



Who benefits from Twitter? Social media and political competition in the U.S. House of Representatives



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ABSTRACT

Many researchers have assumed that social media will reduce inequalities between elite politicians and those outside the political mainstream and that it will thus benefit democracy, as it circumvents the traditional media that focus too much on a few elite politicians. I test this assumption by investigating the association between U.S. Representatives using Twitter and their fundraising. Evidence suggests that (1) politicians' adoptions of social media have yielded increased donations from outside their constituencies but little from within their own constituencies; (2) politicians with extreme ideologies tend to benefit more from their social media adoptions; and (3) the political use of social media may yield a more unequal distribution of financial resources among candidates. Finally, I discuss the implications of these findings for political equality, polarization, and democracy.

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1. Introduction

1.1. The recent adoptions of social media in politics

The recent advent of new information technology, along with the resulting social media such as Facebook and Twitter, and its enthusiastic use in political competition have rekindled attention to the role of new information technology in politics. Currently, almost every major American politician has a Twitter¹ account, and many employ specific staff or even social media consulting firms to maintain such accounts. One example of a politician who has used social media is Barack Obama, who utilized Twitter to hold America's first virtual presidential town hall meeting in July 2011. During this event, he responded via his official Twitter account to questions posted online by users of social networking services, including the chair of the Republican National Committee, Reince Priebus. Many commentators described the event as a modern “Kennedy–Nixon TV debate moment” that would foreshadow the future use of media in politics. Weeks later, on July 29, the president used Twitter during the debt ceiling debate to mobilize his 9.4 million followers,

asking them to “Tweet at your Republican legislators and urge them to support a bipartisan compromise to the debt crisis” (BarackObama, 2011). The growing importance of Twitter in politics is also evidenced by the fact that in October 2010, then Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi made her initial announcement that she would run for House Minority Leader not on a major news network, but via Twitter.^{2,3}

Politicians' recent active adoption of the new information technology raises an important question: Are politicians deriving measurable benefits from their social media adoptions, and if so, to what extent? Presumably, politicians have embraced this new form of communication technology because they find it an effective tool for communicating with their supporters; therefore, it is reasonable to expect that significant benefits are associated with their use of social media. A few studies have attempted to report the potential effects of politicians' use of social media. For instance, a body of literature provides descriptive evidence that online attitudes, as measured through the sentiments of “tweets,” correlate well with public sentiment as measured through polls (Tumasjan, Sprenger, Sandner, & Welpe, 2011) and that the size of politicians' online networks (e.g., the “friend” count of politicians' Facebook accounts) is an acceptable predictor

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¹ Twitter is an online social networking and microblogging service that enables its users to send and read text-based posts of up to 140 characters, known as “tweets.” The service has rapidly gained worldwide popularity, with over 300 million users as of 2011 (Taylor, 2011), generating over 200 million tweets (Twitter, 2011).

² CongressDaily 11/5/2010, p. 1-1.

³ Twitter use has also spread globally to other democracies. The newly elected president of Chile, Sebastián Piñera, recently asked his cabinet members to start using the social networking tool. Other studies have reported that the number of Japanese politicians using Twitter grew from only three to 485 in less than a year and that 577 German politicians had opened Twitter accounts.

of public opinion (Wattal, Schuff, Mandviwalla, & Williams, 2010; Williams & Gulati, 2007).⁴

While previous studies have focused on social media use by politicians in general, no study, to the best of my knowledge, has empirically investigated this phenomenon in the context of election campaigns, even though elections are important political activities. Thus, the present research attempts to fill this gap in our understanding of the political use of the social media tool Twitter by presenting an empirical test of the association between the social media adoption of politicians and the success of their campaign financing activities, and how this association differs among politicians with different online network sizes (e.g., Twitter followers) and varying political ideologies.

1.2. Competing hypotheses: Minimal vs. strong effects

Since the advent of radio and television, researchers have hotly debated the effect of new technologies on election campaigns. One school of researchers (Klapper, 1960; Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960) followed the famous “minimal effects” thesis, which argued, among other things, that political campaigns mediated by information technology only marginally affect public opinion. Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) provided a theory supporting this finding—namely, the “two-step flow of communication”—positing that media messages are filtered by opinion leaders through social mediation processes. This theory was largely based on social conditions at that time (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008), which were characterized by (1) a pre-mass-communications media system and (2) a group-based society with social capital (Putnam, 2001). Opposing this theory, however, is another school of thought that has emerged since the 1980s, with such underlying social changes as individuals’ disconnection from a group-based civil society (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008) and better measurements of priming, framing, and agenda-setting. Numerous studies belonging to this school have suggested that television news could actually determine which issues the public considers important (Iyengar, Peters, & Kinder, 1982) and that public opinion toward policies could be significantly influenced by the content of news stories (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Gilliam & Iyengar, 2000; Baum, 2005; Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2006; Gerber, Karlan, & Bergan, 2009).⁵

However, the emergence of new media, such as cable television and the internet, has led to a new era in which media may play a different role in political campaigns (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008). The emergence of new media has created a much wider range of media choices; therefore, politicians are no longer able to reach vast audiences via a limited number of channels. Supporting this statement, Jenkins (2006) has shown that unlike advertisers in the 1960s, who could reach 80% of U.S. women with a prime-time spot on ABC, CBS, and NBC, modern advertisers have to run the same spot on 100 TV channels to reach the same number of viewers. Based on this observation, some scholars argue that we may return to a time of minimal effects (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008).

