (Stanford, 2009: 3). Consequently, in 2007 there was a “social media boom” where the use of networking technologies exploded, and Obama’s team did not fail to use this sudden boom to their advantage. Joe Rospars, one of the first hires to Obama’s marketing team once said, “The
problem was that the mechanics of the political process was disconnected from the passion and sense of momentum of what was really happening.” (Stanford, 2009, 3). Rospars acknowledged this disconnect and was a key player in creating a campaign that built on momentum and connected voters to their candidate.

MyBO (www.mybarackobama.com), was an interactive website that assisted in promoting Obama’s campaign. On MyBo alone, over 2 million profiles, 400,000 blog posts, 35,000 volunteer groups, and 200,000 offline events were created (Stanford, 2009, 2). MyBO was launched in February 2007, at the same time Obama initially announced his candidacy. The biggest role MyBO played in this presidential campaign was its ability to get voters involved in the campaign process, making their involvement feel personal and as if they are part of something bigger than themselves. The website itself provided users plenty of opportunities to get involved and allowed not only connected users to Obama himself, but to other users within the network as well. It is important to emphasize the use of MyBO, as it was not a typical strategy for campaigns to use, let alone something an unknown candidate would be expected to put so much of their initial funding into. The use of MyBO was different from previous campaigns, as traditional campaigns focused on money and votes from their audience, but Obama and his team prioritized asking voters for time, their involvement, and their engagement in the campaign (Stanford, 2009, 5). Asking voters for their time rather than only their money to feel part of the bigger picture, and connected to Obama himself. This connection allowed voters to work on mobilizing other voters and essentially expanded the campaign team by providing users who wanted to be involved, the resources to promote his campaign on their own time. While prioritizing asking for voters' time and involvement,
Obama’s campaign team continued to accept financial contributions and reinvest that money into creating a stronger bond with voters. The “bottom-up” campaign strategy served as part of Obama’s political DNA and served as a strategic necessity to emphasize his authenticity in the community (Stanford, 2009, 6). McCain, Obama’s key opponent, ended up mimicking their network tools but lacked the interpersonal connections that allowed Obama’s campaign to prosper, “If you’re not running a campaign where people understand that those relationships are central to winning, then they don’t care about tools on your website.” (Stanford, 2009, 5).

MyBO was used to promote authenticity, raise money, and aided in using resources outside one’s normal reach, and most importantly, direct interaction and contact between Obama and his [potential] voters.

Despite how strategic and beneficial the use of MyBO was, Obama and his campaign team spread out and utilized more than just their own website. Obama was able to garner over 5 million supporters spread across 15 different networks (Stanford, 2009, 1). Scott Goodstein, the Obama campaign’s external online director, primarily focused on using external networks where they could target an audience that is already there. “Social networks are shopping malls that have millions of people already hanging out in them”, Goodstein once said (Stanford, 2009, 7). Despite a plethora of social networks already existing and there being a near endless amounts of profiles for the Obama campaign to create, Goodstein decided to focus on only 15 different networks (Stanford, 2009, 6). The range yet carefully selected capacity allowed the Obama campaign to branch out and target specific audiences on different platforms, while maintaining an authentic presence on each of them. Additionally, the Obama Campaign worked to not only participate on large platforms such as Youtube, Twitter, Facebook or MySpace, but
had Obama become the first political candidate on several platforms such as AsianAve, MiGente, and BlackPlanet (Stanford, 2009, 6).

