

Vote for Me: How North Carolina Politicians Use Facebook to Engage with Online Users During a Campaign

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Abstract

Historically, politicians have looked for efficient and innovative ways to engage with the public and cultivate supporters, focusing a great deal of attention on social media platforms in recent decades. This study examines trends in social media engagement rates, specifically on Facebook, between campaigning state politicians and online users. Data was collected from the Facebook pages of 12 North Carolina state senators (three Democratic incumbents, three Democratic challengers, three Republican incumbents, and three Republican challengers). Units of analysis were the posts published by these politicians on their official Facebook pages during a two-week period. Through both “a priori” and emergent content analysis, three specific findings surfaced: challengers post more on Facebook than incumbents, Democrats post more on Facebook than Republicans, and most politicians react but do not respond to user comments. The research also found that these politicians reply similarly in length and structure to user comments, and most online users reply positively or do not reply to politicians’ responses. The findings suggest that state politicians should devote more time responding to user comments and forming online relationships.

I. Introduction

Politicians have historically looked for efficient and innovative ways to engage with the public and key voters in their state. These promotional methods have gradually changed over time, beginning first with posters and flyers, transforming to billboards and yard signs, and finally to social media. Most political campaigns today are a hybrid mix of all these methods and more.

While academic research has been conducted in general on politicians’ use of social media, there is little to no research on the online relationship between state politicians and Facebook users, as well as the impact of this online engagement. Due to this lack of research, controversy surrounds social media practices for campaigning politicians. One such example is the argument about whether or not politicians should respond to online user comments. Without research, campaigning politicians may make decisions about social media engagement solely based on personal opinion.

Therefore, this research seeks to address this gap by examining the Facebook pages of campaigning North Carolina state politicians. This research will qualitatively examine the online activity of these politicians and quantitatively gauge the politicians’ social media engagement with users. Using content analysis, this research

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explores the Facebook posts, user comments, and replies from 12 campaigning North Carolina state senators during a two-week timeframe.

II. Literature Review

Public expectations of politicians on social media

Social media has become a common tool for campaigning politicians. With 2.23 billion monthly active users on Facebook, 1 billion on Instagram, and 336 million on Twitter, these social media platforms are widely and often used by millions of potential voters in the state of a campaigning politician (Statistica, 2018).

Considering the sheer number of people on social media, public expectations have risen for campaigning politicians online. Not only is it expected that politicians are on social media, but the voters expect an acknowledgement or response to public feedback. In fact, research has shown that the reputation of politicians can actually be hurt by ignoring public feedback on social media (Stoddart, 2013).

Perhaps the greatest public expectation of politicians on social media is the need for authenticity. With politicians increasingly being presented as targets for parody, voters must be inspired by campaigning politicians. To do so, politicians must remain genuine and conversational with voters, including in online persona (“Not Another Political Zombie,” 2009). Experts encourage politicians to meet public expectations by regularly responding to and prioritizing these online conversations, so voters do not feel ignored and alienated by the politician (Crawford, 2009).

Impact of social media on politics and politicians

Social media has transformed the relationship that politicians have with voters. More specifically, political leaders have talked about how social media has given them the opportunity to strategically connect more with voters (Stoddart, 2013). Tools like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube allow campaigning politicians to speak directly to voters for little to no cost (Murse, 2019). Social media provides politicians the key opportunity to share with voters their promotional events and posts, thereby helping them reach a larger audience (Murse, 2019).

Perhaps the greatest reason for politicians to engage on social media is the hope of influencing voting behavior. For example, social media is one of the best methods for campaigning politicians to reach and engage with young people as they are more likely to use the Internet for political purposes (Raine, Cornfield, & Horrigan, 2005). Even internationally, such as in the 2010-2011 national elections in the Netherlands, research has shown that politicians with higher social media engagement received more votes relative to others in their political party (Effing, Van Hillegersberg & Huibers, 2011). Social media is an effective way to spread the message of campaigning politicians, but research has shown that social media engagement alone is insufficient to “...convince supporters of an opposing party to change their attitudes” (Utz, 2009, p. 229). Instead, social media is more useful in promoting campaign messages, raising awareness of politicians, and convincing voters to get out to vote.

