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Piecing Elections Together In The 21st Century: Social Media, Outreach Strategies, & Community Engagement

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PIECING ELECTIONS TOGETHER IN THE 21ST CENTURY:

SOCIAL MEDIA, OUTREACH STRATEGIES,

& COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

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By
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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to all the people that have positively impacted my life throughout my

collegiate career – to include family, friends, colleagues, and mentors.

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THESIS

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Abstract

This thesis analyzes the role of social media usage in campaigns and explores methods for operationalizing this campaign phenomenon. Understanding social media and its connection to politics is challenging, for countless researchers have found it difficult to try to explore a relationship between social media and political campaigns. While social media is relatively new and has been on the rise in recent years, there are challenges associated with measurement and capturing relationships. I will first provide a literature review noting key works on the subject that offer valuable insights on the importance of social media and its influence on the political sphere. Additionally, new research has begun to emerge where more recent works have started to capture important relationships. Along those lines, in this thesis I will be further exploring the latest works and will provide my own insights and contributions on the matter. In doing so, I will include insights from personal experiences to illustrate the role social media can play across campaigns and in community engagement. Therein, I include a content analysis of Beto O'Rourke's 2012 Congressional bid with examples of how his campaign provided informative and creative posts where people were compelled to share ideas about and discuss certain issues, in turn lending support for him that may have helped at the polls. I then conclude with a summary and the implications of my insights for future research.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 EMERGENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

People are constantly connected to the Internet on a daily basis through an array of devices. A decade ago, people had to wait to get home from school or work to check their social media accounts, and now they can connect to these networks on their cell phones almost every minute of the day. Social media sites like Facebook and Twitter allow for their users to access great content, but at the cost of their privacy. Almost anyone can find out a person's favorite food, pictures of their family, and political views by simply logging onto their social media account and doing a search on someone else's account. It is up to a person to determine how much they wish to share on social media, and many times news stories and politics are talked about through a person's network of friends. Social media has a short history, but in that short time some networks have advanced and expanded while others have become extinct in the blink of an eye and replaced by new ones that flourish.

In the infancy of social media, users adopted MySpace, which gained a lot of traction in its early years until 2004 when Facebook was created. In the beginning, Facebook was exclusive to college students and over the years it became available to users over the age of 13 (*Time*, 2015). In 2006, another social media site emerged, Twitter, with a different approach to sharing information in only 140 characters. Twitter instantly became popular with celebrities and in recent years, it has been a great hub for news and politics. The site has been used for big announcements to include a picture of Michelle and Barack Obama on November 6, 2012 after winning a second term in office with the simple caption "Four more years" and instantly became the most shared tweet of all time, a total of 749, 412 shares (*Time*, 2015). This reign was cut short when Ellen DeGeneres posted a selfie from the 2014 Academy Awards and people shared

it 3,349,777 times. These popular sites give their members an opportunity to engage in politics at the same time they are reading about what is happening in a loved one's life. People are able to choose who they want to follow and befriend, creating a field for people to connect and engage in current events and politics.

Social networks are now widely used in political campaigns through the creation of support pages on Facebook and accounts on Twitter to get a succinct message out to potential supporters. Campaigns have always had the difficult task of engaging their audience through methods like commercials, mailers, signs, and debates. Social media allows for campaigns to divulge important information and gain an immediate reaction from followers. The rhetoric behind a campaign's message is extremely important and social media lets people hold candidates accountable for every word they speak.

1.2   CAMPAIGN TOOLS THROUGHOUT TIME

Campaigns in the United States have seen many changes throughout time. People waited for newspapers to be printed in order to follow information on candidates. Then radio came along and people could listen to debates and make a decision before heading to the polls. In 1960, campaigns were revolutionized when two formidable candidates – John F. Kennedy and Richard M. Nixon –faced off against each other. This election changed the game because it was the first election that had a presidential debate televised and people were instantly mesmerized by John F. Kennedy, who looked like an actor straight out of Hollywood while Richard Nixon looked like "death warmed over" (*Time*, 2010). Many people deemed this the modern campaign at the time and television would play a big role in all campaigns through today. The continued evolution of technology has strongly affected campaigns throughout history and social media has

brought the latest change. I deem this the modern campaign of the 21st century, just like

television was over 50 years ago in the Kennedy and Nixon presidential race. The most pressing

question for campaigns is engaging their audience and this engagement can easily occur through

social media. The use of social media in campaigns has risen over the past several years and one

wonders if campaign accounts on sites like Facebook or Twitter can fuel a campaign's success.

1.3   METHODOLOGY AND THEORIES

This thesis will use participant observation in order to understand the activities of a few

groups in the El Paso community. Through my own community engagement, there are

observations I will detail that are taken from "invading the life of informants" at senior centers

and students across the University of Texas at El Paso (see Creswell, 2014). Although my

observations may invade the life of informants, in this instance it will be a light observation

where I will simply see how senior citizens react when exposed to an elected official speaking.

Furthermore, I will see their interactions with technology via mobile devices and how this

population's attention can be kept throughout a standard update on local politics. Such

observation also employs important terminology in ethnography, which means "writing about

groups of people," specifically the culture of people (LeCompte and Schensul, 2010). Therein,

the people visiting the senior centers are mostly Spanish speakers, compelling people who visit,

in this case an elected official, to speak to them in their language. This demographic will be

further discussed below to provide a more comprehensive scope of El Paso's political landscape.

Voter studies have been conducted for decades and have evolved with time focusing on,

among other things, ideological based voters, which are few, and issue based voters, which may

get new voters to the polls in a given election. Usually the typical voter will have trouble

understanding questions about policy because they are objectively vague or poorly stated (Converse, 2000). If informed opinion is isolated into demographic categories that reflect competing interests in the political arena, it can be easier to understand the more sophisticated among the electorate who engage as more informed, rational actors when casting a vote at the ballot (Converse, 2000). With this in mind, we can find a way to apply to social media users that are simply participating in superficial activism – only sharing their opinion through a post on a social network and not putting their opinion in action at the polls – versus those who engage in more substantive debate. The former makes the group of users that are "politically active" on social media less sophisticated or even unsophisticated in cases where such engagement on social media fails to translate into votes at the polls. It can almost be a tool to distract people and get them energized about a certain subject while not giving them enough energy to vote on Election Day.

The summary tally is another theory that is great in practice because it allows voters to create an opinion in a reasoned manner, but a person does not recall the information used to create the tally when making proper judgments (e.g., see Villalobos, 2013). This can also explain the reason why most people know how much they dislike or like a certain candidate on an issue, but cannot recount why and results instead with people sometimes eluding to vague recollections or even stereotypes that digress from the original information they received like a game of telephone (Villalobos, 2013). This low sophistication in voters opens the door for posting uninformed opinions on social media and ultimately not voting on Election Day. In essence a voter is not ignorant, they are simply privy to becoming informed yet not completely digesting information, thus leading to them not being extremely engaged in politics and either voting according to subtle cues or perhaps not voting at all if their engagement is largely superficial.

Firsthand insight into Beto O'Rourke's 2012 campaign provides an interesting understanding of a new aspect of the modern campaign – social media. The usage of this phenomenon allows one to get a deeper understanding of modern political campaigns and their influence on the electorate. Via a social media content analysis through background information obtained through Brian Wancho's personal blog (authorized by Congressman O'Rourke), I explore the themes that contributed to his successful election to the House of Representatives. A content analysis usually targets traditional mediums such as documents, books, diaries, and records, but even this typical list must be updated to include websites and blogs – as is the case for Brian Wancho's blog (LeCompte and Schensul, 2010). Wancho's comprehensive study on employing much technology into the campaign will make scholars and readers alike better understand social media usage in campaigns and how it can be essential to their operation.

1.4 ELECTIONS, UNDECIDED VOTERS, & SOCIAL MEDIA

The idea behind engaging voters through social media is easier said than done, for it is a phenomenon that has been difficult to understand and in the second chapter I will try to explain the difficulties scholars have encountered in studying this subject over the years. To understand the importance of social media in modern campaigns I review literature based on both the 2008 and 2012 U.S. presidential elections. I will also explore first works that have come out that have started to demonstrate some insight on the role that social media plays in campaigns. I will then highlight more recent works that have shed some light on key relationships that have been difficult to explore over the past years. Furthermore, popular shows like *The View* and *The Daily Show* and figures like Oprah, have influenced the political spectrum at some point. Finding the

next water cooler moment is a constant challenge, and through social media these moments have taken a new form to influence the political arena.

1.5   TURBO VOTE REWRITES THE RULES

The third chapter will analyze a relatively new program called TurboVote. The program's website, https://turbovote.org, is where users can sign up for a service that provides voter registration and sends reminders via text message on cell phones about the next election occurring in their area. A political science class at The University of Texas at El Paso signed up to use this program to conduct a micro study on how TurboVote works and to test it for the midterm elections during the fall semester of 2014. This chapter goes in depth explaining how the program started, what it does, and how it has been employed. An explanation detailing the program's use at UTEP will be discussed at length. The program has been employed more widely at various college and university campuses across the country. Targeting this age group is critical, since they are the group that constantly has the lowest voter turnout. TurboVote has rewritten the rules and in time it has the potential to create new voters and increase participation.

1.6   COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT THROUGH THE OFFICE OF EL PASO COUNTY COMMISSIONER DAVID STOUT

This chapter will journey through the first year in office of El Paso County Commissioner David Stout and his efforts of engaging the community through different media tools and strategies. County government will be briefly explained in order to get a better understanding about the issues and policies that affect the office of Commissioner David Stout. The profile of

the typical voter, senior citizens, will be analyzed through observations from visiting El Paso

Senior Centers found in Precinct Two of El Paso County. In an effort to achieve the best possible

community engagement, Stout employs different mediums like a quarterly newsletter,

community meetings, and the press in order to inform his constituents about the issues affecting

his precinct. Social media is a tool that is part of the day-to-day operations of his Precinct Two

office, but it is only one of many that allows him to connect to the people he represents and in

this office it is barely gaining traction.

1.7 THE SUCCESS OF BETO O'ROURKE'S CONGRESSIONAL CAMPAIGN THROUGH THE SIGNIFICANT USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

The final chapter further aids in deciphering how social media works by analyzing Beto

O'Rourke's successful 2012 Congressional bid for the 16th District of Texas seat located in El

Paso, Texas where he ousted an incumbent of over 15 years in the U.S. House of

Representatives. The massive campaign operation used a copious amount of technology in order

to achieve a victory in a race that was an uphill battle to win. The campaign created a strategic

plan to turn the interactions and connections made through its Facebook campaign page to

translate into votes on Election Day. The ability to target social media and its role in campaigns

has been hard to explore in the past several years, but the key here was the campaign's plan to

integrate social media as a main tool to target specific voters and earn their support.

1.8 SUMMARY

It is a difficult process to operationalize social media and thus far scholars have only

spoken about social media and elections as a broad subject, as opposed to analyzing its limits and

positive aspects. With the fast approaching Presidential Election of 2016, more data will be readily available and perhaps assist in studying this hot topic. In this thesis, I hope to understand what has and has not worked in using social media. I expect to run into a few speed bumps, but through a review of literature, I intend to help readers to better understand what has happened in the past years and what is to come. Beto O'Rourke's 2012 campaign really pinpoints an answer to effectively using social media in a campaign. TurboVote has made significant strides in registering more voters. The unique opportunity of this study promotes the widespread use of this program throughout the states. Community engagement is essential and through my unique work position with El Paso County Commissioner David Stout, I will be able to understand what the community faces on a daily basis in order to understand the issues. The methods used in this thesis are basic observation and content analysis, and overall qualitative in nature. An analysis of the value of social media, contributing to society through voter registration, dissecting a successful Congressional campaign because of social media, and personal experience in community engagement have allowed me to capture the reader into understanding social media, elections, and communities.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 EXPLORING SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media is a relatively new tool that has been on the rise throughout the past decade. In academia, as social media has been on the rise in American Politics, there have been studies in recent years that have explored this new phenomenon and its effect on politics. It is a growing area of research that scholars continue to explore, finding challenges along the way. These challenges are associated with measurement of key factors and capturing relationships between social media and politics. In this literature review, I plan to talk about some of the early publications that began to have some insights about the role of social media in U.S. politics and transition to highlight more recent works that have started to reveal some of the key relationships formed between social media and politics.