One less popular platform that is important to talk about is the Obama Campaigns engagement on Disaboom, a social network for the disabled community. Using Disaboom allowed the campaign to talk to a very specific audience in a targeted approach. However, their online presence was not just used for show or to promote his candidacy, but to interact with the community on a personal level. Through Disaboom, Obama and his team were able to have very genuine, authentic conversations with users. Obama and his team listened to their concerns, answered questions, and were able to point them toward specific policy papers that addressed their concerns (Stanford, 2009, 7). A huge part of online campaigns works with targeting audiences that are interested in what a client is promoting, and that typically starts with campaigns using platforms where their political party is strong. This practice, of course, makes sense. Targeting an audience that positively engages in content avoids ‘internet trolls’ and makes it easier to only interact with those who seek positive engagement or agree with what an individual is already saying. However, the Obama campaign did not shy away from networks that held a stronger Republican affiliation. Specifically, LinkedIn was a heavily Republican network that the Obama campaign decided to invest time and resources in. LinkedIn, a business networking website, connected Obama to users he would’ve previously never connected with, let alone had access to. Similarly, to their interactions on Disaboom, Obama asked “What are your suggestions for helping small business?”, and through LinkedIn, real-world small business owners were able to discuss, address, and voice their concerns and real-life problems (Stanford, 2009, 7). This simple post allowed Obama to personally
address several suggestions given, engage in a meaningful dialogue, and assist him as he moved further along his campaign. Again, it is vital to understand the role authenticity played in Obama’s campaign, as it gave him a huge leg up compared to his opponents. As this approach humanized not only Obama as a politician but humanized his campaign and allowed supporters to form genuine connections to the campaign they advocated for.

Many campaigns will seek big donors to invest in their campaigns fundraising efforts. These investments enable the campaign to continue and build momentum and maintain progress. Obviously, having funding for a campaign is extremely important and necessary, but money will not win a presidency. The investment in social media was not a huge fundraising point, but fundraising was also not the point of this investment. As previously stated, Obama and his campaign decided not to focus on the amount of money individuals were interested in investing in their campaign, but the number of individuals who contributed instead. The focus of participant numbers over financial numbers became a tradition for the campaign, as the team realized it accentuated Obama’s relationship with supporters, and did not detract from it (Stanford, 2009, 7). It is important to remember that a better connection with millions of supporters can be much more meaningful than the monetary value from big donors. There is a clear connection between not seeking money from every interaction and how authentic the movement grew as a result, “the Obama campaign was bigger than just Obama, how it was a movement of ordinary people around the country who wanted to get involved in the campaign, and how many of these people have never been active in a political campaign before.” (Stanford, 2009, 7-8). The Obama campaign took an unusual path where they emphasized and showed off supporters’ stories, where individuals were profiled and interviewed in-depth.
Countless stories were told and it created a chain effect, inspiring viewers, and other supporters to donate to the cause. YouTube particularly was used to showcase these stories, in which the video platform created a natural tendency to provide transparency, and even created $47 million [in TV advertising dollars] worth of advertising and campaigning, in which the campaign didn’t even spend an extra penny on for those videos. Additionally, the humanization and authenticity used within Obama’s campaign enabled Obama to garner 23x more Twitter followers than McCain, as well as 4x more on Facebook and YouTube. Resultingly aiding in Obama’s triumph of beating McCain by 200 electoral votes and 8.5 million popular votes.

**The Themes of the 2016 and 2020 Presidential Elections**

The backbone of all democracy relies on the engagement of the people in their government, and nothing has made political engagement more accessible and possible than the introduction of social media. Politicians and their use of social media to communicate with constituents has notably increased, evidenced throughout the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections. As Davis notes, presidential candidates no longer need to communicate through the press to get a message out, “being able to bypass the journalists and the press, candidates can now get any idea on the Internet with the swift clicks of a few buttons at any moment’s notice” (Davis, 2017: 4). However, the effects of using social media for campaign marketing is dependent on the ways in which a candidate utilizes the tools and opportunities they are given. As I investigate the 2016 and 2020 elections, the focus will be examining the various impacts of candidates using social media. Beginning with looking at the exposure each candidate had or
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experienced in both presidential elections, following with how they marketed themselves and engaged with their audience. Additionally, looking into what factors can be credited for determining the outcome of both elections by comparing and contrasting the approaches between parties and candidates throughout both the 2016 and 2020 elections. Finally, after going back and forth between these two defining elections, the section will finish by showing how evident social media marketing was for the 2020 Georgia Senate runoff election.