Although the impact that social media has on voting is recognized, social media also has considerable impact on politicians’ political stances. After all, social media tools like Facebook and Twitter give campaigning politicians the opportunity to immediately see how potential voters may be reacting to a controversy and adjust their campaigns accordingly (Murse, 2019). The public strongly believes in the power of social media to grab the attention of politicians and push them to pursue important issues. For example, a Pew Research Center poll found that “69% of U.S. adults say social media is very or somewhat important for getting elected officials to pay attention to issues” (Anderson, Toor, Rainie, & Smith, 2018).

Little research exists that examines the online relationship between state-level politicians and voters. This relationship however is not unlike that between corporations and customers. In these buyer-seller relationships, social media have established a new model of customer engagement: connection, interaction, satisfaction, retention, and loyalty (Sashi, 2012). From a reputation standpoint, companies are increasingly implementing “social customer care” -- a form of customer service by responding to and engaging with customers over social media (Hyken, 2017). Experts are encouraging companies to respond to all social media comments, whether positive or negative. Furthermore, research has shown that: “...the simple act

of replying to a customer on social media increases customer advocacy by 20 percent” (Baer, 2017). The politician/voter relationship has a similar dynamic, and politicians’ campaign methods can often follow the marketing methods of businesses.

Politicians’ two types of communications models for social media

With the growth of social media, potential voters have developed an expectation that all politicians can be found on these platforms. It is important to note, however, that the politicians’ approach to using social media can be broken into two general categories: the broadcast-only model and the social listening model.

Politicians that use the broadcast-only model rely on social media to publicize their platform, stances, events, and more, but often do not respond to the public and keep comments hidden. Of the politicians that use the broadcast-only model, most politicians enact the first model of public relations. The category, known as “press agent / publicity,” is described as a one-way communication model that “...uses persuasion, half-truths, and manipulation to influence audiences to behave as the [person] desires” (Roberts, 2016, p. 69). This communication style is seen as comparably selfish, as it solely serves the politician and allows no venue for public interaction or consultation (Stoddart, 2013).

Politicians that use the social listening model rely on social media as a two-way communication platform to publicize their stances and events, but also to listen to and respond to public comments and messages. In general, most politicians that practice social listening are using the fourth public relations model, known as the “two-way symmetrical model,” defined as using “communication to negotiate with the public... seeks to resolve conflict and promote mutual benefits, understanding and respect between the organization and key publics/stakeholders” (Roberts, 2016, p. 69). This communication model suggests a direct line of communication between the politician and voters.

Of the politicians that use the social listening model, three categories exist: background listening, reciprocal listening, and delegated listening (Crawford, 2009). Background listening refers to politicians, in this particular case, reading their social media comments but not responding. Reciprocal listening refers to the politician noting and directly responding to potential voters’ comments and messages. Delegated listening refers the politician’s indirect response to potential voters’ comments and questions by outsourcing the Facebook profile to a paid media person or team to respond on the politician’s behalf (Crawford, 2009). Although no research has specifically been conducted on the number of politicians using each social listening model, research has shown that it is common for campaigns to “...hire staffers to monitor their social media channels” (Murse, 2019).

Different politicians use different social listening models, yet communication experts generally agree that politicians should practice the social listening model, specifically reciprocal listening. These experts criticize the broadcast-only model as alienating voters, making them feel ignored by their own campaigning representatives (Stoddart, 2013). Comparably, politicians that use social media tools like Twitter to converse with voters rather than broadcast messages appear to gain more political benefit from social media than others (Grant, Moon & Grant, 2010).