2.2 WHAT IS SOCIAL MEDIA?

Social media is a tool that has appeared in campaigns in the past several years. It is rare for a candidate running for a political office to not have at least one social media account. Campaigns can use this medium to directly connect to potential voters that may miss campaign signs, commercials, or a visit at their door. Social media is defined as connections that happen between people and institutions as they engage in everyday lives (Heaney and McClurg, 2009). These connections consist of familial relations, close friends, and friends on opposite ends of the planet. People use social media in order to expand personal networks and have access to information, expertise, and status (Heaney and McClurg, 2009). A person builds their network through befriending family members, friends, and even strangers on these virtual platforms. They may also share their interests in movies, television, and books. The connection to politics

comes through a person's decision to come across or follow a campaign on Facebook or Twitter, and further engage in conversation with the people in their network.

Social media accounts allow campaigns to push updates to their audience throughout the course of a campaign through Election Night. The 2012 presidential election in the United States advanced the use of social media in campaigns (Bor, 2013). People saw a presence of candidate information on their social media home pages - referred to as a *news feed* on Facebook or *timeline* on Twitter, where people receive real time updates about the people and pages they follow. People may not exclusively sign on to their social media account to see political updates, but having it appear in between an update on their favorite show and a picture of a relative's wedding makes it unavoidable, therefore leading to a potential spark in interest on the topic. It allows a user to become informed on campaign platforms and share this information in conversation with friends, relatives, and coworkers. It can best be seen as an immediate "water cooler moment" that can happen at any given time since people can connect at all times of the day. This new evolution of "water cooler moments" is termed as a *trending topi*c in social media lingo – where social media sites compile the most talked about topics in entertainment, world news, and politics that are easily accessible to users to help them engage in conversation.

Interest in politics likely happens when campaigns have a plan to address concerns that hit close to home. For example, a presidential candidate may develop a plan to create new jobs and a person that has recently lost their job may suddenly engage in the race because they want to believe in someone that will change their situation. Perhaps a person uses marijuana regularly and talk about legalizing this drug can make them interested in practicing their civic duty and casting a vote on Election Day. People with a passion for a single issue may go on their Facebook or Twitter pages to share their thoughts on the subject and create a chain reaction with

their followers to support a candidate because of one issue. Undecided and uninformed voters can gain passion on topics after seeing the posts of others that have commenced engagement in a certain election. Those that are politically informed and regularly post their views on their accounts can also motivate their followers to follow an election. Social media has potential to affect political participation, engagement, and most importantly perhaps even impact the outcome of an election.

2.3 THE CHALLENGES OF SOCIAL MEDIA (NO LONGER)?

The setback of studying social media is finding a formula to operationalize this new campaign tool. Data currently available may not be accurate and political scientists realize the difficulty as each election passes by. This subject is understudied and is most likely caused by a lack of knowledge in approaching social media sites. The lack of significance in recent research could stem from the way campaigns employ social media to reach the electorate. The current methods used by campaigns are obviously not working to turn users of social media sites into voters at the ballot. If social media sites are continually used in the same fashion, the results will be negative and time dedicated to the effort will be a waste. In order for researchers to find a way to best operationalize studies on social media, campaigns must learn how to effectively operationalize the tool in their own campaigns

In Barack Obama's 2008 campaign, he was able to successfully move his supporters through social media in certain regions throughout the country. It was not nationwide, but the northeast and the south part of the United States had users engaging on social media sites (Stern and Rookey, 2012). This was the beginning of a new social movement and the Obama campaign experimented with integrating use of social media in his campaign. Carlisle and Patton (2013)

may have found no significance, but Stern and Rookey (2013) point to the opposite and show that social media traction began in 2008 and has strengthened through the 2012 presidential campaign, and will be a factor in the 2016 election.

2.4 GAINING SOCIAL TRACTION IN 2012

The 2012 presidential election transitioned from a novice level use of social media to an intermediate stage, where it will probably remain for years to come. Social media is simple to use and it gives candidates instant citizen feedback, allowing for fundraising efforts, and became central to campaigns in the presidential elections (Bor, 2013). Bor's description of social media becoming central to a campaign is interesting, for campaigns have definitely made it a priority to open accounts on the diverse platforms, but these sites have not aided campaigns in finding success in winning elections. Instead campaigns slowly move to using social media sites as a resource and not investing time on how to make them an integral part of the campaign. Think of it like this – after weeks of campaigning, campaigns end up using these networks as a nice wall decoration that remains in the campaign office until the end of the election, whether successful or not. If they would take the time to place creativity behind every post, then it is a step closer to Bor's thoughts on social media being not only central to campaigns, but really making them a central, *influential* part, not just a temporary hobby of sorts or an afterthought.

Iowa is one of the first states to cast votes in presidential primaries and is made up by a diverse group of people who are accustomed to having candidates really come down to earth and visit them in their kitchens, living rooms, or backyards to talk about the issues that matter to them and learn about platforms. The use of social media changed the course of traditions and the modern campaign affected Iowans and increased participation in caucusing (Dimitrova and

Bystrom, 2013). Caucusing is unique to few states and social media was used to encompass new voters to the process in Iowa. It is a difficult process to understand and requires a few more steps than simply showing up at the polls to cast a vote. By posting on social media, Iowans were likely presented with all the information necessary to understand the process and in turn increased numbers at the polls. It is a neat reference point that Iowans and voters across the country could access at any point. I like to compare it to using a hardcover dictionary, for years ago, if a person needed to know a definition of a word they would have to pull out their own personal dictionary or visit a library to find any given definition. Nowadays people simply type the word into an online search engine and the definition comes up instantaneously. The same situation occurs in today's political atmosphere, since people can enjoy on demand information about campaign platforms or even see where their favorite candidate is headed to next through social media sites. The ability to generate voter education via these sites is valuable since a dense explanation can be illustrated through images or through the simplification of platform language into a user-friendly experience.

Social media presence in the 2012 Presidential Election races elevated the public's perception about candidates running for president. People have used social media in a positive manner to gain more knowledge about candidates and make an informed decision at the polls, instead of using it to post derogatory comments on a candidate's Facebook or Twitter page, (Groshek and Al-Rawi, 2013). Voters are enabled to hide behind their screens and use their social media accounts to interact and ask candidates questions that they would be too afraid to ask face-to-face in public. Many prefer visuals and figures, thus social media is perfect for educating voters about what matters most to them. These sites also create a type of hub where all

candidates could be viewed on one web platform and easily navigate through their most

important information.

Social media was presumed to have had a strong impact on the 2012 presidential election, which set the precedent for future races. Nevertheless, scholarly articles about social media and elections decreased significantly from 140 published articles in 2008 to 40 published articles in 2012 (Veerger, 2012). This decrease in publications should not have occurred, for by 2012 there were many more users on Facebook and Twitter. A valid explanation for this decrease can be attributed to scholars hitting a rock wall or ceiling on what to investigate and not being able to further expand on research on social media, particularly since operationalizing key factors for deeper analysis can be difficult and some scholars have been trying to figure out new ways to approach the matter. In 2008 social media was a novelty and scholars probably took interest, but were surprised to find the many challenges in exploring this new medium. Furthermore, scholars have not fully acknowledged that the Internet of 2012 is far different from the one of 2008 and surely will be different in 2016 and beyond (Kreiss and Welch, 2015). Finding the differences between these periods and why they matter is likely a key element to exploring this mysterious phenomenon.

The use of social media websites has became a norm in people's lives to access daily news and learn about an election like the 2012 presidential campaigns. There was a heightened use of media and more people seemed to have interest in Facebook, Twitter, and campaign websites than 20th century campaigns that had none of these resources (Towner, 2013). Obama acted as a catalyst when he used social media in 2008, a move that made other candidates across the nation adopt it into their campaigns. The adoption of Facebook came at a pivotal time, since it went beyond the election and those that won their respective race could use the medium as a

constant electronic town hall. By the end of 2012 almost 100 percent of Congress members had adopted this site and used it to communicate with constituents (Gulati and Williams, 2013). It is a way of personalizing communication and very useful to constituents who may hold candidates accountable to the many promises made during the campaign trial. Democratic Congressional members participate in a social media contest that is put on by Democratic Whip, Steny Hoyer, making members of Congress challenge each other to have the most likes on Facebook and followers on Twitter (Democratic Whip Hoyer, 2014). This is a partisan contest, but it exemplifies how much members of Congress value their social media accounts. It also demonstrates that the Democratic Party places a high priority on using social media over the Republican Party.

2.5 SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT WITH FOLLOWERS

Social media has been used to concede elections to winners and vice versa to announce a victor. Congressional candidates have been the most proactive to announce their victories and defeat via 140 characters on Twitter (Mirer and Bode, 2013). Those that win elections can use these sites to inform the public and also clarify any hearsay that traditional media outlets put out. This is becoming more and more evident when established news networks like CNN keep an eye on social media constantly to see if politicians or any celebrities may clarify their controversial comments or react to a significant event in the world. It is now normal for the media to grab these comments and show them on air to viewers and probably easier than attempting to get an interview with any individual. Ten or twenty years from now, the sophistication of these messages will evolve and it may become a primary source for politicians.

The instant connection that social media sites allow their users to have with candidates makes these individuals seeking office more personable and followers feel as if they truly know their favorite politician. This is further evident when candidates take time to respond directly to their followers igniting excitement - even though it was probably a campaign staffer who acts on behalf of the candidate and responds to all interactions on the various social media accounts. The prospect of mobilizing potential voters is there, for a positive message on Facebook that a campaign puts out takes seconds to read and move people to vote, but it is difficult for a campaign to craft a motivating message every time that will mold a person into an informed individual who would then take it to the next level and vote.

These powerful platforms are a game-changer for the news cycles, since now many more people contribute to a story. Through the many tragic world events that have happened in past years, there has been a deeper presence of user-generated cell phone video of a tragic event, or play-by-play updates on social media sites. No longer is a story being made by a select few reporters; instead, these reporters and news networks are reaching out to normal people to give their news stories a more personal touch by sharing a story through words, photos, or videos posted to social media sites by people that were present at a given event. It also allows campaigns to use snippets of viral moments in campaigns that could be showcased to people where a candidate may have had momentum over other candidates in debates to convince undecided voters to support their candidate.

2.6 TRADING IN THE TRADITIONAL MEDIA FOR YOUTUBE

Another social media outlet that has gained traction since the 2008 election is YouTube. Candidates upload videos to its server and save thousands of dollars to air advertisements on

television. Not only do they save money, but people can also watch these advertisements repeatedly at no cost to the campaign. YouTube is viewed as a place for entertainment but there is a strong correlation between people looking for politics and finding videos on the site (Hanson, Haridakis, and Sharma, 2011). It is a sign of the times that traditional ways of obtaining daily news is not necessarily by waiting till after work to catch the nightly news since on demand videos can be accessed throughout one's work day. The price people pay is the loss of social skills since connectivity trumps any real interaction with another person because consumers are glued to their smartphones throughout the day. In time, YouTube and other video sharing sites have the potential to steer voters toward hot topics immediately. It is evident that social media is making an impact through sites like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, with usage on the rise year by year where the number of users have increased for the past five years for Twitter and Facebook. It allows people to have yet another choice to become informed and less excuses about not knowing how to perform their civic duty on Election Day.

YouTube has really become a place where people go to find short videos about almost anything they want to research more. It is now a site that competes with traditional news media to spread a message to voters that candidates are using to engage with voters (Klotz 2015). It is also a place that can be used to make advertisements that are longer than the traditional 30 seconds, which campaigns do not need to worry about purchasing more air time if they are one, two, or three minute messages. It also serves as an archive of videos, for if someone running for a particular office has run for another position before and used YouTube, users may run across these old ads while searching for their new videos. The site inadvertently creates a point of accountability and may force candidates to stay on course with their message and not contradict themselves from prior positions on certain issues.