Political Figures, Exposure & Engagement in the 2016 & 2020 Elections

Reviewing the 2016 election instantly shows that Donald Trump had a leg up when using social media. With his previous celebrity status and fan-following, Trump did not need to seek name recognition or credibility as he had already achieved both throughout his very public career. According to the Pew Research Center, in May of 2016, Donald Trump had 3 million more followers on Twitter than his opponent, Hillary Clinton, and had double her number of followers on Facebook. Additionally, in the United States, both Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton were already household names, making this election extremely unique compared to previous elections, specifically regarding social media and citizen’s engagement. Everyone had something to say, and with social media they had a place to voice their opinions. However, “the 2020 election occurred in a cultural and political climate that was vastly different than that of the 2016 race” (Pew Research Center, 2021). While the 2016 election was a tight race that became a battle between the Electoral College and popular vote, the 2020 election happened in the midst of a social justice movement and a world-wide pandemic. These extenuating
factors are reflected in how much and in which ways members of Congress used social media. Throughout both political parties, lawmakers were found to use language that was distinctive to each party. For example, The Pew Research Center recorded that in 2016 “Trump” was the second most common term used by Democratic lawmakers on social media, while in 2020 “Trump” was the most used term by Democratic lawmakers, appearing in their posts more than 33,000 times. In contrast, in neither the 2016 nor 2020 election were candidate’s names in the top-ten most used words by Republican lawmakers. The mention of “Trump” being so consistent and available to anyone seeking election information further pushes the Trump campaigns’ agenda and forces individuals to read more into Donald Trump as a candidate, his political views, and public opinions. This kind of exposure led to more and more interaction with his campaign. At the end of the day, even bad coverage is coverage and can still have a positive influence on the outcome of any given scenario, especially when high tension politics are involved. According to Dr. Dona-Gene Mitchell, when it comes to any scandal, the time at which a scandal for a candidate is revealed will make a direct impact on how they are viewed by voters (Mitchell, 2014: 697) The ideal timing for a scandal to become public knowledge is early in the campaign so that a candidate has time to recover from and regain control of the narrative. Again, the internet and social media allow anyone and everyone with an opinion, the opportunity to voice it, allowing for any perspectives to potentially become the public’s opinion. This fact only emphasizes a politician’s need to be on social media, ensuring their direct communication with voters and their ability to tell their side of any story. Despite the fact that before the 2016 election politics had already entered an era where candidates at nearly any level were greatly utilizing social media, from 2016 to 2020, there was a dramatic spike in
lawmakers personally utilizing social media to spread messages and interact with their constituents. In 2020, likes and favorites on social media were up 586%, shares and RTs (retweets) were up by 268%, and the number of posts created by candidates or lawmakers was up 53% (Pew Research Center, 2021). In 2020, lawmakers posted on Facebook about 35,000 times more and sent out about 74,000 more tweets than they did in 2016. Many of these posts varied based on each lawmaker’s affiliations, but both parties increased the rate at which they directly interacted with the public, pushing the idea of just how important the outcome of the upcoming election was.

**Controlling the Narrative: 2016 Determining Factor**

The exposure a candidate may get during an election, and the way in which they handle high-profile scandals can play a crucial role in the outcome of the election and may have a significant effect on the sway of undecided voters. During the 2016 election, Clinton was hit with several scandals including leaked emails, and this was reported on by media outlets far and wide. Similarly, Donald Trump faced his fair share of scandals, even resulting in members of the Republican party rescinding their endorsements. Clinton and Trump, having very different personalities and political aspirations handled their scandals differently. With Clinton’s hesitancy to apologize and Trump being rather quick to apologize and turning voters focus back to his opponents’ previous scandals, Trump was able to handle his allegations and scandals more head on. Specifically in the instance of a leaked audio tape containing lewd comments regarding women from about a decade before Trump ran for office. Trump immediately
responded the same night audio was leaked, condemning his own behavior and apologizing for his past actions (Diamond, 2016). With the apology and ownership Trump took over the situation, he was able control the narrative news outlets and the public were presenting. While both candidates found themselves answering to their respective scandals throughout the election and afterwards, Trump taking direct control of the situation rather than Clinton’s approach of hoping it would eventually dissipate, furthermore cemented voters’ opinions of the two (Diamond, 2016). This was evident when the election came close, despite many high-profile political figures condemning Trump’s behavior so close to election day, Trump being able to control his own narrative did surprising wonders for the outcome of his first presidential race. Overall, the most important aspects of a campaign lie with candidates’ ability to control their narratives, mobilize [potential] voters, directly communicate and share authenticity with voters, while using both social media and news coverage to their advantage.

