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How to Win an Election: An Analysis of the Power of Social Media in Politics

Kevin Anderson

As a voter, what do you see during election seasons? Did you notice any newspaper ads, front lawn posters, or even some bumper stickers for candidates? Maybe you did, maybe you didn't but what you did probably notice are articles, ads, emails, postings, tweets, and pictures on social media made by candidates in the upcoming elections. This article dives into the frenzy that is social media by specifically focusing in on the power social media has in politics. This article compares a few different presidential candidates, as examples, that have used social media to enhance their campaigns and influence voters like you and me.

Taking a step back in time, consider the effect television had and continues to have on political campaigns. With the historical televised first presidential debates of John F. Kennedy and Richard M. Nixon television, made its national debut as a political influence.¹ Television became a third player in the debates in the way it filmed the candidates.² Due to television and its growing popularity, "image" emerged as part of the sensibility for any public figure as well as an intrinsic part of the political lexicon.³ Kennedy developed a model of his frequent usage of television as an outreach connection to the public, continuously displaying his image.⁴ With television, Kennedy was able to reach more constituents than Nixon and present his image as a politician.⁵ As a result, Kennedy won the presidential Election with 49.72% of the popular vote and over 50% of the electoral vote over Nixon.⁶

Fifty-five years after Kennedy and Nixon's first televised debate, Donald Trump used television like Kennedy, as a public outreach tool, and became an unusual candidate for the presidency in 2016 with his far-right views about public tolerance and acceptance.⁷ Trump's viewpoints reached a large number

¹ Vito N. Silvestri, *Television's Interface With Kennedy, Nixon, and Trump: Two Politicians and One TV Celebrity*, American Behavioral Scientist (2018).

² *Id.*

³ *Id.*

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ David Leip, 1960 Presidential General Election Results, <https://uselectionatlas.org/RESULTS/national.php?year=1960>.

⁷ *Id.*

of the public largely influenced by cable television and its effect after fifty-five years of viewers and the additional factor of hundreds of cable channels.⁸ Kennedy, Nixon and Trump serve as bookends for television's prominent and definitely mediated influence on American history and its power on elections.⁹ So, television is an important part of political campaigns since the Kennedy election, but what about other social media outlets?

A prominent example of a president that changed how social media influences American Voting and elections is Barack Obama.¹⁰ During Obama's 2008 campaign, television was prominent still, and 10% of the United States population had a social media profile.¹¹ In a 2011 article, Qualitative data were collected by Cogburn and Vasquez from social media tools used by the Obama 2008 campaign (e.g., Obama '08 Web site, Twitter, Facebook, Myspace, e-mails, iPhone application, and the Change.gov site created by the Obama-Biden Transition Team) and public information.¹² The qualitative data found that the Obama 2008 campaign created a nationwide virtual organization that motivated roughly three million individual contributors and mobilized a grassroots movement of more than five million volunteers.¹³ Clearly, the Obama campaign utilized these tools to go beyond educating the public and raising money, to mobilizing the ground game, enhancing political participation, and getting people out to vote.¹⁴

In 2018, 77% of the U.S population has a social media profile.¹⁵ That is a 67 % jump in just a decade.¹⁶ Recent research demonstrates that social networking sites such as Facebook or Twitter can facilitate settings in which an individual's own political beliefs are repeated and amplified and dissenting opinions are screened out into homogenous networks.¹⁷ Basically social media sites alter the flow of information to amplify the political viewpoints of their

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ Derrick L. Cogburn & Fatima K. Espinoza-Vasquez, From Networked Nominee to Networked Nation: Examining the Impact of Web 2.0 and Social Media on Political Participation and Civic Engagement in the 2008 Obama Campaign, 10 *Journal of Political Marketing* 189–213 (2011).

¹¹ *The Infinite Dial 2018.*, EDISON RESEARCH 16, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/273476/percentage-of-us-population-with-a-social-network-profile/>.

¹² Cogburn and Espinoza-Vasquez, *supra* note 10.

¹³ *Id.*

¹⁴ *Id.*

¹⁵ *The Infinite Dial, 2018, supra* note 11.

¹⁶ *Id.*

¹⁷ Bert Baumgaertner et al., *Social media echo chambers and satisfaction with democracy among Democrats and Republicans in the aftermath of the 2016 US elections*, 28 *JOURNAL OF ELECTIONS*,

followers.¹⁸ Taking a look back to 2016, it is not much different than today, again 77% of the United States population was using social media.¹⁹ In 2016, 61.4 percent of the citizen voting-age population reported voting in the presidential election.²⁰ With Hilary Clinton winning the popular vote and Donald Trump winning the electoral vote, Trump is the fifth person in U.S. history to become president despite losing the nationwide and is the first president without any prior experience in public service.²¹ Just how exactly did Donald trump get the jump on Hilary in the 2016 election?