Research Questions

This research seeks to explore campaigning politicians’ use of their official Facebook pages to respond to and engage with online users. Therefore, the following research questions have been identified:

RQ1. Do North Carolina state senators engage with and respond to online user comments on their Facebook social media posts?

RQ2. What similarities and differences can be found in social media engagement habits among Democrat incumbents, Democrat challengers, Republican incumbents, and Republican challengers?

RQ3. What types of comments do campaigning politicians respond to, and how do campaigning politicians respond to these comments?

RQ4. How do online users reply to politicians’ responses on their comments?

III. Methods

This research used content analysis methodology to examine Facebook posts generated by campaigning politicians during a two-week period. This research pays special attention to posts that have any public comments by online users or the politician. Underpinning this study is uses and gratifications theory, which seeks “to explain how individuals use mass communication to gratify their needs...to discover underlying motives for individuals’ media use...[and] to identify the positive and the negative consequences of individual media use” (“Uses and Gratifications Approach,” 2017). Uses and gratifications theory is applied to this research for examining how online users comment on politicians’ social media posts, as well as the motivations behind why the politicians are more likely to reply.

The study examined three Democratic Party incumbents, three Republican Party incumbents, three Democratic Party challengers, and three Republican Party challengers for a total of 12 politicians running for state senate in North Carolina. The term “incumbent” is defined in this research as a person who currently holds the office position. The term “challenger” is defined in this research as a newcomer opposing the person who currently holds the office position.

To strengthen objectivity in choosing which candidates to monitor, the selection of politicians was randomized. For example, in the first category of “Democratic Party incumbent,” a random number generator was used to select a state senate district; the random number generator was repeated until the district had a Democratic Party incumbent that won the 2018 midterm elections. The same process was then repeated until all 12 politicians were selected for data collection and analysis. The names and categories of all 12 politicians are listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Politicians and units of analysis selected for the research.

Category of Politician	Name of Politician	Total # of Facebook Posts over 2-Week Timeframe
Democrat Incumbent #1	N.C. Senator Mike Woodard	9 posts
Democrat Incumbent #2	N.C. Senator Dan Blue	4 posts
Democrat Incumbent #3	N.C. Senator Valerie Foushee	4 posts
Democrat Challenger #1	N.C. Senator Sam Searcy	17 posts
Democrat Challenger #2	N.C. Senator Wiley Nickel	52 posts
Democrat Challenger #3	N.C. Senator Toby Fitch	39 posts
Republican Incumbent #1	N.C. Senator Kathy Harrington	2 posts
Republican Incumbent #2	N.C. Senator Bob Steinburg	66 posts
Republican Incumbent #3	N.C. Senator Bill Rabon	2 posts
Republican Challenger #1	N.C. Senator Vickie Sawyer	10 posts
Republican Challenger #2	N.C. Senator Carl Ford	30 posts
Republican Challenger #3	N.C. Senator Todd Johnson	9 posts
TOTAL: 12 politicians	NA	TOTAL: 244 posts

An important point to consider in the selection process is that this research solely uses North Carolina politicians who ran for state senate in the 2018 midterm election. As considerable research already exists on federal politicians, this research is made unique by focusing on state politicians. The research only considers politicians running for state senate, rather than state house, as campaigning state senators have a wider audience base and are more likely to have a higher number of voters in the district engaging online with the politician.

Code

The coded units of analysis for this research are the Facebook posts published between October 24, 2018 and November 7, 2018 on the official Facebook pages of all 12 politicians. These dates represent the last two weeks of the campaigning period leading up to and immediately after the 2018 midterm elections.

All units of analysis are coded through a priori coding where the code is established prior to data collection and used uniformly for each unit of analysis. The code for each unit of analysis goes as follow:

- 1) Number of likes and followers on the Facebook page;
- 2) Type of post (informational, motivational, congratulatory, multimedia, event);
- 3) Number of online user reactions by user “liking” or “reacting” to the post;
- 4) Number of online user comments on the post;
- 5) Number of online user shares of the post;
- 6) Reaction rate (defined as the percentage of user comments the politician “liked” on Facebook);
- 7) Response rate (defined as the percentage of comments the politician publicly responded to on Facebook);
- 8) Number of words in the politician’s response to the user comments;
- 9) Type of politician’s response to user comments (generic response, detailed response, referral, citation to external source, other contact method); and
- 10) Sentiment of the users’ replies to politicians’ responses (positive, negative, neutral, no response).

