



How political candidates use Twitter and the impact on votes



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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the content characteristics of Twitter during an election campaign, and the relationship between candidates' style of online campaigning (i.e., politically personalized and interactive communication) and electoral support for those candidates. Thereby, it provides a better understanding of the linkage between the use of Twitter by candidates and effects on preferential votes. Two data sources are used to examine this relationship: first, a quantitative computer-assisted as well as a manual content analysis of tweets posted by political candidates during the Dutch national elections of 2010 ($N = 40,957$) and second, a dataset containing the number of votes for electable political candidates during that period. The findings show that using Twitter has positive consequences for political candidates. Candidates who used Twitter during the course of the campaign received more votes than those who did not, and using Twitter in an interactive way had a positive impact as well.

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1. How political candidates use Twitter and the impact on votes

New media have become increasingly important during election campaigns. The potential of Internet to connect with and mobilize voters, gives politicians the opportunity to promote themselves and to communicate interactively with the electorate, without the interference of journalists (Blumler & Gurevitch, 2001; Golbeck, Grimes, & Rogers, 2010; Parmelee & Bichard, 2011). It is not surprising that political organizations have embraced the Internet. Political candidates are increasingly using new media, such as Twitter, Facebook and other online platforms.

The rise of web campaigning has also been subject to a growing amount of scholarly inquiry (e.g., Gibson & McAllister, 2006; Wagner & Gainous, 2009). Although these important studies give valuable insights into both the content of online political communication (see e.g., Foot & Schneider, 2006; Lilleker et al., 2011) and the potential effects on citizens (see e.g., Boulianne, 2009; Kenski & Stroud, 2006; Shah, Cho, Eveland, & Kwak, 2005), studies that provide a link between the two arenas are relatively scarce (Gibson & McAllister, 2006). Particular studies that examine the persuasive effects of *different styles* of online political communication have been limited. Prior work within this field has frequently pointed out that new media brings new opportunities for politicians (Kruijkemeier, Van Noort, Vliegthart, & De Vreese, 2013; Trammell, Williams, Postelnicu, & Landreville, 2006): Candidates increasingly use interactive communication styles (e.g., reacting on comments

and posting tweets) and personalized communication styles (e.g., exchange information about their private lives and personal emotions) when communicating online. However, to what extent these communication styles (i.e., politically personalized and interactive campaigning) influence the electorate (e.g., the amount of votes a candidates will receive because of the usage of new media) remains unknown.

The current study tries to fill this gap by investigating (a) the content characteristics of political campaigning on Twitter, (b) the effects of candidates' use of online campaigning (versus no use) on electoral support, and (c) the relationship between candidates' style of online campaigning and electoral support. This study focuses on the micro-blogging platform Twitter, because Twitter has become an essential and frequently used medium during election campaigns – besides party and candidate websites and Facebook (Parmelee & Bichard, 2011; Tumasjan, Sprenger, Sandner, & Welpe, 2010). However, little is known about the content characteristics of political tweets and even less is known about the impact Twitter has on voting. So, by focusing on candidates' Twitter use, this study sheds new light on the linkage between the uses and effects of new media. Hence, the aim of the present study is to understand the relationship between the (style of) usage of Twitter by political candidates, and electoral support for these specific candidates (i.e., the amount of votes a candidate receives).

Two data sources are used to investigate the relationship: (1) a quantitative computer-assisted as well as a manual content analysis of tweets posted by political candidates during the Dutch national elections of 2010 and (2) an aggregated dataset containing

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candidates' electoral support (i.e., amount of preferential votes¹). In the next section, the central characteristics or style elements used in web campaigning will be described. Subsequently, the potential effects of web campaigning on electoral support are discussed. Afterwards, two hypotheses and one research question will be proposed.

1.1. Communication styles on Twitter: Interactive and political personalized communication

The literature that studies the content of web campaigning has been focusing on different styles and characteristics (Gibson & McAllister, 2006). Two characteristics are repeatedly claimed as most important: interactivity and, to a lesser extent, political personalization.

Sundar, Kalyanaraman, and Brown (2003) point out that “several researches have claimed that interactivity is a key variable for studying the uses and effects of new media technologies” (p. 32). Interactivity can be operationalized in many different ways (see e.g., Lee & Shin, 2012; Liu & Shrum, 2002; Sundar et al., 2003; Warnick, Xenos, Endres, & Gastil, 2005), but two-way communication (the opportunity for reciprocal communication) is a central concept in many definitions. Two-way communication can be defined as follows: one communicator can communicate directly to another one and vice versa (Tedesco, 2007). This characteristic makes new media different and unique from offline media, as offline media principally offers information without receiving information back. In the political context, interactivity is mainly examined on party and candidates' websites (Sundar et al., 2003; Warnick et al., 2005) and, to a lesser degree, on Twitter (Lee & Shin, 2012; Parmelee & Bichard, 2011). Both areas of research have shown that interactivity is increasingly used during campaigns (Stromer-Galley & Foot, 2002), especially because it offers opportunities for direct communication, which is particularly true for Twitter (Parmelee & Bichard, 2011). One of Twitter's main functions is to facilitate direct communication between users, as users can comment on each other's posts. Studying the uses and effects of interactivity in the context of Twitter is, therefore, very relevant.