2.7 THE GROWTH OF SOCIAL MEDIA USERS

      Juliet E. Carlisle and Robert C. Patton (2013) use a quantitative approach to operationalize how there is a connection between political engagement and communication through social media, specifically Facebook. Interestingly, as the primaries began and led to the general election in 2008, Facebook users were not talking about political engagement. This probably happened because Facebook was still relatively new and its user base was not vast. In August of 2008, there were 100 million worldwide users on Facebook, so it is reasonable to say that the 2008 presidential election was hardly affected (Carlisle and Patton, 2013). Carlisle and Patton do acknowledge that the site was generating much attention, but their findings indicate no significant impact. In the next years, the site saw tremendous growth and by March 2012, there were 901 million users that later increased to 955 million users in June of the same year (Associated *Press*, 2013). In fact, by September 2012 the site reached 1.01 billion total users (*Associated Press*, 2013). This milestone happened right before the presidential election of 2012 and the growth is ten times more than 2008. New resources, especially in media, take time to gain popularity, but in just four years Facebook became a social media giant.

      Compared to Facebook, Twitter has taken more time to grow with an initial increase from 2006-2009 that eventually tallied up to 26 million users (Loftus, 2011). The more major growth then came in March 2010 when Twitter grew from 30 million users to 101 million by September 2011. A year later in September 2012, the site had 167 million users and further grew to 218 million users by June 2013 (Lee, 2013). Currently, Twitter boasts 302 million monthly users (Twitter, 2015). Facebook has about four times more users than Twitter at 1.44 billion users (Rosenfeld, 2015). These two platforms have demonstrated their power in light of their year-to-year growth. Accordingly, this is a prime time for research and I predict that there will be more

expansive publications on social media usage in politics, especially once the 2016 presidential election ends.

2.8 MATCHING TRADITION TO MODERN

Negative campaigning is traditionally done via advertisements on television and one would think that negative campaigning creates an immediate backlash. This is not the case, for it is more of a delayed backlash (King and McConnell, 2003). By exposing a number of people to negativity, it was seen that the backlash came after a while and only after being exposed to advertisements a repeated number of times. Furthermore, the results showed that a negative attitude toward negative advertisements is gender specific, especially in women (King and McConnell, 2003). There is a positive response to the advertisements at first, but the more people watch them, the more aggravated they become. Candidates must use this method wisely where actual facts and not ones that can be found to be incorrect. A good strategy is to not overexpose people to negative advertisements, but when you find yourself in the middle of the second decade of the 21st century, people can overexpose themselves by turning to video sharing sites or even campaign social media pages and find these advertisements when needed. Before this, campaigns controlled the exposure by only airing them for a certain period of time on television and to not show them again. Now everything is archived on the World Wide Web.

Timing is also important because if too many advertisements run early in the election voters may be pushed away. The advertisements should be used to make an impact towards the end of the election when people still do not know who to vote for and it can help them decide at the last minute. It can be applied for controversial topics where a candidate can pull old information on their opponent and show how a certain opinion is only given to please a certain

audience. This negativity is usually done through advertisements, but now this method is also enhanced via social media. Social media allows for accountability and in this era almost no person can get away from being criticized since everything is documented and can easily be found through Facebook or Twitter. Any posts made are also on the Internet indefinitely and campaigns would be sharply criticized if they deleted a post that did not bode well with their targeted audience since it acknowledges a mistake was made, and even after deletion of the record of the mistake it can nevertheless live on forever on another site that reposted it.

2.9 A COMMUNITY EFFORT TO EXTINGUISH A FIRE

The mobilization of people is difficult, for substance must be behind every political move in order to move people to the voting booth. Important issues like abortion, gay marriage, or drug legalization get people out and make a difference in their community on a larger scale. Campaign staffers are forced to sharpen their strategy since an issue can bring more voters than predicted. This was seen in May 2015 in the local El Paso County elections where city representatives running for office had to fight harder to earn each vote since firefighters were out on the street campaigning for pay raises. The firefighters brought new voters to the polls and simply voted to support them to give them better wages. With this, incumbents that were challenged in city races had to work hard in an election that would likely been easy to strategize because of the usual low voter turnout in the region that sparked up because of the people that the firefighters brought out to vote. Candidates running in any of the races would have been smart to support the firefighters' cause since they were campaigning hard on the streets for their health benefits and pay increases and had no group campaigning against them. Other candidates could have used their momentum to win their own election and in turn have the support of the firefighters for their own campaign.

This strategy did not work if used, for the three incumbents up for election on El Paso City Council retained their seats (El Paso County Votes, 2015). A push on social media was made and days leading up to the election, people were consistently talking about supporting pay raises. The efforts were a success and the firefighters earned their raises through a 19,289 to 15,039 vote (Washington Valdez, 2015). In this scenario, outreach was vital and firefighters united a community through sign holding at various intersections, phone calls, and establishing a brand on Facebook that had over 5,000 followers.

2.10 THE "OPRAH EFFECT" IS BORN

Through the 2008 presidential election, a new type of campaign began for the White House, one that had to be clever and different from the past. During this campaign, one could argue that the political "Oprah Effect" was born and might be credited for the election of Barack Obama. Oprah Winfrey has been a champion for women since the beginning of her daytime talk show in 1986 until its dissolution in 2011, at which point she moved to her own cable channel – the Oprah Winfrey Network (*Biography Channel*, 2015). Her show initially arrived at a time when daytime television was filled with tabloid television and most talk shows obtained their ratings through controversial topics that would spark interest in viewers. Winfrey came and changed that notion completely, creating a space where real issues like public affairs, betterment of society, and healthy living were discussed on a daily basis (Villalobos, 2012). As Oprah became more popular, her audience of primarily women felt empowered by her and idolized her for the topics discussed on her show. As time passed, women turned to their icon for tips on everything from weight loss to fashion, A-list celebrities, news, and politics, all depicted through Oprah's own personal journey on the subject matters.

Through her massive following, it was obvious that Winfrey's influence could impact or even impose her beliefs on her viewers and she did just that when she made headlines by endorsing Barack Obama for President over Hillary Clinton in 2008. Oprah is a strong female leader that women across the country looked up to and felt empowered by, so naturally it made sense for her to align her support with Hillary Clinton, another strong female leader that has dedicated a long portion of her life fighting for women. But she could also do the same as a strong African American leader supporting Barack Obama. By going with the latter, Winfrey chose race over gender with her endorsement of an African American to the presidency. Either candidate would make history if they won the White House, with Clinton potentially being the first female president at the time and, as it actually turned out, Obama being the first African American to lead the country (Villalobos, 2012). Ultimately, Obama won the race and Oprah's power with women could in part be attributed to aiding his successful presidential run.

This endorsement helped change the course of the 2008 Presidential Election and generated more voters in support of Obama than Clinton. Simply taking into account votes for Obama and not voter participation, 1,015,559 votes were attributed to Obama's final vote count in the primary (Garthwaite and Moore, 2008). Garthwaite and Moore (2008) only focused on 45 states and the District of Columbia leaving Texas, Michigan, North Dakota, Alaska and Kansas out of the sample. When voter participation is taken into account, this endorsement increased voter turnout by 2,196,300 people (Garthwaite and Moore, 2008), which helps demonstrate the positive effect that Oprah had on the race and really exemplify how much power her opinion had across the country.

After her endorsement, Oprah had to abstain from inviting any presidential candidates to her show because of mixed backlash received by her audience and to avoid potentially (and

perhaps permanently) harming her credibility with the lion's share of her conservative viewers. Some damage was done, but it seemed she had helped Obama come up with the votes needed to become president while keeping her reputation overall intact. Her stature as a talk show host influencing her viewers for many years through a book club, her own magazine, and life advice really added to her credibility at the time and made her views resonate with people across the country. Upon her subsequent absence from daytime television, others like Ellen DeGeneres began filling that void with a somewhat different approach than Winfrey that still worked to attract big stars and candidates that included Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton, and John McCain.

2.11 *THE VIEW* DELIVERS

The void that Oprah has left on daytime television allowed for other programs such as *The View* and *The Daily Show* to take over, often supplemented with additional related activity via social media. Both *The View* and *The Daily Show* have been on air since the late 1990s, but in recent years have become more important to the political spectrum. *The View* has set the bar high in programming for women through its controversial hostesses. In 2010, there was a huge turning point when Barack Obama decided to pay a visit to the show under much scrutiny – his visit gave the show its biggest rating ever at about 6.7 million viewers (Villalobos, 2012). People criticized the Commander-In-Chief's appearance as far as saying that it was like a previous appearance on the Jerry Springer Show by Governor Ed Rendell (D-PA). This comment could not be more disparaging for at the time, *The View* was an important show that allowed women, the show's target audience, to be updated on important topics and the President's visit could stimulate interest to those viewers that did not watch traditional news shows and presented him in a different light than the serious role he has on a day to day basis (see Villalobos, 2012).

Obama was able to subtly speak about foreign policy and educate the public, while talking about entertainment news that the audience is accustomed to watching. Furthermore, Barbara Walters is a reputable journalist that has been in the news business for decades and a far cry from Jerry Springer. *The View* is groundbreaking television, for it is a platform that has a panel of women contributing their opinion on politics, world news, and entertainment. It is interesting to watch these women react to diverse topics because they see things from a different angle and may prioritize current issues different than men, who usually dominate opinion shows. During this time four of the five co-hostesses – Barbara Walters, Whoopi Goldberg, Sheri Shepherd, and Joy Behar – held liberal views while Elizabeth Hasselbeck countered with unabashed conservative views.

Recently, the show has seen a decline in viewership, perhaps attributed to the departure of Barbara Walters and a rotating table of co-hosts that has failed to gain traction with audiences. Walters gave much credibility to the show and now the network has shifted the show into the ABC News department to give it the credibility that it now lacks (Setoodeh, 2014). The show should probably make a shift and attempt to engage their audience with more social media usage to spark interest in discussions, which could lead to viral moments on the Internet. The show's "Oprah effect" had a short run and it is unlikely to be an influence on politics as it once was, but it should refocus to bring an important demographic, women, back to engaging in politics.

Obama's appearance on *The View* was initially criticized, but in the end his popularity seemed to rise at the time and everyone talked about him on the Internet (see Villalobos, 2012). Nevertheless, his popularity in the polls only rose one or two percent in the immediate aftermath of his appearance on the show. Reactions online were vastly positive, a sign that initial reaction on sites like Facebook and Twitter does not neatly correlate with national polls. Adults, 18-24

years of age, dominate the use of social media sites for political engagement, which is the group

that has the lowest voter turnout (*Pew Research*, 2013). By comparison, 60% of adults on social

media over the age of 65 are active, but only 13% of Americans in this age group have social

media accounts (*Pew Research*, 2013). An interesting point can be made that like negative

advertisements, a delayed backlash (King and McConnell, 2003) happens with social media.

Initially people may react positively on social media about the popularity of a candidate, in this

case President Obama, but after it has settled in for several hours that excitement is lost by the

time the polls are conducted. Ways of measuring reactions on social media should also be taken

into account when measuring popularity in the polls, but it is yet another challenge for finding

causal relationships in social media and politics.

2.12 *THE DAILY SHOW* INFLUENCE

With the departure of Oprah Winfrey in daytime television and the decline of *The View,*

The Daily Show with Jon Stewart has entertained audiences for over 16 years, until recently

when his show ended on August 6, 2015. He has undoubtedly become a person of influence in

the political spectrum, especially during Obama's tenure. Stewart's show is a liberal comedic

satire, but can serve as a dose of news to its viewers that are not accustomed to watching or

following news. His ability to present hard policy topics in a funny manner helps educate the

public and educate the public about politics.

