



Online political public relations and trust: Source and interactivity effects in the 2012 U.S. presidential campaign



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ABSTRACT

This experimental investigation ($N=476$) parses the influence of information source and interactivity on the effects of the 2012 United States presidential candidates' online campaign communications on citizen-campaign political organization-public relations and political trust. The results indicate Facebook is differentially more effective than campaign websites at building both citizens' relationships with the campaigns and trust in government, especially among users who engage in expressive behaviors triggering higher levels of elaboration and self-awareness. These findings support the direction of the exposure effects in the political organization-public relations model and extend two-way communication models by testing the influence of interactivity and specifying the online platform on which political expression exerts the greatest effects on relational outcomes and political trust.

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1. Introduction

Similar to most businesses in the United States, contemporary U.S. presidential campaigns execute a variety of online relationship-building strategies to achieve organizational goals (Kelleher, 2009; Sweetser, 2011). In addition to raising brand awareness and differentiating the organization/campaign from its competitors, these online communications are also designed to promote socially responsible behaviors and engage strategic publics (Levenshus, 2010). Grounded in the organization-public relations (OPR) literature, scholars have developed a political organization-public relations (POPR) framework for analyses of political communications and campaign effects on citizen-political party relationships and outcomes (Ledingham, 2011; Zhang & Seltzer, 2010). This line of research suggests strategic campaign communications significantly influence POPR with the political parties, which is related to individual levels of social capital, confidence in government and attitudes toward political parties' issue positions (Seltzer & Zhang, 2011a, 2011b; Zhang & Seltzer, 2010). Additionally, the degree of interactivity and the extent to which both the organization and its publics engage in conscious and dialogic communications may influence POPR states and other relevant outcomes (Karlsson, Clerwall, & Buskqvist, 2013; Kim, Painter, & Miles, 2013; Lee & Park, 2013). Based on survey research indicating strategic campaign communications affect on voters' POPR with the *political parties* (Seltzer & Zhang, 2011a, 2011b), this experimental investigation tests for the main effects of online information source on voters' POPR with the presidential campaigns and individual levels of political trust.

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Compared to traditional media, internet platforms allow for more interactive and two-way communication, and research indicates higher levels of interactivity may influence the effects of exposure to online political information (Pingree, 2007; Shah, Cho, Eveland, & Kwak, 2005; Shah et al., 2007; Tedesco, 2007). Moreover, research on the indirect effects of political communications suggest users who express themselves during interactions with political information experience higher levels of self-consciousness, awareness and ego-involvement, which influence their perceptions, attitudes and resulting behaviors (Cho et al., 2009; Kim et al., 2013; Kim, 2006; Pingree, 2007). Although much experimental public relations research focuses on the effects of message sources and/or contents, this study focuses on the influence of sending and receiving messages, or dialog, by manipulating users' online behaviors to test for the influence of interactivity. Specifically, this investigation tests for the main effects of interactivity by comparing the differential effects of surveillance and expressive behaviors on gains in voter-campaign POPR and political trust. Finally, this investigation finds its place in the literature by testing for differential effects and interactions to specify the online information source (Facebook versus campaign website) and interactivity level (surveillance versus expression) exerting the greatest influence on voter-campaign POPR and political trust.

2. The relational perspective, political trust and online information

Organization–public relations (OPR) is “the state which exists between an organization and its key publics, in which the actions of either can impact the economic, social, cultural or political well being of the other” (Ledingham & Bruning, 1998, p. 62). To measure perceptions of relationship quality and the effects of strategic communications, Hon and Grunig (1999) developed four dimensions of organization–public relations: trust, satisfaction, commitment and control mutuality. This relational perspective is appropriately applied to political public relations because “organizations and their strategic publics are interdependent, and this interdependence results in consequences to each other that organizations need to manage constantly” (Hung, 2005, p. 396). Thus, it may also be argued that the relational perspective uses these four indices to measure the extent to which the public trusts the organization to behave responsibly (Grunig & Huang, 2000; Huang, 2001).

2.1. Political organization–public relations (POPR)

Seltzer and Zhang (2011a, 2011b) developed a line of research on political organization–public relations between U.S. citizens and the two major political parties, Democrat and Republican. These researchers analyzed survey data that included measures of antecedent variables and self-reports of exposure to strategic partisan communications to measure their association with citizens' POPRs with the political parties, political participation, confidence in government and other outcomes (Seltzer & Zhang, 2011a, 2011b; Seltzer, Zhang, Gearhart, & Conduff, 2013; Zhang & Seltzer, 2010). Their analyses indicate strategic partisan communications, especially those using two-way or dialogic tactics, are positively associated with citizen–political party POPR states, attitudes, and supportive behaviors.

Although the two major parties hold conventions to officially nominate candidates for the U.S. presidential elections, presidential campaigns are independent organizations focused on marketing a single candidate who may face intra-party competition in primary contests determined by voters, not political party operatives (Parker, 2012). Indeed, contemporary presidential candidates may be conceptualized as individual brands supported by campaign organizations with specific sets of stakeholders and publics (Hoegg & Lewis, 2011; Needham, 2005; Zavattaro, 2010). While the individual campaigns may end on Election Day, the candidates vie for a position in an enduring institution through election to a government position. Indeed, presidential elections are the most salient events connecting U.S. voters with opportunities to influence their government and “also serve as a means by which parties and candidates can mobilize support for democratic processes” (Banducci & Karp, 2003, p. 443).

2.2. Political trust

The construct of political trust is conceptualized as an affective orientation toward the government based on an evaluation of its behaviors according to normative expectations (Miller, 1974; Stokes, 1962). Similar to the trust construct used in OPR research, political trust is based on evaluations of the government's integrity, fairness, dependability and competence, but includes individual orientations toward both government institutions and political actors. Scholars' concerns about Americans' steep decline in political trust and its persistence near the 50% mark over the past 40 years are based on the necessity of trust not only in citizen–government relationships, but also for the proper functioning of democracy (Banducci & Karp, 2003; Gallup, 2014; Hetherington, 1998). Indeed, the insidious nature of political distrust is evidenced in the modern spiral of widespread political distrust breeding disapproval, which constricts leaders' abilities to marshal resources and solve problems, thereby solving fewer problems and leading citizens to question both their relationships with the government and its legitimacy (Bowler & Karp, 2004; Neustadt, 1990; Rivers & Rose, 1985).

2.3. Online information sources

During the 2012 U.S. presidential elections, 47% of U.S. citizens cited the Internet as their main source of political information and 69% identified as social media users (Pew, 2013; Pew, 2012a). Moreover, 66% of social media users engaged in

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