Marketing & Other Determining Campaign Factors

When it comes to the differences in how the Republican party markets their candidates, versus the way the Democratic party markets their candidates, there is not a jarring difference between their initial approaches. Many candidates use the same tools and follow the same agenda as one another. However, there are significant differences between the way they express their opinions and thoughts, as well as how they attempt to mobilize potential voters. In terms of seeking engagement, many news outlets and lawmakers alike will tend to harp on the negatives of their opposing parties, since they know nothing can work individuals up more
than news on subjects they do not like or do not agree with. People are far more likely to interact with a headline or topic that highlights an issue they have strong feelings toward.

Regarding Congress members specifically and their online presence and online interactions, it was found that “While the public may express normative concerns about political incivility, such content is found to be more engaging and memorable than civil content and may potentially lead to political mobilization.” (Heseltine et al, 2022: 3). Hence, the fact that throughout the 2020 election, Republicans continued to push the idea that every Democratic lawmaker wanted to ‘defund the police’, despite the majority of Democratic lawmakers being against the idea.

The House Republicans’ Official Twitter account tweeted out a video that highlights several members of the ‘Squad’ (Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Ilhan Omar, Ayanna Pressley, and Rashida Tlaib) or some of the most progressive and liberal Congresswomen, points of view. While these specific Congresswomen did stand by the ‘Defund the Police’ statement, the House Republican’s tweet “Democrats support Defunding the Police. Pass it on.”, accumulated over 600 retweets and almost a thousand likes. This push for such a ‘liberal’ agenda was meant to rally the Republican party together, in hopes to increase voter engagement and turnout. (Pew Research Center, 2021). Similarly, Republicans found a spike in audience engagement when they demanded to count “every legal vote”. As President Trump tweeted, “RIGGED ELECTION. WE WILL WIN.” On November 15th, 2020, the tweet gathered a total of 521.3k likes, 77.2k RTs and 16k quote tweets. President Trump had several tweets like this, such as “WE WILL WIN” on November 11th, 2020. Similarly, that tweet received 451.8k likes, 93.7k Retweets, and 23.5k quote tweets. On the flip side of the spectrum, Democratic lawmakers experienced an increase in engagement when their messages mentioned the election of Donald Trump and most
frequently posted online about access to healthcare, voting, equality, and COVID-19 (Pew Research Center, 2021). A study found that “Tweets from Democrats that criticized the administration drew more audience engagement: a median of 145 likes and 50 retweets. The median coronavirus-related tweet posted by a GOP member and mentioning terms like racism or discrimination received 918 likes and 186 retweets, compared with 97 likes and 28 retweets for tweets by Democrats mentioning these terms.” (Pew Research Center, 2020) Not only did both parties begin using distinct language, but the sources they shared also became increasingly polarized, as it was discovered that when members of Congress did share information from outside resources, and a majority of these links came from a small number of popular websites (Pew Research Center, 2021). While both parties followed very similar strategies, which included rallying their parties together and focusing on their agenda, the two parties had different power dynamics within the government, forcing them to have several differing marketing approaches. The Republican party was consistent with promoting the strong leadership they believed Trump could provide, leading to the use of ‘fear mongering’ and intensely harping on terms such as “Israel, defund, bless, liberal” and more. This more aggressive approach, nonetheless, worked for their party and the engagement they sought. The Republican party effectively marketed Trump as a strong, authoritative figure during both the 2016 and 2020 elections, with Trump’s presence on social media and history in the public eye making this portrayal appear as authentic as ever. Republicans followed in a similar suit, mimicking and backing the President’s words and ideas with their own and attacking other members of Congress via Twitter. Despite the fact that Congressional Republicans were more likely to use these attacks as campaign strategies, and more likely to be uncivil or hostile on
Twitter, Democratic incivility also increased throughout Trump’s rise to political power (Heseltine, et al., 2022: 3-4). However, these cases of political incivility may have been working during since the 2020 presidency was a highly-competitive race, in general, these tactics turn the general public off, paints candidates in a more unattractive light, is found to be less persuasive and lowers political trust (Heseltine, et al., 2022: 4). Although, no matter the competitiveness of the campaign, it is noted repeatedly that one of the most successful tools in a political campaign is to mobilize current voters and reach potential voters, which is what the Democratic party was able to do and had a dramatic effect on the outcome of the election. Democratic lawmakers and voters who identified as Democrats alike consistently posted and shared ideas of equality, representation, and planning to vote (Pew Research Center, 2021). Overall, both parties used specific language to draw individuals closer to their parties, emphasizing the issues that matter most to their audiences. While Republicans usually take a more aggressive approach with their marketing, Democrats were seen following this approach in 2020. On the Republican side, this can usually enforce a more ‘group-like’ dynamic, suggesting a longer-lasting affiliation to the party. Democrats, however, with their gentler approach can lose momentum if they do not keep members of their party involved. However, in 2020, voting and educational resources were largely shared over social media, with the help of big-name celebrities such as Taylor Swift, were resources to register for voting and how/when to vote, effectively mobilizing [potential] voters. Of course, the Republican party did not lack celebrity endorsements, but the emphasis here lies with the fact that Democratic lawmakers, celebrities, and the average person would not only publicly voice their political affiliation but share resources to create effective voting plans as well.
The 2020 Georgia Senate Runoff