Jon Stewart has been a pioneer for influencing policy through his show, meeting privately

with Obama to help him gain support for various policy proposals. His influence has run so deep

in Obama's administration that he has made them scrap policy plans when Stewart did not agree

with his ideas and bashed them on his show. Stewart sharply criticized the Obama administration

when they planned on removing veterans with private insurance from the Department of Veteran Affairs rolls (Samuelsohn, 2015). The policy idea was dropped a day after the show aired. This type of influence makes traditional news outlets irrelevant. Many of Stewart's videos have become popular through social media. The Daily Show has over 4.8 million followers on Facebook and 3.7 million followers on Twitter.

In today's spectrum, less people are watching live television and are turning to online viewing. Furthermore, people are not watching full length shows, instead opting for the best moments of a show that can be seen in five to ten minutes on their social media homepage. Stewart's large following on these platforms allow spreading important messages instantly. As noted earlier, 18-24 year olds are very politically active on social media sites, so they are the ones that benefit from short videos they can watch to understand important political issues that are very dense in nature and difficult to understand. This age group is the majority of Stewart's audience, and those that are known not to be voters. Through his platform, young people are engaged and their engagement will turn into votes at the polls. Stewart leaves a huge gap in the market, for there are no other shows with a similar large audience to influence politics in a unique way other than traditional news networks. This may very well pave the road for social media to play a significant role in future races.

2.13 SOFT NEWS > HARD NEWS

The "Oprah effect" is best described as a movement that goes unnoticed to undecided voters. These types of people are watching television for entertainment and avoid programs that cover politics, but enjoy watching their favorite show that talks about politics hidden amongst other issues of their interest. Experts are divided on the matter and Matthew Baum (2003)

believes that viewers of soft news coverage on foreign policy are influenced by these shows to be more interested in politics (see also Villalobos, 2012). Markus Prior (2005) argues that the soft audience is small compared to the audience of hard news, and those interested in soft news programs are less likely to participate in elections or gain any political knowledge (see also Villalobos, 2012). The fact is that people are watching more soft news than ever before and social media is allowing for audiences to engage in politics in an environment that is friendly to users and more easy to comprehend. Hard news may confuse the average person since it can go on for hours and terminology used in reporting is difficult to understand, whereas in soft news programming it is presented in layman's terms, as Jon Stewart has done with many topics on *The Daily Show*. Interestingly, hard news outlets and program have recently begun to imitate soft news sources as a way of generating better ratings, even at the cost of less substantive coverage.

2.14 THE "NEW #OPRAHEFFECT"

Social media determines popularity of a certain topic through which users share in the form of a hashtag – # – followed by a topic name. When people click on this hashtag, they are redirected to a page that collects posts as they are shared and shows the person what the population is thinking. The most popular list of five to ten topics "trending" is updated in real time and the latest information is always available. People gain unprecedented instant access to the latest news affecting the world, or the latest controversial moment that everyone is talking about. Now if people want to check what is being said about a topic they can go on social media and those affected by the topic, mainly famous people, including politicians, can easily confirm or deny allegations about certain reported news. This tool is essential to any campaign, for if they create a viral post or video, they can really lure voters to supporting their campaign.

"Soft news" gets a new meaning as it lives on social media accounts, for a person checking their account in five minutes can view pictures of their friend's wedding, read about the latest celebrity break up, and learn about the latest in politics by only accessing their account on their free time. A person could have easily performed these three activities by watching a few programs on television and stopping by a friend's house and having a face-to-face conversation, but that takes a lot of time, and these days people do not have an abundance of time. It is a matter of convenience and a shift towards technology since people check their social media accounts several times a day in order to keep up with all the interests in their lives. It demonstrates a dramatic change in the way people receive their news - when they want it and only subscribing to what they want to see. It opens the door to people of the caliber of Oprah who may endorse someone's candidacy and if they are well liked and very popular, they can create what I deem the "New #OPRAHEFFECT" and people will get behind a candidate, talk shows will discuss the Facebook or twitter post, traditional news media will cover the story, and campaigns win because they get a plethora of coverage they can later convert to votes.

2.15 THE CONGRESS OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Congressional candidates have adopted the use of social media pages, especially incumbents who have frequent elections like those in the House of Representatives - every two years. Those challenging incumbents placed a low priority on those pages, even though most candidates have had pages for at least two years and frequently post their work to constituents (Williams and Gulati, 2013). U.S. Representative Beto O'Rourke has taken advantage of using a Facebook page to notify his constituents of his work in Washington, D.C. His vast use of social media will further be discussed in chapter five. Incumbents who maintain social media accounts

establish an audience giving them an advantage over a potential challenger that must start from the bottom to gain a following.

The use of social media sites in Congressional campaigns is an interesting aspect to analyze. The ones that do not use these sites are those with no challengers and those that are poorly financed (Gulati and Williams, 2013). Poorly financed campaigns should be the first ones to create social media sites since they are free and can help them develop a following. They can distinguish themselves from other candidates and build a bridge of information with the electorate. The vulnerability of losing an election will not influence most to adopt the use of Twitter or use it to their advantage (Lassen and Brown, 2010). Instead, it is assumed that traditional campaign methods like phone calls and block walking take precedence over social media, even though posts take little time out of one's day. During the 2012 election, 97 % of senatorial candidates had a Facebook page and used it actively (Gulati and Williams, 2013). Although Facebook is heavily used in the U.S. Senate, Twitter is a preference of U.S Senators and it is a platform works well with young voters (Gulati and Williams, 2013). U.S. Senators are more known since there are only 100, so they tend to be under a larger microscope when they make statements. With Twitter, Senators can explain themselves and clarify any statements that may have been misunderstood. The point Gulati and Williams make of Twitter working with young voters is interesting because this is an age group that has little impact on most elections since they do not turn out to vote. It can likely be concluded that they will not have a big impact on derailing an incumbent senator for their actions, especially in the early years of the term since by the time they are up for election the controversies of early years will be forgotten by the electorate.

There is also a good indicator that incumbent senators seeking another term have a good advantage and do not need to rely too much on social media sites since they may build a constant presence online throughout their term to the citizens that they represent (Hayes, 2010). If they have a social media account set up for the first time they run for election, they can build an audience over several years. Senate terms are also longer than those in the House of Representatives at six years compared to two, therefore people know their senator well after having them in office for many years and few are challenged. If challenged, the rapport built with constituents through these sites can aid them in firing up their base of supporters. Of course this may only occur if they task themselves with doing a good job in Congress and at least making the many votes that happened throughout the year. It is important to note that most candidates have two pages, one for the campaign and the other for the official office they hold. This allows for candidates to ask people for their vote through one account and if elected, use another account to display the work in Congress that they were tasked with. In future elections, those challenging incumbents could strategically use Facebook or Twitter to have a presence and channel the vulnerabilities of the person in office through smart social media posts. Simply having great graphics and short videos that connect with the electorate can win over the support needed to oust an incumbent from office. All parties benefit from social media and candidates reach more people and help their campaigns, while people are able to get excited about voting and participating in their communities.

2.16 TURNING THE PAGE ON THE TRADITIONAL CAMPAIGN

The novelty of social media has definitely not worn over these past years. As new mediums form for candidates to use, campaigns must approach social media in a way that they

are still in control of the message they put out to voters since it ultimately affects their campaigns (Farrar-Myers Vaughn, 2015). Campaigns must not allow for negative moments to go viral because in this day, any photo or video will easily be trending within minutes of occurring. This could lead to days or even weeks of campaign material that opponents can use to their advantage to sink a campaign with this bad luck. Campaigns can cut back on traditional forms of media like television and newspapers in favor of 140-character tweets or a video that goes viral have potential to be more effective (Farrar-Myers Vaughn, 2015). In fact, it has been a very long time since I have seen campaign advertisements in newspapers, a fatality that I attribute to the struggling industry that has people moving to the Internet to receive their daily news rather than waiting for the paper to be delivered each morning. The abundance of news sites and the simplicity of turning to a mobile device or computer for up to the minute news creates a faster approach to news. This is why there is a high degree of possibility of social media sites to create great moments for campaigns. Major news networks and publications have websites, and now social media pages – a move that allows them to reach out to people other than just their website. A big advantage to using social media is that sites are free and it is just a matter of cracking the code of reaching out to users to make it a standard functionality for political campaigns. With the changing times, it makes sense that social media could be the new print media and go hand-in-hand with television and radio.

With all the untapped potential into social media, both scholars and campaign staff have a misconception of putting into practice good methods of using these sites (Farrar-Myers Vaughn, 2015). The improvement of Obama's 2012 campaign over Romney stemmed from certain advantages he had going into campaign season. For one, a primary was nonexistent and all his resources could strictly go into focusing on a general election and several more months of

building infrastructure across many platforms (Farrar-Myers Vaughn, 2015). This is true for any incumbent, for as stated previously, they have the ability to build their networks throughout their years in office and reaching out to constituents via Twitter or Facebook to show they are actually doing the job that voters elected them to do. Attempting to operationalize social media will be further be discussed in the next sections, where scholars, politicos, and general users of social media are finding direction after being at a crossroads for many years. These recent works reveal that as time passes by, the challenges and misunderstandings of social media are now being understood better.

2.17 SOCIAL MEDIA FIGURES IN 2012

Social media really expanded to many platforms that people were interacting with throughout the 2012 presidential election. During Election Night in 2012, 67 million people watched coverage on network television. On the other hand there were 306 million people shared their thoughts on Facebook and 11 million people on Twitter (cited in Kreiss and Welch, 2015). These figures are outstanding for when trying to understand the relationship between social media and campaigns, these numbers must mean something. It would also be interesting to know how many of the 67 million viewers were using social media to share their thoughts as the results unraveled throughout the night. This would especially be true today since it is almost impossible to watch anything on television, news, reality, or scripted television, without a suggested hashtag at the bottom of the screen so people could flock to social media sites to talk about what they are watching. Another interesting figure of the night was Obama's Election Night victory photo that he posted and shared on Twitter over 800,000 times in three days – a feat that at the time was the most shared image in social media history (Kreiss and Welch, 2015). This compared to his

victory post on Twitter in 2008 that was shared 157 times, 5000 less times than in 2012. The

numbers are staggering and shows how much social media grew in four short years.

2.18 CONGRESSIONAL CAMPAIGNS AND FACEBOOK

Naturally, Congressional members have used social media for some time, both for

campaigning and staying in touch with those that they represent. Gulati and Williams (2015)

conducted a study where they interviewed 91 Congressional campaigns for the House of

Representatives to find out how they used or did not use Facebook for their campaigns. One of

the reasons cited was that they believed it was a big necessity to be on Facebook since people

turn to this site to find more information on candidates. Furthermore, they believed that it was

important to have a site for voters to find and it being a cost-effective method, free to register

and use, it only makes sense to use them in campaigns. This became true for campaigns with

hardly any money and trying to use these sites to reach the most voters. All valid reasons, it is

imperative to see how campaigns put into practice the use of social media since it is difficult to

measure how to find success in these sites.

A small majority of the campaigns interviewed used social media to target a specific

block of voters with young people, volunteers, and supporters being the most targeted (Gulati

and Williams, 2015). Targeting seems to be the most effective way of outreach, since campaigns

can compile information that can narrow down which voters are the ones missing from

supporting a candidate. It also shows that campaigns may just want to grow their base of

volunteers through these sites and have more boots on the ground to spread a message. Reaching

out to supporters may be redundant since those are already committed and candidates can usually

do almost no wrong for these staunch voters. Over half of those that participated said they did

not have a specific target and had a page for everyone to see (Gulati and Williams, 2015). This is not an intelligent move because it likely will not produce results and a reason that contributes to the issue of not knowing how social media contributes to campaigns. It can also be attributed to campaigns not knowing how to even use these sites or how do target the electorate effectively.

Over two-thirds of the campaigns interviewed mentioned that they used social media as a tool to inform people about issues, invite them to events, and share other general information that was very one-directional (Gulati and Williams, 2015). By doing this, it can be seen that most Congressional campaigns do not attempt to use social media as a resourceful tool. Instead they use it to serve as a giant bulletin board, like one in a hallway of any institution that can be filled with a lot of information that goes unnoticed. This factor is crucial to the misunderstanding of social media that has puzzled scholars and politicos alike over the past few years. By taking this route and campaigns claiming that they are "engaging" with voters, there is no actual engagement being made. In chapter four, this targeted campaign strategy will be discussed and how successful it could be to use social media in this manner.

