Honors Theses   Lee Honors College

4-29-2022

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 -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

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 Trumps' 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 Trumps 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.

<u>The 2020 Georgia Senate Runoff</u>

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. '@BenRobiinson', 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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