IV. Findings

In answering the first research question, it is important to note the key difference between reaction and response rates from the campaigning politicians. Whereas the majority (eight) of the 12 politicians reacted to user comments on their Facebook posts, only a few politicians (three) actually responded to user comments. All three politicians who responded to user comments also reacted to user comments. Based on these results, the research indicates that campaigning state politicians are two times more likely to react to user comments than not react at all. Similarly, data suggests that these very same campaigning state politicians are nearly two times more likely to react to user comments than to respond to user comments. The reaction and response rates for each analyzed politician can be found in Table 2.

Table 2. Reaction and response rates to online user comments by campaigning politicians.

Politician	Average number of user comments per post	Reaction rate	Response rate
Democrat Incumbent #1	3 comments	0%	0%
Democrat Incumbent #2	3 comments	67%	0%
Democrat Incumbent #3	3 comments	79%	0%
Democrat Challenger #1	7 comments	64%	0%
Democrat Challenger #2	14 comments	84%	12%
Democrat Challenger #3	0 comments	0%	0%
Republican Incumbent #1	4 comments	10%	0%
Republican Incumbent #2	2 comments	52%	32%

Republican Incumbent #3	10 comments	0%	0%
Republican Challenger #1	7 comments	0%	0%
Republican Challenger #2	4 comments	43%	0%
Republican Challenger #3	16 comments	50%	20%
Average of all 12 politicians	6 comments	37%	5%
Average of all eight politicians who reacted to user comments	7 comments	56%	8%
Average of all three politicians who responded to user comments	11 comments	62%	21%

As Table 2 indicates, the average reaction rate among all 12 politicians is 37%, and the average reaction rate among all eight politicians who reacted at least once to user comments is 56%. Of the politicians who reacted to user comments, it is important to note that these eight politicians reacted to more than half of all comments (56%) they received. On the other hand, the average response rate among all 12 politicians is 5%, and the average response rate among the three politicians who responded at least once to user comments is 21%. Of the politicians who responded to user comments, these three politicians responded to a fifth of all comments (21%) they received.

There seem to be no trends between number of user comments and reaction or response rates. Additionally, the data suggest that no other relationships exist between the reaction rate and the number of social media posts the politicians published. Comparably, a slightly positive relationship appears between the response rate and the number of social media posts the politicians published. The more social media posts the politicians publish, the higher the response rate.

In terms of the second research question, the similarities and differences in the data among Democratic incumbents, Democratic challengers, Republican incumbents and Republican challengers require cross-section analysis.

In regard to politicians' reaction rates to user comments, each of the four categories has two politicians that reacted to online users, and one politician that did not react to users. Of the politicians that reacted to users, this data indicates that Democrats have the highest reaction rates by a considerable margin (a combined average of 73.5% compared to the Republican combined average of 39%). It is also important to note that challengers (both Republican and Democratic) have higher reaction rates (combined average of 60%) compared to incumbents overall (52%).

Considering politicians' response rates to user comments, three categories had one politician that responded to online users (the Democratic incumbent category has no politicians that responded to users). Further comparisons are difficult to determine with only three politicians to draw from.

The third research question examined the types of comments politicians responded to, and how they responded. Emergent coding revealed five categories of comments that were most likely to merit a candidate response: campaign support, support for the political party, support for the politician, legislative and ballot questions, and comments against the opposition. Numerically, politicians seem to respond most often to comments in the categories of support for the political party and support for the politician. With the exception of one post, politicians only responded to questions and positive comments, rather than to negative comments.