In November 2015, Clinton had 1.7 million followers on Facebook.²² By Election Day 2016 that had grown to 8.4 million, a 394 percent increase.²³ Trump had 4.2 million Followers on Facebook in November 2015.²⁴ By Election Day, that number jumped to 12.35 million, a 194 percent increase.²⁵ So, while Clinton saw a greater increase, Trump still had nearly 4 million more followers.²⁶ While statistics show that Clinton's campaign was overall more active on its social media accounts, it did not receive the same amount of attention and support on social media as compared with Donald Trump.²⁷ So, in short, Trump had a greater following and attention rating than his opposing candidates on social media, and with all those followers her was able to promote his image and eventually win the election.²⁸

So, what now? How do we go about the handling the power social media has on elections? In an interview with Illinois State Representative Kelly Burke,

PUBLIC OPINION AND PARTIES 424–442 (2018), <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/17457289.2018.1434784>.

¹⁸ *Id.*

¹⁹ *The Infinite Dial*, 2018, *supra* note 11.

²⁰ *Voting in America: A Look at the 2016 Presidential Election* The United States Census Bureau (2017), US Census Bureau (2017), https://www.census.gov/newsroom/blogs/random-samplings/2017/05/voting_in_america.html.

²¹ *2016 Presidential Election*, 270 TO WIN, https://www.270towin.com/2016_Election.

²² *Tow Center, A final, data-driven look at Trump v. Clinton on social media* Medium (2017), <https://medium.com/tow-center/a-final-data-driven-look-at-trump-v-clinton-on-social-media-7ea9bb747982>.

²³ *Id.*

²⁴ *Tow Center, A final, data-driven look at Trump v. Clinton on social media* Medium (2017), <https://medium.com/tow-center/a-final-data-driven-look-at-trump-v-clinton-on-social-media-7ea9bb747982>.

²⁵ *Id.*

²⁶ *Id.*

²⁷ *Id.*

²⁸ *Id.*

she answered a few questions that may shed some insight on the future of politics and social media:

Q: Do you use social media? Why or why not?

A: I use FB for my legislative role. I use Instagram as a combo legislative/personal account. It is a great way to share information and keep in contact with constituents. It is less expensive than Constant Contact. It is a better way to stay in touch with younger residents, who tend not to read the email newsletters/announcements I send.²⁹

Q: In general, do you think that social media enhances a campaigns chance of winning an election? Why or why not?

A: It is an essential communication tool today, especially if one candidate is using social media and another is not. In a local race (mayor, trustee, state rep, county commissioner) many of the people seeing the communication are not residents or not registered to vote.³⁰

Q: In your personal experience, or if you have seen this, what are the benefits or detriments of having a social media presence in a political setting?

A: The benefit is that the candidate can shape his or her own narrative about his or her background, accomplishments, positions, etc. The ease with which this info can be shared, boosted, etc. and the relatively low cost of using and advertising on social media are also beneficial. The converse, of course, is true as well. False information can be spread by a candidate's opponent just as easily. In addition, the ability of viewers to comment on or become part of the narrative has more negative impacts than positive. My guess is that negative comments, nasty exchanges, and controversy are viewed more often than complimentary or positive comments and exchanges.³¹

Q: In the wake of the 2016 elections, and elections to come, do you think there should be more restrictions, regulations, or just some overall oversight on social media and what can be posted, tweeted, or displayed to the public by people running for office? Is this different for "fake news," news that was made up for the detriment of another candidate or just not factually checked?

²⁹ Interview with Kelly Burke, Illinois State Representative 36th District (Nov. 8, 2018).

³⁰ *Id.*

³¹ *Id.*

A: I think there should be some regulation not just of the information candidates put out but also by anyone advocating for a candidate or a political cause.³²

Q: Do you see Illinois, the United States, or any other state passing legislation regarding what campaigns can post on social media? Or regarding “fake news?”

A: Passing a regulation on speech on social media platforms that would apply only to a particular state is problematic. Enforcement would clearly be very difficult. I think this is a topic that needs to be addressed at the national level in order for it to be effective and workable.

The interview with Representative Burke shows that social media is becoming a more vital way of reaching constituents and voters. Focusing on not just elections but in general, social media is helping elected representatives get in touch with the people of their elected area. In terms of working towards more regulations to, Representative Burke finds that there should be some regulations, but in terms of policing and not endangering a person's right to free speech is very difficult.

In conclusion, through a comparative look on a few elections with some statistics, social media does have a power in politics. Presidential campaigns have demonstrated that social media not only helps candidates reach more constituents and voters but helps display the candidate's image to more people than ever before. With this in mind, future politicians might need to consider regulating how social media is used during elections. This would help prevent misrepresentation of a candidate and narrow campaigns to focusing on the merits of a candidate.³³

³² Interview with Kelly Burke, Illinois State representative, 36th District (Nov. 8, 2018).

³³ *Id.*