2.19 UNIVERSITY STUDENTS INFORMED, BUT NOT VOTING

The limitations of social media are vast and difficult to comprehend such phenomenon. In a study conducted with university students across the country, the effect of candidate evaluations on social media was put to a test and found to be relatively small and unlikely to have an influence on voter choice (Hawthorne and Warner, 2015). This finding is not surprising, as the authors further describe their polling sample as unique and when compared to other young people not attending research universities, their pool is likely to get their information from social media sites. This is a thought provoking finding because it sheds light on an age group that is

always deemed as non-voting, digests information on their Facebook or Twitter, but it is not motivating enough to make them vote. As this age group becomes older, in the next ten years, they will be part of another age group – one that usually votes and the effect of social media on elections may hit a turning point. This young group of users is one that already uses social media on a daily basis and probably does not remember the last time they did not use some sort of social network in their daily routine (Conroy, Feezell, and Guerrero, 2015). This is important because for the first time ever, the people that had these accounts in their 20s, will be in their 30s and will have been account holders for over a decade and perhaps an increase in political sophistication will be seen. A study that would follow this age group through the next three election cycles would be interesting to observe to see if their political sophistication increases throughout the years as elections pass, technology changes, and the group ages. This will allow scholars to further improve their understanding of this phenomenon and possibly find some causality between social media and American elections.

2.20 MANIPULATING THE PRESS

As news outlets continue their evolution into reaching the public, Twitter has been a platform that has aided in this transformation. In the 2012 presidential election, young reporters covering diverse events were the most comfortable using Twitter to provide play-by-play accounts of occurrences on the campaign trail (Lawrence, 2015). It is almost as if Twitter can replace the old reporter's notebook, since reporters can simply share what is happening and after sending out several posts, they simply need to compile the information into a news story to share with those that may have missed the information as it was happening. Today it is nearly impossible to find a reporter, old or young, without a Twitter account. Furthermore, it allows

any user to be a reporter of the news. A tragic event may happen and those living through such even can share what is happening with the world and first responders could be alerted of how grave a situation is and develop a strategy to help in the best way possible.

The Obama and Romney camps used Twitter to set precedence for the news media. As campaign gaffes were generated throughout the campaign trail, Romney capitalized on one where Obama was talking about businesses and said that if people owned a business, "they didn't build that," (Kreiss and Welch, 2015), a phrase Romney ran with and shared on Twitter, mailers, and signs throughout his campaign events. In the same fashion, a blunder committed by Romney when he went to women's groups about staffing women for his administration when he served as Governor of Massachusetts and later receiving "binders full of women," (Kreiss and Welch, 2015). This did not stem for either campaign, instead it was generated by average social media users sharing these words in the form of *memes* – a picture with a caption on it that usually portrays a person, community, event, or group in a demeaning fashion. Almost four years later, memes are all over social media and enjoyed by users to illustrate current feelings about a subject.

2.21 THE TRADITIONAL AGAINST THE USER GENERATED

For many years, traditional media news outlets have controlled the stories put out to the public and have evolved through the years from print, radio, television, the Internet, and now social media. Because of social media, now everyone has an opinion and unless someone does not engage on these sites, it is not hard to find news and opinions about many topics – especially those that turn viral. Furthermore, there are conservative and liberal blogs or websites that do their best to debunk the opposition, in addition to the mainstream media. Through campaign

controversies that arise, thousands of articles put out by the aforementioned were analyzed to see just how much they covered a certain issue that came up during the 2012 Presidential Election. Obama's "Didn't build that" remarks garnered over 250 conservative blog posts, about 200 liberal blog posts, and about 150 mainstream media articles (Gruszcynski, 2015). In comparison Romney's "47%" comments about people not paying income tax were covered in about 200 conservative blog posts, over 400 liberal blog posts, and over 300 mainstream media articles (Gruszcynski, 2015). These numbers are not surprising for the conservative and liberal blogs were surely going to use opposition to their advantage and really talk about what could make the competition weak and talk less about the weaknesses of their candidates. For the media it shows that the more controversial a subject may be, the more likely they will cover it. In this instance, Romney's comments were deemed more newsworthy that they covered it more than Obama's comments on small business and it possibly cost Romney the election. Today anyone can create their own virtual space through social media pages, blogs, or websites and this is incredibly challenging for any campaign to control. Now more than ever a campaign must cover all its bases and a firm grip on what they put out and immediately work to dispel or fix any other information people put on the Internet. Not being in control and making mistake after mistake can end campaigns, especially in the current times we are living, as it did for Romney's quest for the White House.

Traditional news outlets have an upper hand in credibility over news that is generated through social media accounts, blogs, and other websites that average people create. When it comes to substance, this new type of media has created marginal differences in campaign coverage (Eshbaugh-Soha, 2015). As an avid social media user for the past ten years, I have been able to see the transformation of sites and others disappear. This contention that Eshbaugh-Soha

(2015) is interesting because I will still hold traditional outlets like CNN or The New York Times as credible over any other information posted on social media websites. As I scroll through my News Feed on a daily basis, I see that this fact does not hold true for many of the people in my network, for many of the links they share are from blogs or other non-credible sources that they claim as factual information. They do not bother to research if the information they are reading is being reported on news giants and instead just post and accept as the truth. This leads me to believe that political sophistication lacks, for it would be common sense to check where one gets their information and make sure it has the credentials to support any claim that is being reported on. This lack of sophistication likely translates at the polls with low voter turnout because many people believe the first thing they come across on the Internet.

2.22 BEING VOTER SPECIFIC

Sophisticated voters are hard to find, and through education there is a chance that voter turnout can increase for years to come. Reaching out to potential voters via Facebook is a method that was employed by the Obama reelection campaign to reach out to voters in key swing states in order for them to register to vote, gain their support, or volunteer for the campaign (Kreiss and Welch, 2015). This method created 5 million voters that were young, 18-29, and reacted positively to this communication, for they were ones that did not answer phone calls (Kreiss and Welch, 2015). To no surprise, they did not answer the phone, for in these times, most people prefer to be contacted via text message, email, and any other media that does not involve them picking up a phone and dialing a number. This I attribute to people multitasking and always being connected to their phones. It seems that people no longer have any hours in the day and by being able to communicate through written messages allows them more time to be in a meeting

and responding or watching their favorite television show without being interrupted by a phone call that can potentially last a few hours.

The large spending of money that may have gone towards advertising in newspapers is being spent on social media. As Obama's 2012 reelection campaign has been deemed to be "the most advanced application of data and analytics to strategic communications in electoral politics to date and as the standard that Republicans are currently striving to meet," (as cited in Kreiss and Welch, 2015). As Obama tried using the social media in his 2008 campaign, four years later these networks had tremendous growth, allowing for better use, a trend I predict will continue to improve into the 2016 and 2020 elections and beyond. In 2008 Obama set out with three goals for online advertising: build a supporter base, turn supporters into volunteers and donors, and finally make undecided voters supporters (cited in Kreiss and Welch, 2015). The fact that Obama cared enough about advertising online, demonstrates the potential he saw in investing and molding voters to support him. After testing the waters in 2008, he went in with a strong sense of spending money on online advertising doubling Romney's spending at $26 million with $52 million (cited in Kreiss and Welch, 2015). This is a strong online presence and significant chunk of money devoted towards the Internet. A significant part of this money likely went towards asking people to donate money for at times money must be spent in order to make more money in the end, especially for campaigns.

2.23 THE BEGINNING OF A NEW STANDARD

Citizens have progressed into a new type of political landscape as the past few presidential elections have come and gone. In the 1980s, a top- down approach worked for many

campaigns, but in times of social media that approach does not work because people can participate in elections without being on a campaign (Coffey, Kohler, and Granger, 2015). This sets up a political climate unlike no other since campaigns are held to a higher standard and people expect to have more of a personal approach. A person may want to receive a like on one of the comments they post on a campaign Facebook page or be followed by a campaign on Twitter. When this happens, people get excited and feel important, but most of all they feel like they are being included in the process of the campaign. This is a process that both scholars and campaign workers must fine tune in order to figure out the best way to approach social media, integrate it into campaigns, and find success.

Through the use of social media, politicians can position themselves to cause turmoil in a person's head and make them change their mind at the last moment. If a campaign is able to cause viral moments across many different platforms, their campaign brand skyrockets. Free resources that are available through these sites are vast and communication is key to creating any type of social movement. This is definitely a great investment of social capital and people should be using the sites to come together to really make the change they want to see. On the verge of the 2016 presidential election, it will be interesting to see candidates use social media to communicate with voters. Candidates like Hillary Clinton and Ted Cruz have used social media to make their official campaign launch announcement, showing that the value of social media is high and they will use it frequently in their respective campaigns (Twitter, 2015).

Chapter 3: The Impact of TurboVote on Participation

3.1 THE CASE FOR ONLINE VOTER REGISTRATION

As online trends continue to simplify traditional methods of executing tasks, one that has not been adopted widely in the United States is full online voter registration. In a country with low voter turnout, it makes sense to simplify the process of registering new voters. Currently, not all states allow people to register to vote through the Internet. As of July 2015, a total of 21 states allow for online registration. These states include Arizona, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Kansas, Louisiana, Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Missouri, Nevada, New York, Oregon, South Carolina, Utah, Virginia, and Washington (NCSL, 2015). Most of these states implemented online registration after 2010 with the exception of Kansas in 2009, Washington in 2007, and Arizona in 2002 (NCSL, 2015). The District of Columbia and a number of states have passed the law, but have not implemented it like Florida, Hawaii, Nebraska, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and West Virginia (NCSL, 2015).

The costs for states to move to online voter registration have been minimal and have mostly been paid for by existing budgets. In some cases state legislatures have had to appropriate one-time funds ranging from 250,000 to 750,000 dollars (NCSL, 2015). Other states have paid for costs through the Help America Vote Act (HAVA) that was signed into law by President George W. Bush in 2002. This mainly addressed improvements to voting across the country after the 2000 presidential election where many problems occurred in Florida (EAC, 2015). The system also allows for the Election Assistance Commission to conduct research, access to share voting practices, voter information and other shared practices that allows for the overall improvement in every election (EAC, 2015). The funding has not been a problem for states, so it is probably a matter of time until all fifty states adopt full online voter registration.

Moving to online voter registration is a step that is large for states. Most are hesitant to make a drastic change like this because of security. Thus far, there have been no security breaches thanks to the approach states have taken to design these sites. Arrays of four steps are taken to ensure the utmost security. Someone that is attempting to register must provide their driver's license number and the last four digits of their Social Security number. They also incorporate a CAPTCHA image, which is jumbled text captured in an image that must be decoded by a person attempting to register as identification to ensure they are a real person and not someone trying to hack the system. The data is encrypted and the questions that a registrant must answer appear one at a time as a means to deter hacking.

3.2 FOUNDING TURBOVOTE

TurboVote is a project that was born from the work of We're Democracy Works, a nonprofit organization that is dedicated to promoting the idea of voting. It is a nonpartisan organization created by millennials after realizing that it was difficult to remember to vote when away for college. Seth Flaxman realized that he was missing several elections while away from home and in graduate school. He had always been civically engaged, so with determination he set out to build a system that would ensure him not missing another election again. He created Democracy Works in order to bring the process of democracy to the Internet and the 21st century, which in turn created TurboVote. This project launched in 2010 in an effort to make voting fun and easy for American voters. To boost TurboVote's credibility, *The New York Times* and *ABC News* have endorsed their efforts. The program helps people register to vote and update their voter registration. They also direct people on how to obtain absentee ballots if they are living in another city other than their hometown.

We're Democracy Works' nonprofit status allows TurboVote's operation to provide the service at a low cost in order to reimburse themselves for the service provided to its users. TurboVote varies depending on the type of partnership, a civic organization or an institution of higher learning. Through these partnerships, colleges and universities can support voter engagement at a reduced rate than regular pricing, depending on how many people they plan to engage. Organizations that form standard partnerships can register or vote by mail and are given the option of receiving copies of completed forms. The mailed forms include a pre-addressed envelope and a stamp to be returned by mail to local election departments. The amount of postage an organization uses is what TurboVote will bill at the current standard postage rate, along with an annual fee to help with TurboVote maintenance throughout the year.