Another important characteristic of online communication is political personalization. Political personalization is conceptualized as a shift of focus from political parties and institutions, to individual candidates and politicians (Adam & Maier, 2010; Rahat & Sheaffer, 2007). It seems that this shift of focus is present in new media, as individual candidates and politicians are increasingly using new media to communicate with their electorate (Van Santen & Van Zoonen, 2010). However, it could be argued that a focus on politicians, instead of parties, is different from the personalization that is present on Twitter. Twitter is personalized per definition, as the candidate is usually the holder of the Twitter account. Communication on Twitter therefore conceptualized as a focus on candidates' private life (privatization), on candidate's emotions and feelings (emotionalization) and candidates' competencies and professional activities (individualization; Van Santen & Van Zoonen, 2010). Recent work that investigated personalization in new media supports this argumentation line. Golbeck et al. (2010) found that politicians “are primarily using Twitter to disperse information, particularly links to news articles about themselves (...) and to report about their daily activities (...). [Twitter] is [used as] a vehicle for self-promotion” (p. 1612). In

other words, it seems that the communication on Twitter is often about candidates' private persona and less about political issues.

Despite the evidence that politicians are adopting interactive and personalized communication styles on Twitter, there is little evidence that shows that these forms of campaigning actually have an effect. This study is going to investigate whether there is a link between style of campaigning and electoral support (i.e., the amount of votes candidates receive).

1.2. Persuasive effects of campaigning on Twitter

In general, research that examines the effects of Internet use on voters demonstrates that the effects of new media are often positive (for an overview, see Boulianne, 2009). Different scholars support the notion that Internet use has a mobilizing effect on citizens' political engagement (e.g., Kenski & Stroud, 2006). They argue that, in contrast to traditional media, the (political) information online is flexible and the cost of participation is low. This encourages citizens to learn more about politics. As a result, those citizens become more politically involved (Shah et al., 2005; Wang, 2007).

The literature that studies the effects of web campaigning on voters, points to equal findings (Rackaway, 2007). Already in 1997, D'Alessio found a link between web campaigning and voting. He found that having a website resulted in more votes, so that candidates who did not have a website received significantly less votes than candidates who did (D'Alessio, 1997). Later studies confirmed those findings. For example, Gibson and McAllister (2006) found that web campaigning exerts a positive impact on the level of support a candidate receives. This study was conducted during the Australian election of 2004.

There are, however, scholars that are more skeptical. Park and Perry (2008) point out that although campaign websites have a direct effect on political engagement, websites tend to focus more on getting supporters involved who are already engaged. They found that the use of campaign websites influences different forms of political participation (i.e., donating money, sending political e-mails and persuading others to vote), but not voting. In other words, web campaigning might not influence voting, in contrast to other forms of political participation. However, later work conducted by Wagner and Gainous (2009) found that web presence was a significant predictor of total votes for specific candidates. Similarly, Gibson and McAllister (2011) demonstrate that use of online electoral sources and particularly campaign websites had a positive influence on vote choice. So overall, it seems that there is a substantial amount of evidence supporting the more positive view.

While previous studies focused on political websites, this study focuses on the effects of Twitter use on electoral support. Twitter is a different platform than websites, as Twitter is a social networking site and a (micro) blog platform that is mainly used to directly send and read messages. Websites have a more diverse content, such as news items, pictures or forums. Besides, websites are not primarily used for social interaction. Thus, it can be questioned whether the effects of Twitter use are similar. Recent work that studied the effects of Twitter, however, points to similar effects: candidates' Twitter use seems to have a positive effect on electoral support (Lee & Shin, 2012; Parmelee & Bichard, 2011). Therefore, it is expected that Twitter use (compared to no use) positively affect the amount of preferential votes a candidate receives. Hence, the following hypothesis is formulated:

Hypothesis 1. Political candidates that use Twitter to communicate with their electorate will receive more preferential votes than political candidates that do not use Twitter to communicate with their electorate.

¹ In the Netherlands voters can vote for individual candidates. Candidates who receive more votes than the electoral threshold will be elected into the Parliament. However, the total amount of votes for a party determines the total number of seats the party will obtain in the Parliament (Van Holsteyn & Andeweg, 2010).

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