⁴ Another body of work reports some evidence of the impact of the internet or new media in general, rather than focusing on the impact only of social media. Some studies have found that the dominance normally enjoyed by political elites is reproduced or even magnified on the internet (Hindman, 2009; Schlozman et al., 2010), which challenges the optimistic view that the internet will promote a democratic public sphere that reduces inequalities of attention between elites and those outside the political mainstream (Agre, 2002; Benkler, 2006; Bennett & Entman, 2001; Jenkins, 2006). Others report that new media may polarize public opinion (Hong, 2012; Prior, 2007; Sunstein, 2009; Baum & Groeling, 2008). There is also a different body of work that examines the role of new information technologies such as social media in promoting communications between government agencies (Chun & Warner, 2010; Chun, Shulman, Sandoval, & Hovy, 2010; Jaeger & Bertot, 2010), in creating a culture of openness and transparency in government organizations (Bertot, Jaeger, & Grimes, 2010; Bertot, Jaeger, Munson, & Glaisyer, 2010), and in improving managerial effectiveness (Gil-García & Pardo, 2005; Gil-García, Chun, & Janssen, 2009; Gil-García, Pardo, & Burke, 2010; Luna-Reyes, Gil-García, & Cruz, 2007).

⁵ Also, see Strömberg (2004), Gentzkow and Shapiro (2004), and DellaVigna and Kaplan (2007).

In this study, I argue that new media, such as the internet, will still have a significant impact with the rise of a “self-selected” audience as opposed to a more “inadvertent” audience during the heyday of network news. Although political information in a prime-time spot on three networks would have reached a greater audience before, most members of that audience were inadvertent and less likely to change their positions in response to the information provided (Negroponte, 1995; Sunstein, 2009; Prior, 2007; Bennett & Iyengar, 2008). With a large number of media outlets, however, people can now self-select the political information that matches and reinforces their ideological positions. This fragmented audience structure allows political elites to influence public opinion through the targeted use of new information technologies, even though the size of their audience may be smaller.

In order to test these competing hypotheses, the first consideration should be the possible effect of “self-selective” technology. Previous evidence (Hong, 2012) suggests that online technology such as social media may *concentrate* and *polarize* information consumption patterns through a cascade mechanism. Previously, without online technology, people had limited chances to *interact* or *network* with nonlocal politicians, while now they can have a personal conversation with nonlocal candidates by “following” or “friending” them. Out of the large number of nonlocal politicians, people are more likely to “follow” or “friend” the ones they perceive as more *salient* (Hong, 2012; Farrell & Drezner, 2008); that is, either *nationally recognized* or *ideologically distinctive*. Hence, the preferences revealed by people’s “self-selection” with these technologies might be more concentrated and polarized than what is observable without these technologies. If this online information consumption pattern affects political behaviors, such as people’s willingness to contribute to a political candidate, we should expect increasing *concentration* and *polarization*, not only in online information consumption patterns but also in important political outcomes such as campaign finance.

1.3. Social media & political finance

In examining the effects of new information technology on political outcomes, I investigate the political use of *social media* and its effect on *political finance*. The political effects of such social media technology as Twitter deserve special attention, not only because most politicians are using it but also because one of the key features of this new technology is to maximize “self-selection,” which is the component that leads us to the two different hypotheses of minimal and strong effects.⁶ Here, I look particularly at Twitter among the many existing forms of social media, because its “asymmetric” form of network makes it potentially more conducive to political interaction (Porter, 2009; Hong & Nadler, 2012),⁷ which is defined as the mutual flow of feedback between political actors and citizens (Stromer-Galley, 2000).

Political finance, among the many possible political variables, is important for the following reasons. First, recent empirical evidence has increasingly indicated that political finance has a significant and positive impact on candidate electoral success in a number of countries with national, local, and multiparty elections (Benoit & Marsh, 2008), regardless of whether the candidates are challengers or incumbents.⁸

⁶ Further, previous evidence (Hong, 2012) implies that social media technology is an ideal platform for political campaigning, as it provides a greater potential for politicians to reach out to their targeted audiences rather than just waiting for search engines to direct traffic to them.

⁷ Twitter differs from many other alternative social media such as Facebook, in the sense that it enables asymmetric networks. For example, Twitter users (say, politicians) can find themselves in the “asymmetric” position of following the tweets of a small number of users, while their own tweets are followed by millions of users (Porter, 2009). Twitter can thus function as a form of social media that is potentially more conducive to political interaction (Porter, 2009).

⁸ There is an ongoing debate over whether the impact of campaign spending is more significant for challengers than for incumbents. The former view is supported by Abramowitz (1988, 1991), Ansolabehere and Gerber (1994), Green and Krasno (1988), and Jacobson (1978, 1990); the latter view is supported by Gerber (1998) and Moon (2006).

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