

# Campaigning on Twitter: A Content Analysis of Four U.S. Senate Candidates' Twitter Feeds

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## Abstract

*The use of Twitter has become almost universal in political campaigns because the platform allows candidates to communicate directly with potential voters. As part of this shift in the political media environment, this study conducted a qualitative content analysis of the Twitter comments of four U.S. Senate candidates to examine how the candidates used Twitter to campaign. The results show that candidates most frequently used Twitter for non-issue-related communication, namely, to request donations, provide updates about campaign events, and urge supporters to vote. The study also found that negative messages played a large role in candidates' Twitter communication. Lastly, the two Republican candidates used Twitter to frame the election as having radical consequences for the future of the country.*

## I. Introduction

This study examines the topics and tones of the two 2020 Georgia U.S. Senate races to expand knowledge about what topics the candidates emphasize and how their agendas shift over the course of a campaign. No candidate in either race's November general election won 50% of the vote, meaning — per Georgia state law — each race's top two vote-getters advanced to a runoff on January 5, 2021. Moreover, the results of the 2020 election cycle revealed that control of the U.S. Senate depended on the two Georgia runoff races (NPR, 2021), making both closely followed contests.

The first contest pitted incumbent Republican Sen. Kelly Loeffler against Democrat Raphael Warnock, senior pastor at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta. Loeffler had been appointed to her seat in 2019 to replace former Republican Sen. Johnny Isakson who retired because of health reasons (NPR, 2019). The other race featured incumbent Republican Sen. David Perdue against Democratic challenger Jon Ossoff. Ossoff had previously lost the 2017 special election race for Georgia's 6th congressional district. Perdue was first elected in 2014 and was seeking reelection (NPR, 2021).

Political campaigns have evolved over the years to rely on social media for communications directly from the candidates to the voters (Golbeck, Grimes, & Rogers, 2010). With this shift, Twitter has become a valuable tool for political campaigns, one that warrants scholarly attention. This study will use qualitative content analysis to examine the Twitter comments of the four candidates from September 5 to January 5, the

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day of the runoff election, to expand knowledge of how political candidates use Twitter.

## II. Literature Review

### ***Agenda-Setting Theory***

Lippmann (1922) argued that the public does not respond directly to events but instead lives in a pseudo-environment shaped by media coverage. Later, McCombs and Shaw (1972) extended Lippmann's idea and proposed agenda-setting theory, which posits that the media tells the public what to think about by heavily reporting on certain issues. Their study showed corresponding object salience between media coverage and the public, which became important evidence of the media effect in the 1970s (Lee & Xu, 2017). The theory states that the media sets the public agenda.

Today, political discussion is no longer limited to traditional agenda-setting structures (Boynton & Richardson, 2016). With the rise of social media, many researchers have examined the homogenization of agendas between social media and traditional media. Sayre, Bode, Shah, Wilcox, and Shah (2010) examined the relationship between the agendas of thousands of YouTube videos and California media on the issue of same-sex marriage. They found the social media outlet set its agenda on the issue independent of traditional media.

### ***Negative Tweets***

Scholars have established that negative ads are a significant aspect of candidates' overall approach to political campaign communication (Lau & Pomper, 2001; Skaperdas & Grofman, 1995), and they are often a core characteristic of competitive races (Shen, 2004). As campaign messaging has expanded onto Twitter, negativity has followed.

There are many possible reasons why candidates choose to go negative. Wattenberg and Briens (1999) posit that candidates use attack ads to win votes by drawing attention to issues they have credibility in handling and which their opponent does not. In other words, going negative can provide candidates the opportunity to undermine support for their opponents (Skaperdas & Grofman, 1995). Going negative, however, does not guarantee an increase in candidate support because it only provides reasons not to support the opposition (Damore, 2002). In fact, going negative can have a backlash effect and decrease voter support of the candidate (Fridkin & Kenney, 2004; Ansolabehere, Iyengar, Simon, & Valentino, 1994; Lua & Rovner, 2009; Kahn & Greer, 1994). Overall, voters seem to be more tolerant of attacks that focus on a specific issue than they are of personal criticisms (Lua & Rovner, 2009).