Georgia’s 2020 two senate runoff elections was the determining factor in the race for both parties’ control of legislative power. With the Republicans holding senate majority at the time, they had potential for the Senate to block any initiatives President-Elect Biden would introduce to Congress. During the 2020 Presidential election, the historically red state of Georgia had turned blue, following an unprecedented turnout from black voters. The surprising flip of the state meant that the Senate runoff could be anyone’s race to win, and the results would boil down to voter turnout.

As a resident of Michigan, I was personally invested in the outcome of this race, but did not think either campaigns would reach me, since I could not vote in the election. However, I was proven wrong whenever I scrolled social media and found my carefully curated TikTok algorithm showing not only me, but thousands and thousands of others around the country information about the election, and various ads regarding the candidates. However, as seen on TikTok, majority of the videos circulating the app revolved around Raphael Warnock and Jon Ossoff, the two Democratic candidates in the race. As of April, 2022; ‘#JonOssoff’ accumulated 73.1 million views, ‘#RaphaelWarnock’ got 19.9 million views, as well as ‘#FliptheSenate’ has 16.3 million views. Meanwhile ‘#KellyLoeffler’ only garnered 5.8 million views and ‘#DavidPerdue’ accumulated only 3.6 million views. Surprisingly, ‘#SenateRunoff’ accumulated only 10.4 million views. While 10.4 million views may seem like a lot, it still amounts to less than what both Democratic individuals were able to accumulate on the app, demonstrating how much more publicity Ossoff and Warnock gathered on the platform. On the other hand,
the ‘#SenateRunoff’ tag still garnered more views than both ‘#KellyLoeffler’ and ‘#DavidPerdue’ combined did. While some of this was of advertisements, a large majority of top trending videos were from non-sponsored users. These users videos contained important information regarding the runoff, such as how to vote or why Georgia citizens should vote one way or another. ‘@BenRobinson’, whose video focused on how to vote in the runoff, garnered 36.3k views and 12.9k likes. This user was not alone, many TikTok users filmed themselves volunteering, voting, or simply providing resources to vote. These TikTok’s all accumulated tens of thousands of likes and were viewed thousands more times. While it can seem insignificant, a large portion of both f and Warnock’s campaigns was about mobilizing voters, which these TikTok users were able to assist with. Users were spreading important information all over the TikTok platform, as well as on others including Facebook, Twitter, or Snapchat. Many feel as if this information and updates on this race were inescapable, which may have been the case, but nonetheless, it paid off for the two Democratic candidates. According to Ballotpedia, approximately 4.5 million voters participated in Georgia’s runoff, which was a mere 10% drop from the Presidential election held months before. Ballotpedia found that “Record-breaking spending and grassroots, Black-, Latino-, Native American- and Asian American-led efforts to mobilize voters meant that early voting alone exceeded total turnout for any previous runoff election... According to the Fox News Voter Analysis, Black Americans made up 32 percent of the runoff electorate, up from 29 percent in November. This corresponds with trends at the county level, which also show higher turnout in counties where a larger share of the population is Black.” Further proving the impact voter mobilization has on election outcomes, and how the
spread of resources via social media can have a significant impact on campaigns. In the end, both Ossoff and Warnock claimed victory in the Georgia Senate Runoff.