Users can also sign up without belonging to a higher education institute or organization. Through this method, people pay $1.60 per from or $5.00 for the mailings needed in one year. These include the registration forms, a stamp, and a pre-addressed envelope. If possible, it is better for people to sign up for the program through a non-profit organization or a university in order to not have to personally pay for the service. Registered voters are encouraged to sign up in order to stay up-to-date on elections in their local area. This is especially important and helpful if there is an upcoming referendum or bond election. It is also useful for those that no longer live in their hometown because of school or a professional life, since absentee ballots can be requested through TurboVote.

3.3 SIGNING UP FOR TURBOVOTE

The process to sign up for TurboVote individually or through an organization or university is similar. The only difference is that a person must enter their information through a

customized interface that displays an organization or university's logo, as opposed to the standard TurboVote interface. To access TurboVote, one must visit their website at https://turbovote.org/, and begin the registration process. On the home page, a person clicks on "Getting Started" and is directed to a page where one provides their first name, last name, and email address. The website is secure, since it deals with sensitive data, and even has a feature that allows a person to let the site know they are on a public computer and not a personal computer. This increases security and the website is able to wipe important login information so that the next user cannot access the account and instead sees the default TurboVote home page. The user then clicks on "Continue" and are presented with a question, "Are you a U.S. citizen?" and an option to answer yes or no. If the user answers no, registration essentially ends with a message appearing that informs the user they must be a U.S. citizen in order to register to vote. If the person's answer is "yes," then they are directed to the next screen and asked where they want to vote. It informs the person registering that they should provide the address to the place where they reside. It suggests that if they are a student, they can either register to vote with their home address or provide their school's address. The user then inputs their street address, apartment number if applicable, city, state, and zip code. The person clicks on "Continue" and is taken to a screen to confirm the information entered.

Once confirmed, they are directed to a screen that gives the person the option to register to vote, request to vote by mail, and sign up for election reminders. Most users will likely check all three options and click "Continue." Then they are taken to a screen where they are asked why they want to register to vote. These options include: "This is my first time registering," "I'm not sure if I'm registered to vote," "I need to re-register because I moved," "I need to re-register because I changed my name," and "I need to re-register because I moved and changed my

name." With this slew of options, every concern is covered and most users will likely pick "This is my first time registering." Once that option is chosen, then the site asks if the person has a mailing address different than their home address. If so, it allows them to provide the information to make sure they receive correspondence. Once a choice is made, the site asks where they should mail election materials with the option of picking the address already provided or entering a new address. The site really goes above and beyond to ensure that those who register make sure their address is correct, in order for them to receive materials. When the registrant confirms their address, they then enter their birthday. After entering their date of birth, they are taken to the next screen where they confirm their legal name and must enter a prefix, with the option of adding suffix. Next, a person provides their phone number, with the option of signing up for reminders about election deadlines via a text message. Since TurboVote provides its users with important voter information, it makes sense to sign up for these alerts.

After providing a phone number, users are asked to pick a party – Democratic, Green, Libertarian, Republican, Other, or the option not to register with a party and told that these are usually considered independent voters, nonpartisan, no affiliation, or "decline to state." Once a choice is made, a user is redirected to purchase mailings. These mailings are for TurboVote to mail a person registration forms that are addressed and include a stamped envelope to send to one's local election office. They can choose to sign up for a one-year subscription for $5.00, sign up for $1.60 for the next election, or not pay and choose to print and mail their own registration forms. Finally, TurboVote asks the user signing up to check all the information they provided once more and confirm that everything is correct. The registration is then complete and a user can print out registration forms that are already prefilled out with their information and only need to fill in their ID number and sign the forms. Once this is complete, the last step is to mail the

form to the local elections department. It also informs the user if there is an upcoming election that they can participate in and provides a date. The information on this final screen is then emailed to the new registrant to keep for their records.

3.4 THE TURBOVOTE CAMPUS CONNECTION

TurboVote partners with non-profit organizations, colleges, and universities to reach a broader audience and pass the message of voting along to an important audience they may not reach. This demographic of people, young and in college, is likely not to be registered to vote and they are the perfect targets for TurboVote to register and attempt to increase voter turnout. As of April 2015, there are 209 college and universities to include Georgetown University, Boise State University, University of Texas at Austin, University of Southern California, and Virginia Tech among other. Implementing TurboVote in schools is a movement that enables the population of colleges and universities to increase civic engagement. Large numbers of students connect with TurboVote through their institution when a mass email is sent to the entire school with a link to sign up and promote it at various campus events throughout the academic year. It can also be integrated in classroom curriculum, freshman orientations, and tailgates to name a few events. As the program gains more notoriety, the bar will be raised for universities to make it a permanent fixture of their culture and maybe even petition the rest of the states to move to full online registration.

3.5 RESULTS IN REAL TIME

Civic organizations can be key players to increasing voter turnout, since many politically driven organizations try to engage voters and with changing trends, it has become more difficult

to get voters to the polls. Traditional methods of collecting information through paper and clipboard make for a timely process between registering new voters and the election office. Organizers must then work to get people to the polls and increase participation. With TurboVote, the data collection is seamless and paper is saved at the same time. Block walking and tabling are great assets to any campaign, but having information stored online really lets administrators see what is happening with their data after they have registered new voters. Accountability for those that register can be tracked since the program details statistics after people sign up and if they refer others to sign up as well, in order for organizations to see their performance and if needed, change their strategy.

Member institutions can monitor results that are generated in real time. Data on the amount of students registered to vote and those that have requested absentee ballots can be analyzed. In a city like El Paso, Texas, the ability to request and track absentee ballots is critical because many families are from other cities and are residing and studying here because they are stationed at Fort Bliss, a large military base in Northeast El Paso. Data for diverse civic engagement efforts across campuses can be managed through useful statistics. TurboVote displays these figures in the following format, "You have (number of) completed signups at mdc.turbovote.org. That's out of roughly (number of) undergrads at (name of institution). That's 1.63%." It further analyzes the statistics by breaking down the number of sign ups into how many have requested registration forms, absentee ballots, and email/ text reminders. There are plenty of benefits to TurboVote and it is a tool that promotes leadership through campuses across the country. Student governments at colleges and universities can pioneer this program, while allowing student leaders to engage with the population they represent. Mandates such as the Higher Education Act, are fulfilled when institution use TurboVote since this act makes most

states and the District of Columbia attempt to widely distribute voter registration forms to its students.

3.6 TURBOVOTE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

TurboVote was introduced at The University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP) during the fall semester of 2014. The university is home to over 20,000 students, a big pool of potential new voters. In present day, there are new methods and technologies affecting politics that begin at the source, voter registration. Associate Professor of Political Science, Dr. Jose Villalobos, was appointed as the Provost's Faculty Fellow-in-Residence for the Center for Civic Engagement at The University of Texas At El Paso. UTEP's TurboVote's subscription is paid through the Center for Civic Engagement.

Through this unique partnership, Villalobos was able to incorporate TurboVote into his Political Science 4315 class, Latinos in the American Political System. 41 students were on the class roster and split into nine teams of four people and one team of five people. This political science course teamed up with two political organizations, University Democrats of El Paso and Battleground Texas, to conduct a massive voter registration push. The performance of students in Villalobos' class relied on participating in this program through a community service component of the class or choosing to write a paper instead. Most participated and each team had the semester to reach a minimum goal to register 25 students while spending at least 10 hours in the field. The students had their own unique code identified them, which allowed for accountability. Since Texas does not have an easily accessible online voter registration, students were sent prefilled out forms to their address and a stamp. Once received, they had to provide their ID number and sign the form, seal the envelope, and mail it. Through UTEP's partnership with

TurboVote, the university picked up the tab for the mailings, so the process could not be more streamlined. In the end, the push to register new voters at the university was a success, with approximately 745 people registering through TurboVote in collaboration between Villalobos' course, University Democrats of El Paso, and Battleground Texas. A few of the students in the course were also active University Democrat members and registered about 160 additional voters with TurboVote beyond their classwork, bringing the TurboVote total to 900+. The latter two organizations conducted a traditional paper form side-by-side voter registration push with TurboVote for students to register through the time allotted that fall semester ahead of election Election Day on November 4, 2014. The total registration for the University Democrats (over 35 members at the time) and Battleground Texas (with many of the University Democrats also affiliated with BGTX) came to about 3,170 new voters—bringing the overall total of all efforts that fall semester to more than 4,000 new registrants.

3.7 CONCLUSION

The efficiency of TurboVote bends the rules for many that live in the over 25 states that still do not allow for online registration. A person in any state can register to vote online now, and those states that still require a paper form, will receive it after a person prints or is mailed forms to complete. They can then simply put it in the mailbox and will be registered – all without having to make a trip to their local elections office. It is now up to the newly registered voter to make sure that they perform their civic duty and cast a ballot every Election Day. Another hurdle, voters face is finding out how and where to vote. An average person may assume that voting is as simple as showing up eager to vote on Election Day. It is not that simple, since many rules exist and vary from state-to-state. TurboVote keeps up with the myriad of laws like

registration and vote-by-mail laws. They make sure that anyone who signs up for TurboVote will not have any difficulty voting and take care of providing the best, most up-to-date information to its users. The potential of registering new voters is exciting, and new voters have enough time to research the issues on the ballot for the next election. The concern when new voters register is that they may be performing their civic duty, but may not be necessarily informed on the issues at hand. This is a stumbling block in gaining new voices on Election Day, but for now TurboVote has made great progress in registering new voters and voter education will be the next item to scratch off the list.

Chapter 4: Community Engagement through the

Office of El Paso County Commissioner David Stout

4.1 INTRODUCTION

It is difficult to dissect campaigns and elections, since the makeup is very complicated. Once an election has finished, the victor takes office shortly after and this is the job they fought hard to attain and must now deliver to their constituents. Community engagement is vital, for it is the people of communities that elected officials represent at the local, state, and federal level. In the past months, I have had the honor of working in the Office of El Paso County Commissioner David Stout where I have had a unique opportunity to engage with the community and work to address the most important issues. This chapter will cover countless learning experiences of working in county government and dealing with precinct issues, outreach methods, and policies.

4.2 WHAT MAKES UP COUNTY GOVERNMENT?

To understand the composure of El Paso County, it is one of the biggest counties in Texas with a population estimated at 833,487 in 2014 (U.S. Census Bureau 2015) There are 254 counties in Texas and the City of El Paso in El Paso County is the sixth largest in the state with 681,998 people (*Texas Almanac* 2015). David Stout was elected to El Paso County Commissioners Court in 2014 and took office on January 1, 2015. He is one of five members of Commissioners Court that is composed of four County Commissioners and a County Judge. The area that he represents is Precinct 2, a unique area of the county that is the only precinct that is all located within city limits. It includes all of Downtown El Paso, Central El Paso, the historic Segundo Barrio, a part of Fort Bliss, and parts of the Northeast, Westside, and the Mission Valley of El Paso. Each member of the court has one vote, including the County Judge, who

oversees the entire county. There are strict guidelines that must be followed by the members of Commissioners Court, with the most important being them gathering with two other members of the court. This constitutes a quorum, since three of five members are present, and anytime a quorum exists, the public must be notified no less than 72 hours of a meeting. The Court meets on a weekly basis every Monday at 9:30 AM, therefore an agenda notifying the public of such meeting must be posted by 9:30 AM the Friday before.

4.3 SENIOR CITIZEN CENTER VISITS

Stout has made it a priority to be out in the community as much as possible. Stout and his staff attempt to visit community centers in the area he represents to go directly to voters and address the concerns they may have. These senior centers are interesting to visit, for 30 to 60 people on a daily basis use these facilities. It is an avenue for Stout to explain the most recent information to concerned citizens. The predominant language at these centers is not English, instead it is Spanish and Stout must cater in this language in order to make sure everyone understands. The seniors are usually very engaged in Stout's message, unless they are about to play Bingo, which has happened on several occasions. We have learned to time the visits when they are not about to start a round of Bingo, since this a sacred time for them and probably the most exciting part of their visit at the center. These visits serve to further explain complex policy issues to a population that is concerned and may not understand certain policies, but will ask many questions until they fully understand the topic at hand.