Hale, Fox, and Farmer (1996) and Fridkin and Kenney (1999) suggest that the decision to go negative in a Senate race depends on state size, competitiveness, and candidate status. Lau and Pomper (2001, 2004) found that Senate candidates are more often negative if they are behind in the polls, or in close elections, challenging an incumbent, are Republican, male, or whose opponents also have high levels of negativity in their campaigns. Gandhi, Lorio, and Urban (2016) found that races with only two candidates are twice as likely to see the inclusion of negative ads than races with multiple candidates. In these two-candidate contests, Skaperdas and Grofman (1995) found the frontrunner typically uses few negative ads but the frequency increases as the polling gap narrows between the two candidates. Damore (2002) suggests that attacks are more likely to increase as election day approaches. Interestingly, Bode, Lassen, Kim, Shah, Fowler, Ridout, and Franz (2016) found that negative Twitter comments, unlike television advertising, are not clearly related to many of these classic indicators of negativity, and that negative tones on Twitter do not become more frequent as election day approaches.

As for negative messaging on Twitter, Tsugawa and Ohsaki (2015) found that negative tweets are likely to be reposted more rapidly and frequently than positive and neutral ones. Enders, Gainous, and Wagner (2022) report that the emotion most frequently conveyed by both parties in the 2018 midterm election was anger, although most tweets had a positive sentiment. Stein and Benoit (2021) found that retweets were significantly more likely to be attacks than tweets, and that challengers were significantly more likely to attack than their incumbent counterparts.

Past literature has also examined the effects of negativity on voter decision-making. Krupnikov (2012) argues that increased exposure to negative ads leads to a higher likelihood of candidate selection, the first step necessary for involvement in the political process. Other scholars (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995; Pinkleton, Um, & Austin, 2002) suggest that negative ads drive down voter turnout by turning people away from the political process altogether. Other scholars found no such relationship (Finkel & Geer, 1998).

### ***Campaigning on Twitter***

Social media has become almost ubiquitous among elected officials, with the typical congressperson maintaining an official account and a personal account on each platform (Pew, 2020). This is no surprise since social media has quickly grown in popularity. One in five U.S. adults used Twitter (Pew, 2022). Moreover, political messaging today to some degree caters to social media (Kapko, 2016). As Lipsitz, Trost, Matthew, and Sides (2005) note, "Voters want to learn more about issues, but they want this information distilled" (p. 350). With a 280-character limit per tweet, Twitter forces candidate to distill their messaging. As such, campaigns are increasingly making strategic use of social media to gain attention from the media (Parmalee, 2014) and from voters (Serazio, 2014). This was visible in the 2016 election cycle, which marked the first-time presidential candidates' social media outpaced their websites and emails as an online campaign news source (Pew, 2016).

Twitter has become a popular campaign communication medium because it provides advantages and opportunities that traditional media does not. For instance, as a real-time, direct communications medium, Twitter allows political candidates to respond to issues daily (Bode, et al, 2016), to gauge reactions to their messages in real time, and to respond to the electors' evolving views over the course of the campaign (Kapko, 2016). Twitter also provides a forum for candidates to promote themselves, provide updates, and interactively communicate with potential voters without having to pass through mainstream media's gatekeeping process (Golbeck, Grimes, & Rogers, 2010). Despite Twitter's potential to be interactive, most candidates seem to adopt a "broadcasting" style of communication characterized by limited interaction with other accounts (Adams & McCorkindale, 2013; Aragón, Kappler, Kaltenbrunner, Laniado, & Volkovich, 2013).

When studying communication strategies, it is important to consider audience. Studies show that Twitter users tend to not be representative of the general population. Twitter users are younger, more educated, and more likely to be Democrats than the public at large (Pew, 2022). Moreover, an early, yet comprehensive study (Conover, Ratkiewicz, Francisco, Goncalves, Menczer, & Flammini, 2012) found there was limited connectivity between left-leaning and right-leaning users. Later, Barbera, Jost, Nagler, Tucker, and Bonneau (2015) found that Twitter users primary exchange information among those with similar ideological preferences when political issues are being discussed. Aligned with these trends, Bode and Dalrymple (2016) report that social media campaigns are more likely to target engaged partisans than traditional campaign media.

Scholars have also studied Twitter use as a metric of electoral success and public opinion. Jungherr (2015) found that Twitter was not an adequate predictor of election results or public opinion polls. Similarly, most scholarship found no link between Twitter use and electoral success (McGregor, Mourão, & Molyneux, 2017; Vergeer, Hermans, & Sams, 2013), while some found a correlation (LaMarre & Suzuki, 2013). Candidates' tweets seem to react to offline campaign results and events rather than predict them (Murphy, 2015).