**What is the Algorithm and How Does it Work?**

The various algorithms social media platforms use are currently the most important aspect of social media presence and engagement. On nearly every platform, including Facebook, the algorithm tailors what posts an individual sees, based on what they’ve interacted with and their perceived interests. Therefore, in order to receive engagement from users or connect with unlikely [potential] voters, it is important to know your target audience and how to attract them to your profile. Clodagh O’Brien defines an algorithm as “a mathematical set of rules specifying how a group of data behaves”. O’Brien continues by saying “In social media, algorithms help maintain order and assist in ranking search results and advertisements...to sort content in a user’s feed...a way [for social networks] to prioritize content they think a user will like.” Algorithms are meant to find content that is deemed relevant to a specific user and filter out content it believes they will not enjoy or interact with. While it is, and will likely remain, impossible to know the exact ins and outs of every algorithm, the basics are still important. In the following section, the basic understandings of what an algorithm is and how it varies on different platforms, followed by what works best for politicians or candidates, finishing with the tools each platform offers, and how to best utilize them.

**Understanding Algorithms**
On Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and LinkedIn, it has been found that user interaction/duration, relevancy, content type and quality, and content consistency all contribute to boosting posts on these platforms (O’Brien, 2022). Facebook specifically focuses on the popularity of a page, as well as the content posted. Facebook prioritizes high-quality content, such as images or videos. Twitter, similarly, prioritizes the timing of a post, along with the type of media in a post (O’Brien, 2022). O’Brien recommends posting content relevant to your page, remaining consistent with posting, engaging with those who interact with your posts, and post on “optimum days and times”. Instagram, following a similar route as the other two most popular platforms, ensures users receive content that aligns with their personal interests by factoring in a pages’ [potential] relationship with a user, how long a user may interact with them or similar content, and the time in which the content was posted (O’Brien, 2022). However, it is noted that networks tend to promote their newer features for their own benefit, so using a platforms newest tool can heavily assist in growing one’s page. For example, Instagram carousels (posts containing multiple slides) and reels receive more of a boost from the platform (O’Brien, 2022). LinkedIn, primarily used as a networking site heavily prioritizes relevant content and finds that videos are typically more popular. However, on LinkedIn it was found that comments on a post boosted their algorithm more than the number of likes a post received, and how long a user spent “dwelling” on a post also had a significant effect (O’Brien, 2022). Lastly, TikTok, the most recent popular social media, has an algorithm that widely differs from the rest. While TikTok still focuses on user interaction to boost posts, their algorithm is tailored very specifically to each user. Luckily, for those with a smaller following, TikTok’s algorithm does not rely on popularity to show others content, meaning you could have 5
followers and still go viral on their platform (O’Brien, 2022). Captions and hashtags, as well as one’s device or account settings matter more to the algorithm than quality, consistency, or timing. It is extremely important to remember, these algorithms are always being adapted and constantly undergoing change, so in order to best understand them, it is crucial to understand the analytics each platform provides. While these are essentially straightforward and can typically be found on each side on both a user’s profile and within each post, these networks will gather the data for you. Under analytics you can see the gender, location, age range, and ways [of the] users who interact with posted content. These analytics can assist in telling you what content users find most engaging and if you are targeting the audience you sought. Now, while the basics of these crucial social media tools have been discussed, how can we apply this to politicians and campaigns?