Campaigning politicians also respond to user comments in a variety of ways, qualitatively characterized through coding by six emergent categories: contact information, detailed response, generic response, expression of thanks, citation of external source, and referral to a different person or page.

Numerically, politicians appear to respond most often with an expression of thanks, generally targeted toward user comments supporting the political party or politician. In terms of response rate, the data indicates that politicians most often respond with contact information (targeted toward user comments about campaign support) and with detailed responses (targeted toward legislative and ballot questions).

Furthermore, all responses by the politicians were quantitatively coded to determine the number of words per response. The average number of words in the politicians’ responses to each category of user comment can be found in Table 3. This data suggests that word count in politicians’ responses may drastically vary based on the category of user response. For example, the category of “legislative and ballot questions” receives an average response of 32 words whereas the category of “support for the candidate” receives an average response of seven words. This indicates that politicians may provide more detailed responses to legislative questions and more simple expressions of thanks to voiced support. However, there appears to be little to no difference in word count on all response categories among Democratic incumbents, Democratic challengers, Republican incumbents, and Republican challengers.

Table 3. Number of words in politicians’ responses based on category of user comment.

Category of User Comment	Average # of Words in Politicians’ Responses
Campaign support	6 words
Support for the political party	14 words
Support for the politician	7 words
Legislative and ballot questions	32 words
Comments against the opposition	14 words

Research question four used qualitative sentiment analysis to analyze how online users reply to politicians’ responses on their comments. Six different categories of sentiment emerged: positive, positive Facebook reaction, negative, negative Facebook reaction, neutral, and no response. The categories of “positive Facebook reaction” and “negative Facebook reaction” represent emergent coding to delineate a user’s Facebook reaction in “liking” politicians’ replies from no response altogether. Similar to the third research question, it is also important to note this data is composed of only three campaigning politicians who responded to user comments.

A sentiment analysis of all user replies to politicians’ responses point toward a possible interesting trend across both political parties. As Table 4 demonstrates, nearly half of online users do not reply at all to the politicians’ responses. Nearly all other users reply positively, or positively react, to the politicians’ responses. Across all three politicians, only one user replies negatively, and only one user replies in a neutral manner to the politicians’ responses.

Table 4. Sentiment of user replies to politicians’ responses.

Politician	Positive	Positive Reaction	Negative	Negative Reaction	Neutral	No Response
Democrat Challenger	11 comments	8 comments	0 comments	0 comments	1 comments	13 comments
Republican Incumbent	3 comments	8 comments	1 comments	0 comments	0 comments	12 comments
Republican Challenger	2 comments	1 comment	0 comments	0 comments	0 comments	4 comments
Total number of replies	16 comments	17 comments	1 comments	0 comments	1 comments	29 comments

V. Discussion

The findings of this research have interesting implications for the future of politicians' relationships with online users over social media. The research findings are broken down into five key themes and takeaways.

The number of times that politicians post on social media provides useful, yet predictable findings. Based on the data of these 12 politicians, challengers post more often on Facebook than incumbents. Democratic candidates, incumbent and challenger, appear to post more often on Facebook than their Republican counterparts. These two discoveries are not surprising as they align with previous research. Social media, for example, is used to increase voter outreach and engagement (Vergeer, Hermans & Sams, 2011). This particularly makes sense for a challenger, as this type of candidate is often lesser known than the already established politician. In addition, young people are the most active demographic on social media and more likely to affiliate with the Democratic party. Millennials and Generation Z are rapidly getting more involved with politics as demonstrated by the triple in growth of political activism among 18 to 24 year-olds since fall of 2016 ("So Much for Slacktivism," 2018). Therefore, it makes sense that campaigning Democratic Party politicians spend more time and energy engaging with online users. Furthermore, previous studies have found that candidates from progressive parties represented the most active users of Twitter as a campaign tool (Vergeer, Hermans & Sams, 2011).