Speaking to the senior citizens at all the different centers in Precinct 2 is a very uniform experience throughout. The profile of a senior citizen is one of a person who is largely concerned about taxes for most are on fixed incomes and really take a hit when a government entity decides

to increase taxes. Another aspect is that they are all consistent voters and take part in all levels of elections. Voter education is not necessarily needed, but rather it is further voter engagement that helps prepare them to better understand the issues at hand and if there is an upcoming election helps establishes the facts surrounding key issues debates for that election. Even if they do not frequent the facilities year round, it is a place where most candidates tend to visit during election season. However, Stout did not want to be a person that only engages with these people during election season. Instead, by routinely visiting the centers in and out of election cycles, he and others can build rapport with these important voters and listen to their concerns in an attempt to address them. They also watch or read the news on a daily basis, so subjects that Commissioner Stout discusses are not foreign to them. They are also very genuine in their excitement to have an elected official that constantly visits them. At every visit, they provide a warm welcome when he introduces himself and his staff members, with a huge round of applause.

A majority of them do not engage on social media, or even use the Internet, but it is fascinating to see them with smartphones and tablets. In my observations, I saw that it is not difficult for them to navigate these devices for they focus on the aspects they know how to use. This usually includes the ability to place a call and a smaller majority knowing how to send a text message. They mainly use their phones to communicate via phone calls and as entertainment when there is down time at the center to play virtual games. The other big usage of their phone is the camera function. They are constantly taking pictures and have different events like dances, field trips, and ceremonies where the rows of tables filled by people have their faces covered by their phones while attempting to take the best picture.

The social gap between younger citizens and senior citizens becomes noticeable when they ask for help in searching for something online. If they were educated on social media

accounts for a few hours, they would probably understand and open an account, but it is not a priority for they are more traditional and stick to reading the news, talking to elected officials or candidates, and casting a ballot when the time comes. There is also a sense that many of the senior citizens will endorse the same candidate and give all their support to them collectively a center. They frequently talk about their support for a certain candidate and rate their job performance.

Visiting the center really gives a person the idea of this age group that essentially decides elections. They are the ones that vote and young voters are hardly targeted because they will not impact elections. While young voters are using social media to get political information and not using it to vote, senior citizens are using traditional methods of getting politically informed and using the information to vote. This is perhaps the single most reason why social media has not found significance in elections. As O'Rourke's campaign accomplished, young voters should be specifically targeted through social media sites and combining that force with traditional methods of block walking, heavily done in campaigns to target the majority of the electorate. That can spark an uptick in voter turnout, but more campaigns need to put this strategy in motion.

4.4 OUTREACH STRATEGIES

Stout also engages his constituents through monthly community meetings where he discusses a month's worth of county updates in one sitting. These meetings are very successful in providing in-depth coverage to those constituents who go the extra mile to be informed about government. He usually picks a different place every month to have the meeting in order to come closer to different constituents that may not be able to make the drive to another end of the

precinct. Usually the same group of people will attend these meeting with a few new guests every so often. These people are crucial to ensuring he is keeping up with his duties in an effective manner. Meeting reminders are posted at senior centers on bulletin boards to invite them to attend. This method has not generated many senior citizens at the meeting, but it is probably due to the fact that Stout already visits centers frequently and these voters feel they can already ask the questions they have during his visit. They may also not have transportation to make it to the meetings.

Another method of inviting people is through social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter, where followers are reminded a few days before and on the day of the event to ensure they attend. This method has not generated many people at meetings – maybe two or three people. I believe this is because many of the people who attend are about 40 years of age and older and may not be on social media. The method that best works is email, for everyone signs in at every meeting and provides their email. By doing this, Stout's office creates a database of information to constantly communicate when there is an upcoming community meeting or any other information that needs to be disseminated. The meetings run over an hour each time and are very interactive with people chiming in to ask for clarification or to elaborate more on a certain topic.

The Office of Commissioner David Stout also publishes a quarterly newsletter. In the newsletter, three previous months of work by the office is talked about in a visually pleasing manner. It is very much like a magazine with several pictures and feature stories. So far, he has published three newsletters, in April, July, and October of 2015. These newsletters have a unique audience. In analyzing who is reading the newsletters, I determined that it is the people that attend community meetings, members of neighborhood associations, and county employees.

County employees almost always provide feedback and it has been positive thus far.

El Paso is in a unique position where a vast majority of the population primarily speaks Spanish, therefore it is important to include this demographic. The press visits Commissioner Stout about three times a week, sometimes more, depending on issues at stake. He is very accessible to the press and I have learned in these past few months that all elected officials must be accessible to the media since it is an important medium for constituents. People do not have the time to visit their elected officials to ask about issues, so the best way to reach such a large audience is through television and print media. Stout speaks both English and Spanish, so he can communicate well with both audiences, particularly at a time where the hospital district is in bankruptcy court. The media is also a public service and a public servant should be accountable to the electorate through this method of communication.

4.5 THE IMPLEMENTATION OF SOCIAL MEDIA

The push to have active social media accounts has been beneficial to Commissioner Stout's office. Through this channel, Stout can instantly communicate any update that the public needs to know about his work at the county. It also serves to clarify reasoning behind a decision made by Commissioners Court. Like O'Rourke, the office has realized that feel good moments that are shared are the ones that garner the most "Likes" and discussion. Updates on policy come in at second, not far from O'Rourke's findings. This tool is definitely not as significant as other efforts made by the office for outreach; in fact it is at the bottom of the totem pole. This does not mean that it is not pertinent to Precinct 2, for it is another device that allows Commissioner Stout to be accessible to the people he represents and the media.

I believe that social media is not as strong as other outreach strategies because the

audience that contact the office are often those at least over the age of 40. As stated before, these people are not likely to have social media accounts, thus limiting our audience. The other methods of outreach through visits to senior centers, phone calls, community meetings, quarterly newsletters, and press interviews are more effective since this age group is accustomed to receiving information through these outlets. This demonstrates that voter turnout during non-presidential election years affects local government. Less people are engaged in local elections and in turn interaction with elected representatives also suffers.

Local government impacts citizens the most and many problems can be addressed through this level of government. A goal this office should adopt is voter education to the youth of El Paso since this can be the start of participation increasing. In this first year, Stout's office has not received one call from a person under 30 with an issue needing a solution. In fact, many people under the age of 30 do not know the function of city and county government. Through education of the functions of these local offices, a young person may be able to gain interest in at least being informed and keeping up with the facts and figures. In the next chapter, O'Rourke's campaign will be analyzed - where it has been determined that there must be a targeted audience to go after in order to make the tool work. Instead of ignoring the young population, as most candidates do, it is time to strategize and bring this demographic to the table.

4.6 CONCLUSION

It is rewarding to work and contribute to an office that prioritizes the community it serves. The outreach that is made on a daily basis makes each day a rewarding experience, going home and knowing that you made a difference in someone's life by making a few phone calls or simply just listening. Commissioner David Stout has the correct mindset to address policy when

need be, but focusing on the community and their need is always the number one priority and it reflective of his work. The community engagement accomplished by this office is the beginning and it is one that attempts to reach all age groups through mediums that suit a person best.

Chapter 5: Beto O'Rourke's 2012 Congressional Campaign:

Understanding the Role of Social Media

5.1 INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 2014, I had the unique opportunity of interning in the Washington, D.C. office of Congressman Beto O'Rourke. Knowing that his election had been historic after ousting Congressman Silvestre Reyes from office, I knew that I had to take advantage of my time in the nation's capital to understand what happened with the campaign and the reason it was so successful. I had a few opportunities speak to the Congressman, opportunities not very many Congressional offices give to their interne, so I took full advantage of asking the questions that would end my curiosity and give me a more thorough understanding of a subject that interested me - social media and politics.

I knew that the O'Rourke campaign had used a copious amount of social media to engage voters, since I experienced the campaign and followed it on a daily basis. I wanted to know if social media actually worked for the campaign, since research up until that summer had shown that social media was not significant to any political campaign, even though campaigns were using it since Barack Obama ran his campaign for president. I was right; the campaign would not have won, had it not been for social media. After a few discussions with O'Rourke, he connected me to the person responsible for the majority of the success in his campaign, Brian Wancho, and his study on the entire operation. This chapter will cover the entire campaign, from the valuable tools used online, perfecting social media usage, voter engagement and education, and the mistakes an incumbent in office for over 15 years made to end his tenure.

5.2 THE FOUNDATION

In order to have a strong technologically centered campaign several online services and social media sites were used to maximize efficiency and raise money to defeat an incumbent. To save money, the campaign used Google Voice, which assigns a phone number without a phone line and can be used on several mobile devices (Wancho, 2012). This technology created a way for the campaign to move funds to other areas needed rather than paying copious amounts of money to a traditional phone service. Other Google services used included Google Docs, a suite of shareable spreadsheets and documents that can be worked on by several people at the same time. This is useful for a modern campaign like this one because staff needed access to donor lists, phone numbers, and any other communication needed to reach the goal of winning the campaign.

Flickr, a social media site for photos, was used to upload high-resolution photos of O'Rourke. The purpose for uploading pictures to this site was to have quality images available to the media and not risk having a bad picture of O'Rourke pop up on a news story (Wancho, 2012). The site served as a central location where pictures were stored for use throughout the campaign. Another resource the campaign used was Dropbox in order to be able to share large files with a group of people. This site can be used for pictures, videos, documents, and any other type of file shared through a hyperlink with many different users. It is essentially a hard drive of files accessed via the Internet.

Beto O'Rourke's Congressional campaign strategy reaped the benefits of having high quality pictures available to anyone needing images for their news stories. In one instance, a side-by-side comparison of O'Rourke and incumbent Silvestre Reyes was published and Reyes had a stain on his blazer (Wancho, 2012). O'Rourke's sharper appearance over Reyes helped the

campaign shape a better image of O'Rourke. If the media had access to a plethora of photos, they would likely use them over searching and finding the first image that appeared on search engines across the Internet. Another important social media site vital to the campaign was YouTube. It is widely accessed by millions of people daily. The campaign preferred Vimeo, another social networking site for sharing videos, because of the high quality it provided, but it is not as popular as YouTube. Knowing this, they uploaded the videos to both sites. This connected the campaign to voters and it was of essence to keep this constant communication at a high level.

The Beto O'Rourke campaign bent the rules on the traditional campaign and made the Internet a big focus for the success of the campaign. Collecting money was heavily pushed online and supporters could donate via a website called PayPal, a service that processes online payments made with credit cards (Wancho, 2012). Users would enter their credit card information on a secure site via the campaign website and the campaign would receive the donations. It was an instant money transfer as opposed to picking up a check at someone's house across town. At campaign fundraisers, people were offered the option to make donations through their credit card through a program called Square. This program connects a small square to the headphone jack of a smart phone and credit cards can be swiped creating a transaction that wires the money to an account of choice. A person then receives a receipt via email or text message. This was especially useful for the many that do not carry cash or checks and could use this method to process payments quickly. It also helped the campaign to not have to have too much cash on hand. Using these two programs to collect payments was a brilliant idea, for most campaigns still collect donations in traditional forms of cash or check.

The majority of these online websites and social networks were available for free and the campaign knew that they must use technology to fill the void of having a budget that was less

than half of the incumbent's. The use of yard signs was another method employed to spread the message and O'Rourke's campaign needed to distribute these in an efficient manner. People would request the signs and the campaign would map where the signs would be placed (Wancho, 2012). The signs were delivered in a streamlined way, for the whole area was mapped with a grid and the campaign knew exactly where they had signs located. It allowed the campaign to distribute the work more evenly and it lessened the time it took to deliver the signs. There are many components that go into a successful race and the innovation that O'Rourke used throughout this race was unprecedented.