Which Social Media Platforms Are Best for Politicians?

In the current age, most politicians are primarily active on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Other social media such as TikTok, LinkedIn, or Snapchat can prove useful, but if this is an individual’s first time utilizing social media, it is important to focus on which platforms will best serve their campaign. As noted early on, Obama and his team focused on their top 9 platforms to interact with voters. With social media continuing to rise, new social sites continue to emerge, and it is impossible to promote a campaign consistently and effectively on all of them. Instagram itself is not a platform meant for meaningful conversation, rather it enables individuals to reshare posts to their platforms. Instagram is best utilized when sharing
information about a campaign, topic, or voting itself. One of the best features to use on
Instagram is the ‘Share to Story’ tool. For smaller level elections, this tool can be vital, as not all
politicians will begin with a high-profile, gaining exposure can be a top priority. Utilizing
infographics on one’s page can allow any of their followers to simply reshare the post with their
own followers. While it is an easy tool that both Facebook and Twitter offer, this tool on
Instagram will bypass the algorithm and can instantly expose an Instagram page to hundreds or
thousands of other users. Instagram is best used as an informational sharing tool that can be
used to track rates of sharing, amount of exposure, and the current audience interacting with
the page.

Canvassing Public Opinion vs. Campaigning

Regarding the specific differences between Facebook and Twitter, the two most popular
social media sites for political figures, it has been found that the rates of audience engagement
on these websites vary by topic. Research showed that politicians at a national level preferred
Twitter, while local campaigns utilized Facebook more frequently (Steir et al, 2018: 55).
Facebook allows you to curate a specific audience, by gender, age, interests, and even location.
This tool to target promoted and paid for posts allows a page or individual to find a friendly
group of users who are more likely to interact with content. Politicians and candidates are more
likely to use Facebook to promote their campaigns and mobilize voters, as their audience
typically already agrees with the message they are sharing (Stier, et al, 2018: 55). On the other
hand, it was also found that Twitter is seen as more of the “index of public opinion”, where
targeted messages have a higher potential or tendency to find their way onto other media platforms and is more effectively used by higher-level campaigns. Furthermore, politicians use Twitter to discuss high-profile events, and to even comment in real-time on unfolding events (Stier et al, 2018: 55). Twitter is more often used by individuals to stay up to date on real time news, providing them a nearly unfiltered platform to discuss, share, and discover real-world events as they happen. For example, research found that during high-profile events, such as television debates, politicians were more active on Twitter than Facebook, and take up a higher portion of their tweets, and is also used “more extensively to discuss various policies” (Stier and et al, 2018: 55). The same research discovered that while Twitter holds the most space for live posts and a wider audience, campaigning topics were 42.3% on Facebook, and only 26.1% on Twitter, showing a disconnect between the audience and campaign on Facebook, as users mainly discussed topics outside of a campaign in the comments. Additionally, both platforms offer individuals the opportunity to directly comment on a politician's post and discuss their thoughts or opinions with other users on the site.

Overall, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram are the most beneficial to utilize throughout a campaign, as they provide the most exposure and engagement. However, it is important to curate content to attract specific audiences or spark particular discussions. While other sites can offer similar benefits as these three, it will depend on your specific audience and the information one seeks to share. An audience on TikTok will heavily rely on the algorithm to come across a page, meaning it will be harder to target a specific audience when sharing any information or content. Snapchat is seen as more of a purely social platform but can have additional benefits when it comes to users sharing information with each other. However,
Snapchat is a difficult platform to use when seeking exposure or a targeted audience. Lastly, LinkedIn is a solid platform for sharing important, professional information, but may be difficult to gain engagement on, as it is not a highly opinionated platform. Rather, LinkedIn is a professional medium, not just a social website. Above all, what matters the most at the end of the day is how a campaign can manipulate social media to work in their favor; whether it be in terms of finding a larger audience, mobilizing voters, or speaking out on high-profile topics. Social media is widely useful for elections on every level, and for politicians of any party.

