



To tweet or not to tweet: Exploring the determinants of early adoption of Twitter by House members in the 111th Congress[☆]

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ABSTRACT

The adoption of communication forms like Twitter presents students of congressional behavior an interesting case to examine the intersection of technology and politics. Twitter represents a social media venue that provides an immediate and direct link between the Member of Congress (MC) and constituents, which entails a benefit and a potential risk. In this paper, I examine Twitter use in the 111th Congress in order to better understand congressional early adoption of new technology. The primary question addressed is what systematic determinants shape the decision to adopt Twitter as a component of an MC's media strategy. Using data collected from MC Twitter accounts and the 2008 congressional election, I find partisan, cohort, and ideological determinants on early Twitter adoption. Republicans are more likely to use Twitter even in multivariate analysis; ideological extremism influences the use of Twitter. In contrast to past technologies, district demographics have no systematic effect on the early adoption of Twitter.

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1. Introduction

"This technology puts We the People in every room in Washington."

"Our Founders' generation used paper Petitions for Redress to demand and get Congressional action under First Amend: we can use social media!"

"Twitter is addictive!! Is there a term for not being able to walk away from Twitter? I need to sleep - see you all tomorrow."

—Rep. John Culberson (TX-07) posted from his Twitter account (www.twitter.com/johnculberson)

Technology and changing media have always shaped the workings of American democracy and its prominent institutions from the partisan press and the early mail service to C-SPAN and the Internet (Starr, 2004). Shogan (2010) recently notes that social media represents the latest stage in the evolution of media and congressional communication with constituents. From personal websites and email campaigns to the social media of Facebook and Twitter, Members of Congress (MCs) have harnessed the power of the Internet and adopted new approaches to carry out familiar goals of constituent contact, publicity seeking, and campaigning for office (Adler, Gent, & Overmeyer, 1998; Druckman, Kifer, & Parkin, 2007, 2010; Foot & Schneider, 2006; Gulati & Williams, 2007, 2010; Klotz, 2004; Lipinski & Neddenriep, 2004).

In a broader sense, Popkin argues that "Politicians are crowd-seekers who naturally seek alliances with crowd makers. Every time new channels or modes of

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communication create new audiences, politicians try to develop new alliances" (2006, p. 336). This raises the question of which politicians will move first to adapt to forms of communication in as new technologies develop. New forms of media like Twitter, a social-networking website, provide a good case to study the determinants of congressional adoption of new technology. How does this new technology diffuse through our national representative bodies? In essence, the question for MCs is to tweet or not to tweet?

The goal of this paper is to contribute to our understanding of congressional early adoption of Twitter and the intersection of politics and technology on four fronts. First, I attempt to define the contours of the congressional adoption of Twitter using theoretical perspectives on social media. Who uses Twitter and why do some MCs utilize Twitter while others do not? Are there partisan differences in the adoption of Twitter? Research shows quite clearly that Republicans dominate Twitter usage in Congress (Shogan, 2010; Tweney, 2011), but does the Republican effect hold even during multivariate analysis when controlling for alternative explanations?

A second emphasis is to explore the electoral motivations of adoption and use of Twitter. Electioneering and the Internet is also not a new idea as many high profile campaigns have used email, Facebook, YouTube, viral videos, and personal websites to generate political donations, spur participation, and advertise politically¹ (Carpenter, 2010; Druckman et al., 2007; Gulati & Williams, 2007, 2010; Kerbel, 2009; Klotz, 2004, 2010; Robertson, Vatrappu, & Median, 2010; Wagner & Gainous, 2009; Wallsten, 2010). A secondary question is whether there are electoral determinants of the use of Twitter. Specifically, are MCs who are challenged at the ballot box more likely to utilize Twitter?

A third contribution is to test whether there might be ideological influences on the adoption of Twitter. Previous studies have not fully examined the ideological underpinnings, and I argue that there are good reasons to expect ideological determinants of Twitter adoption. Specifically, are ideological extreme MCs more likely to use Twitter? My argument is that more ideologically extreme the MC, the more likely they may be to seek extra-party means to define themselves from the party caucus and to appeal to an ideological constituency. And finally, past studies demonstrate that congressional district demographics often shape the decision of the MC to use Internet technology. Is Twitter adoption similarly shaped by the characteristics of an MC's district? Using data from the 111th Congress and theoretical perspectives on diffusion of innovations, I explore the early adoption of Twitter to better understand the determinants of technological adoption in the U.S. House of Representatives. I find partisan, cohort, and ideological determinants of Twitter adoption. In contrast to previous research on Internet technology adoption, constituency effects have little to no influence on the decision to adopt Twitter.

2. Internet technology and Twitter adoption

For MCs, the Internet provides a powerful new technology to further goals of representation and electioneering. Initially, the primary routes of contact are often one-sided, and relatively impersonal, correspondence through websites and staff monitored email. As Internet technology evolves and is adopted, there is a strong thrust in the literature that gains in technology essentially allow politicians to engage in the same tried and true behaviors via new channels (Adler et al., 1998; Druckman et al., 2010; Lipinski & Neddenriep, 2004). Examining the use of congressional home pages, Adler et al. (1998, p. 592) find that MC "use this new form of political communication much as they do other means of constituent contact — to express their political home style." That is to say, the Internet represents the latest permutation in technological gains that allow MCs to engage in classic congressional behaviors.

Today, social media offers new opportunities to link directly to voters, whether emphasizing social networks on Facebook or immediate information via Twitter. Out of these new forms of Internet media, Twitter has carved out a separate niche in the cultural zeitgeist; Twitter is oft-referenced in the traditional media sources and national newscasts and, in contrast to most forms of new media, seems to be adopted by older Americans (adults) at a higher rate than among the young people (Miller, 2009). Twitter creates a new avenue for MCs looking to contact constituents, shape policy debates, and raise their media profile.²

Twitter is "a real-time information network powered by people all around the world. . . Twitter asks 'what's happening' and makes the answer spread across the globe to millions, immediately" (www.twitter.com/about). Essentially, Twitter users post brief text messages, called tweets, to their Twitter page, and it is instantly sent to a network of followers, other site members signed up to follow the tweets. The messages are constrained by a 140-character length, which sets it apart from other sites that host blogs or political communications.³

What makes Twitter different from previous advancements in political communication and an attractive addition to an MC's media strategy? In their analysis of YouTube use in the 2008 campaign, Gulati and Williams (2010) list four advantages that social media has over traditional media. Compared to past forms of media, social media are timely, easy to use, cost effective, and have the ability to reach a growing audience (Gulati & Williams, 2010, p. 95). These advantages clearly apply to Twitter. First, the immediacy, cost-effectiveness, and ease of use are crucial; MCs can post a sentence and connect with thousands of constituents, or they can respond to constituent questions and concerns on the fly. For example, Congressman George Miller (CA-07) designates his Twitter

¹ See the *Journal of Information Technology and Politics* special issue (Summer, 2010) on the 2008 presidential election for a collection of articles on new media and campaigning.

² The use of Twitter by politicians and candidates certainly extends beyond Congress. On July 6th, 2011, President Obama held a Twitter town-hall to answer questions posed to the President. Over 2.3 million people follow the White House Twitter feed (twitter.com/whitehouse).

³ See www.tweetcongress.org for great resource that tracks the patterns of Twitter use by Members of Congress.

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