### ***Research Questions***

This study will reveal the emerging themes of the two most anticipated and consequential U.S. Senate races of 2020 and discuss what this indicates in the evolution of politics and campaigns. This study also will examine how the agenda changed from the November 3 general election to the January 5 runoff election, providing a unique opportunity to expand on agenda-setting theory. The study asks three research questions:

RQ1: What were the most frequent topics mentioned by the candidates?

RQ2: How did the topics differ between Democrats and Republicans?

RQ3: Did the topics change after election day on November 3?

### III. Methods

To answer the proposed research questions, the study featured a qualitative content analysis of the four Georgia U.S. Senate candidates' Twitter feeds during the 2020 election. A random sample of 600 tweets (150 per candidate) from September 5, 2020, to January 5, 2021, the day of the runoff election, were examined. The incumbents, Kelly Loeffler and David Perdue, both had a personal account and an official account for their position as a Senator at the time of the election, but both primarily used their personal accounts to campaign. These two accounts were examined for the incumbents. The challengers, Jon Ossoff and Raphael Warnock, each only had one account with a noteworthy following at the time of the election. These were the two accounts examined for the challengers. During the above timeframe, the third tweet from each day that the candidates tweeted was coded for, as well as the second tweet from every fourth day.

The topics coded for, based on previous literature as well as the unique topics of 2020, were health care, civil rights/race, crime/law and order, jobs/the economy, COVID-19, voting, God/faith, the military, Senate majority, requesting donations, campaign update, and 2020 presidential candidates Donald Trump and Joe Biden. If a tweet contained an image or a video, the contents of that were also considered. For example, if a tweet contained a video of a candidate discussing health care, then that tweet was coded for mentioning health care.

The overall tone of the tweets and whether they were an attack were also examined. This study defines a tweet as having a negative tone if it includes criticism directed toward a person or group. These tweets were also coded as an attack against whomever the criticism was directed toward. For example, on December 1, 2020, Loeffler tweeted, "Rent is due today, and Nancy Pelosi & Chuck Schumer are focused on legalizing marijuana and outlawing the Tiger King." This tweet was coded as having a negative tone as well as being an attack on Pelosi and Schumer since the tweet was negative toward them and their names were mentioned.

These variables were tested with a pilot examination of 60 tweets, and then compared to those of a second coder to determine intercoder reliability. The variables had a Krippendorff's alpha (1980) of .88 or higher, reflecting a strong coding system. When the coding was complete, the data was transferred into Excel and analyzed. Like previous studies (Theilmann & Wilhite, 1998; Petrocik, 1996; Conover, Ratkiewicz, Francisco, Goncalves, Menczer, & Flammini, 2012; Meeks, 2016) the candidates' tones and Twitter topics were analyzed through the lens of political party identification.

## IV. Findings

**Table 1: Republicans' combined topic frequencies, before and after the November 3 election**

Topic	Before	After	Total
Negative Tweets	49	59	108
Campaign event/ rally	29	35	64
Donald Trump	42	22	64
Senate majority	6	45	51
Requesting donations	14	34	48
Republican in other GA race	0	45	45
Voting	6	36	42
Socialism	5	25	30
Supreme Court	14	11	25
COVID/ pandemic	9	13	22
Jobs/ economy	6	13	19
Defunding the police	6	11	17
Crime/ law and order/ police	11	4	15

**Table 2: Democrats' combined topic frequencies, before and after the November 3 election**

Topic	Before	After	Total
Voting	43	34	77
Requesting donations	37	28	65
Negative tweets	35	28	63
Campaign event/ rally	24	27	51
Health care	20	18	38
COVID/ pandemic	11	16	27
Senate majority	7	18	25
Democrat in other GA race	8	12	20
Civil rights	14	5	19
Donald Trump	9	4	13
Horseshoe	7	4	11
Supreme Court	11	0	11
Economy/ jobs	4	6	10

As seen in Table 1, the Republicans' most frequent topic was attack tweets, followed by campaign updates, support for Donald Trump, and the importance of the Senate majority. As seen in Table 2, the Democrats' most frequent topic was voting. While the Republicans only mentioned the act of voting, the Democratic candidates also mentioned voting rights and voter suppression. The other frequent topics for the Democrats were donation requests, attack tweets, and campaign updates.