**Summary and Conclusion**

To summarize the importance of social media for politicians, in 2020 53% of U.S. adults said they got their news from social media, “often” to “sometimes” (Walker, Matsa, 2021: 1). This is especially relevant when the importance of the youth vote is acknowledged, and understanding that as the younger generation turns 18, the use of social media for political and news information will continue to rise. Social media has been emerging over the last decade and led ‘little-known’ Senator Barack Obama to a huge victory in 2008 and continues to transform the election process to this day. To understand how social media works and know how to manipulate it to your advantage, is to have power. Social networks including Facebook, Twitter, and more have proved to not only benefit politicians and their messages alone, but [potential] voters as well. From the beginning of general elections, an extremely important aspect of a campaign is ensuring they get people to show up to vote. Notably, social media enables the process of the mobilization of voters. By using a social media account on nearly any platform, a politician or any public figure can directly interact with many users Candidates can
use their platform to release educational tools to inform voters of how and where to vote, as well as information on their candidacy or other important political news. Another key point, is that direct communication through social media allows a politician to have direct control over any narrative the media may be portraying. As seen with both Barack Obama and Donald Trump, social media creates a sense of transparency which in hand allows voters to feel authentically connected to a politician.

However, with all this emphasis on the importance and benefits of social media, it is necessary to acknowledge the harm that also comes with the use of social media. As previously stated, social media provides everyone with access to platforms, the ability to share information and their opinions, as well as direct access to politicians. While we’ve seen how beneficial these features can be, it also enables the spread of false information or harmful discourse. The extremely public and direct conversations social media allows, provides those who are uneducated the freedom and ability to share anything they want. Unfortunately, many social media platforms do not necessarily ‘fact check’ most of what users post, even politicians. This gives everyone the ability to post or share unconfirmed, biased, and unchecked information with the click of a button. Not everything that is shared online means that it is true. It is important to research the sources one is presented with, and ensure that one is receiving correct and educated information. With the spread of false information, misleading news, and propaganda, controlling the narrative and properly educating voters is especially important. As we have seen, it is crucial to take advantage of online networking, direct communication, and spreading correct and educational information, as it has become a necessary and crucial part of campaigning today.
In the end, social media has greatly impacted the way politicians run their campaigns, interact with the general public and with one another. Despite the majority of historical campaigns using broadcasting devices or various other news resources, with new technology came a new wave of communication. Social media has become one of the most prominent forms of news publishing and sharing. Additionally, as we have seen, it has given the public more direct access to facts and politicians’ opinions. By cutting out the middleman, or news outlets, many members of the public were able to feel more authentically connected to their representatives and elected leaders. The ability to connect with constituents and voters also changed the angle many ran their campaigns on. Instead of trying to paint themselves as the picture-perfect candidate, social media forced them to have a more personally curated authentic presence online, which many found incentivizing for political engagement. Political candidates are now able to control the narrative against allegations, scandals, any backlash, or potential campaign plans they may receive and have. This transparency between politicians and constituents allows voters to be informed on individual candidates, simultaneously allowing candidates to have direct control of their own messaging. Social media gives both voters and candidates direct access to each other, further allowing voters to have a better understanding of who their candidates at every level of government are and how they differ from one another. However, most importantly, social media has allowed politicians and their campaigns to have instant communication with their voters, aiding in the mobilization of voters and allowing voters to be directly involved with the campaign. As we have seen, getting voters to show up, volunteer, and spread election information has aided in several ‘underdog’ wins in various levels of government and is one of the most critical tools to be utilized in campaigns. No
number of retweets on Twitter, shares on Facebook, or likes on Instagram can guarantee the outcome of any election, but using social media as the tool it is can tremendously aid campaigning efforts and influence voters' opinions and perspectives. Overall, social media has completely transformed the political atmosphere, the way campaigns are run, and the ideas or characteristics the public expects from their elected leaders. It is important for those running campaigns to know how to utilize the various tools social media has to offer and use them to set candidates apart from others, as it can make or break a campaign.
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