These findings also point toward a possible trend in regard to politicians' reaction rates to user comments. These findings show that eight of the 12 politicians reacted to one or more comments, indicating that politicians are spending time to engage with users on social media. Previous research suggested that politicians were more likely to use the broadcast-only model of social media (Stoddart, 2013) although communication experts agree that the social listening model is the better choice (Grant, Moon & Grant, 2010). The findings of this research suggest that the majority of politicians are reacting to user comments, thereby engaging with potential voters. This finding may indicate that campaigning politicians are increasingly employing the social listening model.

It is important to note politicians' hesitation in responding to user comments. Whereas the 12 politicians' reaction rate averages 37%, the same 12 politicians' response rate averages 5 percent. Within this data sample, only three of the 12 politicians actually responded to user comments. This research suggests that politicians are far more hesitant in responding to online users than reacting to the comments. One possible rationale for this stems from politicians' concerns of negative comments and the time needed to respond to user comments.

Another interesting implication within these research findings is that politicians received nearly all positive comments and questions. Furthermore, the sentiment of all user replies to politicians' responses are 51.6% positive compared to 1.6% negative. Therefore, if fear of negativity is the primary driver behind politicians' lack of response rate, this research indicates that positive comments far outweigh the negative overall. These findings supplement previous research in debunking the myth that most people commenting on politicians' Facebook posts are negative, offensive, and/or trolls (Stoddart, 2013). Subsequently, this research and indications of positive responses over negative responses may help convince campaigning politicians to consider responding to user comments more often.

Lastly, research findings have indicated key differences in length between politicians' responses to user comments. These findings suggest that politicians compose shorter responses when replying to supportive comments and longer responses when replying to questions. Whereas politicians respond with an average of six words to user comments expressing campaign support, these same politicians respond with an average of 32 words to user questions on legislation and ballots. It is interesting to find that the varying response length is fairly uniform among the three politicians which, with future research, might lead to a theory that campaigning politicians -- regardless of political party or incumbency -- have similarly-structured responses to users.

Limitations

First and foremost, this research only considers campaigning North Carolina state senators that won the 2018 midterm elections. Future research may examine campaigning state politicians outside of North Carolina to compose nationwide generalizations from data. Future research may also analyze campaigning state politicians that have lost recent elections to compare their online reaction and response rates with politicians that have won.

Second, this research only pulls data from 12 different politicians. While these politicians represent 24% of the entire North Carolina senate, only three politicians responded to user comments, giving a very small data sample for research questions 3 and 4. In addition, this research only covers the social media use of politicians on their official Facebook page. This research is unable to record and analyze politicians' reaction and response rates to Facebook messages sent by online users. Furthermore, politicians' reaction and response rates to user comments may have been different on other social media platforms. Future research may consider comparing reaction and response rates across multiple social media channels.

VI. Conclusion

This study provides insight specifically into the social media world of campaigning state politicians and how these politicians engage online with Facebook users. The research not only points to trends in political communications, but it provides a set of recommendations and structure for future campaigning politicians to consider and implement.

Using data from 12 of 50 North Carolina state senators elected and re-elected in midterm elections 2018, this study shows how politicians are increasingly getting involved in basic social media engagement habits by liking and reacting to user comments on Facebook. On the other hand, it suggests that these very same politicians remain hesitant about responding to user comments. The data also tends to show that Democrats post more than Republicans, challengers post more than incumbents, and Democrat challengers post the most on Facebook overall.

When specifically considering politicians' responses, politicians who respond to comments pay special attention to questions and craft longer, more detailed responses. These same politicians pay attention to other comments as well, particularly supportive comments, but to a lesser degree than user questions, as characterized by the shorter, more generic responses from politicians. In return, most Facebook users do not reply to politicians' responses, but when they do, the replies are overwhelmingly positive.

Due to the lack of previous research on state politicians' communications strategies, this paper is useful in contributing to the field of political communications, specifically concerning online engagement trends. This study may prove important by providing direction for future political campaigns in developing plans to engage with users on social media.

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