## Negative Tweets

**Table 3: Combined attacks tweets from the Republican candidates, before and after Nov. 3**

Directed toward	Before	After	Total
Total	49	59	108
Opponent	34	37	71
Democrats	5	20	25
Chuck Schumer	2	5	7
Biden	5	2	7
BLM	4	0	4
Nancy Pelosi	3	1	4
Abrams	4	0	4

**Table 4: Combined attacks tweets from the Democratic candidates, before and after Nov. 3**

Directed toward	Before	After	Total
Total	35	28	63
Opponent	31	23	54
Trump	6	3	9
Republicans	2	2	4

As seen in Table 3 and Table 4, the candidates' most frequent attack targets were their opponents. As seen in Table 3, the Republicans' second most frequent target was the Democratic Party at large, followed by Joe Biden and Chuck Schumer. The Democrats' second most frequent target was Donald Trump, followed by the Republican Party.

## V. Discussion

This study expanded knowledge of political campaign messaging on social media by examining the tones and topics of the two 2020 Georgia U.S. Senate races, which were not decided at the November 3 election and continued for two months until their runoffs on January 5, 2021. The results reveal several overarching themes, the first being the predominance of negativity across both races. This is no surprise given the competitiveness of the races and the polarized climate in which they took place (Pew, 2019). Congruent with previous findings (Theilmann & Wilhite, 1998; Lau & Pomper, 2001, 2004) the Republicans were more likely to go negative than their Democratic challengers.

Another general theme was the use of Twitter for non-issues-related communication. More than half of all tweets were requesting campaign donations, providing campaign updates, or encouraging followers to vote. All four candidates heavily pushed these three topics during both races, with one exception; the Republicans rarely mentioned voting until the runoff election. There could be a few reasons for this. First, Georgia was historically a red state. Biden was the first Democratic presidential candidate to win the state since 1992, and no Democratic senator had been elected since 2000 (Nilsen, 2021). This being the case, Perdue and Loeffler may have not felt the need to urge their supporters to vote during the November general election since their party had won every Senate race in the state for the past 20 years. Another reason could be that Trump was claiming that the 2020 election had been rigged, and some predominant Republicans were urging Republicans to abstain from voting in the runoff (Semones, 2020). With Biden's success, Ossoff and Warnock's close polling numbers, and fragmented party support, Perdue and Loeffler may have felt the need to remind their supporters of the importance of voting.

When comparing the candidates from the two parties, the Republicans attacked a larger number of targets than the Democrats did. While the Democrats levied almost all their attacks against their opponents, the Republicans often attacked the Democrats at large, as well as other political actors, such as Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer and the Democratic candidate in the other Georgia race. Interestingly, one of the Republicans even attacked non-elected actors such as activist Stacey Abrams and the Black Lives Matter movement.

Another way the campaigns differed was the Republicans tied their campaigns together more than their Democratic counterparts. They did so in two ways. First, they mentioned one another more often than the Democrats did. Perdue and Loeffler mentioned one another a combined 45 times, while Warnock and Ossoff's did so only 20 times. This finding corroborates Livne, Simmons, Adar, and Adamic (2011), who found that Republican candidates in House, Senate, and gubernatorial contests mentioned one another on Twitter more often than their Democratic opponents.

Second, the Republican candidates linked their campaigns together by painting the two races as having extreme consequences for the future of the country. Using the phrases "Hold the line" and "Save America," Perdue and Loeffler attempted to rally support by warning about the radical change that would occur if the Democrats won a majority in the Senate. Specifically, the Republicans warned that Democratic Party wanted to push socialism onto the American people, and that electing Warnock and Ossoff would allow them to implement this radical agenda. The two Republicans went about this in slightly different ways. During the runoff, Loeffler argued that Warnock was a socialist, a Marxist, and the most radical Senate candidate, but she also frequently mentioned socialism in tweets that are not directed toward Warnock. Perdue, on the other hand, attacked Ossoff for being a socialist and a radical, although in his other tweets he did not mention socialism generally as often as Loeffler did. Here are some sample tweets of Perdue framing the election outcome as having dire consequences:

- "@ScottforFlorida reminds Georgians that @KLoeffler and I are the firewall against Democrats' radical, socialist agenda that would destroy our country. 12/2
- "If we save the Senate, we save America. @KLoeffler and I need your help to make sure the road to Socialism NEVER runs through the state of Georgia" 11/16
- "In 50 days @KLoeffler and I will save our Senate majority. We will hold the line. We will make sure the road to socialism will NEVER run through the state of Georgia! But we need YOUR HELP to save America." 11/16
- "Georgia is the last line of defense against the Democrats radical socialist agenda. They want to fundamentally change the direction of our country. @KLoeffler and I need you to stand with us to stop them! Save Georgia, Save America." 11/13

Here are some sample tweets of Loeffler framing the election outcome as having dire consequences:

- "It's time to come together. It's time to hold the line against socialism. It's time to SAVE OUR COUNTRY." 12/22
  - "America is counting on us to STOP socialism in its tracks and SAVE the American Dream." 12/30
  - "My opponent would do nothing but rubberstamp the left's socialist agenda, because he's as radical as it gets." 12/23
  - "Georgia is the firewall against socialism. @chuckschumer said, "Now, we take Georgia, then we change America." And he has his agent of change in @RevendWarnock — the most radical candidate in America." 11/18
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This framing could be indicative of a new campaign tactic for Republicans: vote for us because Democratic governance will ruin the country. Another contemporary and predominant example of this framing is the establishment of the Save America Leadership PAC created by Donald Trump in 2020 (Ballotpedia, 2020) and the “Save America Movement” that Trump started after losing the 2020 presidential election (donaldjtrump.com).

While the Republican candidates framed the consequences of the elections in terms of what would occur if they lost, the Democrats framed the consequences in terms of what they could accomplish if they won. Specifically, they talked about legislation regarding affordable health care, the protection of voting rights, the promotion of civil rights, and COVID relief. Here are some sample tweets of Ossoff pushing the importance of winning the Senate majority:

- “We can make a public college and HBCU degree 100% debt-free. But only if we win the Senate.” 12/27
- “We can cut taxes for working families and small businesses. But only if we win the Senate.” 11/22
- “We can pass the John R. Lewis Voting rights Act. But only if we win the Senate.” 11/16
- “We can make voter suppression a federal Crime. But only if we win the Senate.” 11/11

Here are some sample tweets of Warnock pushing the importance of winning the Senate majority:

- “Health care is a human right. Pass it on.” 11/10
- There’s 500,000 Georgians in the Medicaid gap. When we win, we’ll make sure every Georgian has access to quality, affordable health care.” 11/12
- “Small businesses have been hit hard during this pandemic because politicians like @koeffler have failed to provide the critical aid that they need to survive. When we win on January 5<sup>th</sup>, we’re going to fix that.” 11/28
- “1.8 million Georgians have pre-existing conditions. The only way we can protect their health care is if we take back the Senate.” 11/20

## VI. Conclusion

This exploratory study used a content analysis to examine the topics and tones of Twitter messages in the two Georgia 2020 U.S. Senate races to better understand how candidates use Twitter to communicate with potential voters.

The results reveal several themes. First, all four candidates mostly used Twitter for non-issue-related communication, namely, to request donations, provide updates on campaign events, and urge followers to vote. This lack of issue-related tweets shows that the candidates did not rely heavily on Twitter to broadcast their policy positions.

Second, negativity played a large role in candidates’ communication. More than a quarter of all tweets had a negative tone, and Republican candidates used negative tones more frequently than the Democrats did. Most negative tweets were aimed at the candidate’s opponent, but the Republicans also frequently took aim at the opposing party at large. Other dominant topics for the Republicans included support for Donald Trump, voting, the dangers of socialism, and the Supreme Court. Frequent topics for Democrats included voting, health care, COVID, and civil rights. Lastly, while all candidates communicated the importance of these elections, the Republicans and Democrats did so differently. While the Democrats framed the election’s consequences in terms of what could be accomplished if they won, the Republican candidates warned of the dire consequences that would occur if they lost. After the general election, the two Republicans referred to

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themselves as the last line of defense against the Democrats' radical agenda, specifically the implementation of socialism. This study provided a unique opportunity to examine this novel Republican campaign message. Future studies could examine if Republican candidates continue to use this messaging to rally support.

While the present study is an important step in understanding how political candidates use Twitter to campaign, it has some limitations. First, 600 tweets is not a comprehensive data set. Moreover, while the study compared tones and topics from the general election to the runoff, it did not compare them regarding other factors such as polling or proximity to election day. Lastly, future studies could consider how political communication on Twitter interactions with political communication in traditional media.

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