5.3 A BREAKTHROUGH IN OPERATIONALIZATION

Since the start, the campaign knew they were facing an incumbent that did not frequently engage with voters. He hardly ever held any town hall meetings to update his constituents on important matters in Congress. The campaign assumed that this would also be true for social media. Reyes was likely not going to engage potential voters on social networking sites like Facebook or Twitter, so O'Rourke thought of using these sites to keep people updated several times a day. The catch here was not the followers of the campaign page on social media. Instead, it was for the friends and family members of people that followed the page. It has been widely assumed that the most common way to operationalize the effect of social media on campaigns is through a focus on converting followers on social media pages to voters. Here it was different, people would follow the campaign page and through posts on the page, the campaign hoped it would generate discussion and buzz on personal social networking pages, at home, at work, or at any gathering that followers of the page had with friends and family. The goal was not to have personal or misleading attacks against Reyes on the Facebook page, but instead encourage

discussion among potential voters (Wancho, 2012). Generating discussion was not the only factor in the social media strategy, for messaging was also pointed towards volunteers. The campaign wanted people to talk and create buzz about the message that O'Rourke had, so energizing their volunteers allowed for spreading the message to others and influencing volunteers' contacts (Wancho, 2012). To get volunteers sharing content, inspiring posts were made so they could be shared with networks of friends on social media.

Because of the copious amounts of money Reyes had, O'Rourke was forced to strategize a plan to overcome the amount of money. The campaign made social media a central aspect of the campaign through Facebook and Twitter platforms. By making social media a central aspect of the campaign, the team tried to determine how social media increases voter turnout – a feat that has been difficult in studying social media through recent presidential elections. This campaign sought to take full advantage of social media, for they discovered it was not posts generated by the campaign, but the type of interactions that stemmed from the many messages posted throughout the campaign.

O'Rourke's campaign deemed *social impact* and *social momentum* as phrases to describe the planned strategy on Facebook and Twitter (Wancho, 2012). They had about 2,285 followers on Facebook, but even more exciting was the number of friends that all those combined followers had at 485,068 (Wancho, 2012). The posts were crafted to target these people in order to earn their support. New supporters were added through some form of discussion on the actual Facebook post or through supporters sharing a certain post and creating discussions on their private profiles. Twitter and primarily Facebook accomplished the mission of the campaign - to gain more support and take out an incumbent of over 15 years with more than double the money of the O'Rourke campaign. This campaign is the perfect example of successful social media

usage where large-scale campaigns, like the 2012 presidential election have not perfected the usage, but the code to exploring social media is slowly being cracked. *To further understand social media in any election, it can be stated that informative and inspiring posts that people will share, discuss, and become impassioned about will create excitement and support for a candidate.*

5.4 COMPLEX OPERATION

The Beto O'Rourke social media effort was very complex and a software platform was invented to keep track of every supporter. This was to figure out which supporters influenced other potential voters to talk about and support the campaign. The program was very detailed and allowed for tracking someone's post on their timeline and seeing what kind of interactions the friends of that supporter had with the post. This allowed the campaign to see how much support these virtual supporters generated and some even had several influences on other supporters, which they called *key influencers* (Wancho, 2012). The Facebook followers of the campaign page and their friends generated buzz across the site to make others aware of O'Rourke and created a large base of supporters that would eventually unseat an incumbent after being in the U.S. House of Representatives for eight terms.

In order to build the audience O'Rourke needed for his Facebook and Twitter pages, the campaign made a plan that would allow for people to obtain all the information found on the O'Rourke for Congress website on Facebook as well. This became apparent after many users interacting on Facebook were asking questions about the campaign that could be answered on the website. Perhaps people did not want to go to another site to obtain the information they looked for, so it was simple to put it all in on the social media site. To get the amount of supporters the

page eventually had, the campaign had to work hard to build the crowd. The campaign decided to try to create viral posts that would make people aware of the campaign's efforts and give the page a like, share, or comment. It was a trial and error process to understand the type of posts needed to get people's attention. They analyzed the results of diverse posts that included policy positions, news articles, and photos from campaigning. The posts that were most well received were the photos of O'Rourke knocking on doors through different neighborhoods around El Paso. The campaign determined that there were too many demographic groups to please and the demographics responded in variance to distinct posts. The majority responded very well to photographs, and a smaller group had a good response to policy posts, but these were still highly valuable supporters (Wancho, 2012). The campaign worked hard on the big and small details in order to create a very professional and attractive image, like the high quality images on Flickr. This was also true for the links shared on Facebook, since an image appears next to the headline of the link shared and the campaign ensured it would be a good image that would make readers interested enough to click on the link. They also made their website friendly enough to share O'Rourke's position on policies through one click on Facebook.

The overuse of technology and social media is perhaps an understatement in the O'Rourke for Congress campaign. Attention to detail likely helped in many ways, like targeting users on computers and on mobile devices. The official website allowed for the collection of email addresses to create a strong base of supporters. Anytime a donation or request for a yard sign was made, it was via the website. Workers that found themselves at events or block walking could pull out their smart phones and capture information of new supporters. The technology went as far as using geographic location data to find nearby supporters while walking through neighborhoods (Wancho, 2012). The website was also kept up to date and in line with social

media platforms in order to spread the same message across all the sites. They assumed that not all website visitors would keep up with the campaign's efforts on Facebook and Twitter. This was clever branding for the campaign and it really took advantage of effectively putting technology to great use.

5.5 HANDLING PROBLEMS WITH FACEBOOK

Another concern that can potentially answer why it is difficult to explore the role of social media in campaigns is the shortcomings brought on by Facebook in getting a message out. The O'Rourke for Congress Facebook page had over 2000 followers, but not all of those followers were bound to get all of the posts made by the campaign. Facebook has a *News Feed*, which is a personal home page where users of the site get the latest posts from their friends and the pages they follow. By design, Facebook has an algorithm that will only show posts to supporters on their news feed that have interacted with the campaign page before and leaves the other followers of the campaign page in the dark since they have only "liked" the page. The timing the campaign had for posting was crucial because a post could be missed by followers when the site replaced it with more recent posts generated by friends in a user's network. There were times when the campaign would post an important message and only a fourth of over 2000 followers of the campaign would see the post (Wancho, 2012). This is a major downside to Facebook, but it made the campaign work harder to figure out the formula. Other posts on the campaign page would be seen by more than the amount of supporters of the page because a follower may have interacted with the post and the interaction appeared in the newsfeed of that person and one of their friends saw it. This is good news, but it is a trial and error situation that cannot be relied on when a message of great importance is shared with the audience of the page.

Perhaps the reason Facebook has set up this type of algorithm in their site's DNA is to make pages on the site pay to garner more attention. The owners of pages across the site have the option of paying to boost their page views and guarantee to make it appear as advertisements on News Feeds. O'Rourke's campaign experimented with this and the results generated motivated them to discontinue paying. Instead they realized that it was strong posts with riveting content that would likely create attention and reach a large audience. Another factor to consider is the timing of posts, for users post updates at all hours of the day and campaign posts could easily get lost if posted at bad times throughout the day. Through exploration, the campaign found that social media audience varies by the time of day and even by the day of the week, with a good variance in the demographic of the audience (Wancho, 2012). The campaign timed posts to be rolled out at two different times in order to be seen by two different demographics.

Wancho does not share the specific times that are crucial to reach large audiences on social media, and instead mentions that they figured out the perfect times by amount of data generated by the posts the campaign made to find the perfect times to post and target diverse audiences. There were times when the campaign found itself waiting to post an urgent message because of the time of day and making sure they hit the correct audience. The posts by the pages also had to be carefully made, for overexposure of posts made them get lost in newsfeeds or Facebook summarizing them and making a person click on a link to see more posts from the page. This is definitely another takeaway from this campaign and ensuring success from the usage of social media in elections. *The posts must be timed right to reach proper audiences, be rich in content, and pages should not over post throughout the day, for less interaction will occur.*

5.6 CREATIVE STRATEGIES THAT BUILD AN AUDIENCE

A crucial contributing factor to building a social media following came in the form of a photo contest. People were asked to submit a photo of them as a sign of an endorsement for Beto, then the campaign asked for people to vote on the best picture by clicking "Like" on the photo. This was a golden tool because every time a person liked a photo, all of the friends with the person that clicked "Like" would see it on their newsfeed, thus sparking interest in the campaign. This simple, cost-free contest paid off huge dividends since new people started following the page right before early voting commenced. The photos were then made into a collage and used across the campaign social media sites and digital advertisements. It was a stark difference from the Reyes campaign, which had big names like Bill Clinton endorsing him over O'Rourke having the electorate endorse him through the myriad of photos submitted on Facebook (Wancho, 2012). The creativity of using Facebook as a tool for campaigns was virtually perfected in O'Rourke's campaign, and this is yet another example of reaching an electorate with intelligent posts, rather than just asking for their vote.

This success that this campaign had with Facebook puts great value on this social network as the most powerful site of all the other social media sites. This is attributed to the high volume of users that have an account on the site. Facebook limits its posts to about 60,000 characters, which is likely more than enough for users to express themselves (Lavrusik, 2011). On the other hand, Twitter limits a user to 140 characters and sometimes a message may not come across as intended, especially for campaigns. Facebook's mix of videos, photos, and textual posts give campaigns an upper hand to be creative and build an audience that thus far the O'Rourke campaign has been of the few that reported success. Short videos can be posted to explain issues, or simply sell the campaign. Photos, as noted by the campaign, are of extreme

importance since those were the posts that people were interacting with the most. Being able to write paragraphs to explain certain policy issues is also valuable to create the support. The use of social media in this campaign is a great example to campaigns across the country to replicate the same steps and hopefully get voters to the polls.

5.7 OUTDATED STRATEGIES THAT WORKED… IN THE 20TH CENTURY

Operationalizing social media has been a daunting task, and the Reyes campaign really did not know how to use it to their advantage. This is perhaps because Reyes was used to running traditional campaigns, had not faced a real challenge in years, and was sitting comfortable in Washington, D.C. In 2012, it was also a completely different spectrum than in 1996 when he first ran for Congress successfully. The traditions of the past did not work in this campaign, an example that paves the road for future campaigns across the country to adapt to modern campaign tactics. Some of the mistakes that the Reyes campaign made were so minimal and should not have happened, but they gave O'Rourke an upper hand. He had a great slogan, "Reyes Works" - yet he did not use it to its full potential. He did not register the website domain on the Internet, so when people saw his campaign material and thought of visiting reyesworks.com or searching "Reyes Works" online, the page that they found was an opposition page that supported O'Rourke (Wancho, 2012). By doing this, Reyes was campaigning for himself and even O'Rourke when people searched for him on the Internet.

To further illustrate the misunderstanding the Reyes Campaign had of social media, they made three separate Facebook pages for the campaign, which could be extremely confusing to users. One of the Facebook pages used was Silvestre Reyes' own personal page, which did not provide as much engagement as an official campaign page does on Facebook. Other pages they

had were "Re-Elect Silvestre Reyes," "Reyes for Congress," and "Reyes Works" (Wancho, 2012). The push on social media was there, but poorly executed and even digital advertisements that the Reyes campaign had were not up to par with the O'Rourke campaign. The campaign advertisements that Reyes pushed on social media were the same throughout the campaign, which likely did not appeal to people since they did not connect to them the first time, it almost became spam to them every time they saw an ad. On the other hand, O'Rourke changed these advertisements frequently to appeal to others that may have not been attracted to the first ad they saw. Reyes perhaps did not have someone with expertise on graphic design, or simply did not think it would be important. Their thinking may have been that as long as they had a good campaign logo to use on yard signs, billboards, and advertisements they would ride onto victory. This strategy was extremely great for the campaign to have - in 1996. These mistakes perhaps cost Reyes the election and the over 2000 followers that O'Rourke had on his Facebook page could have ultimately helped Reyes reach a run off, since he was defeated by 2,821 votes. The Reyes campaign is currently part of the status quo, where campaigns are relying on outdated techniques to achieve success, and slowly the wheels are turning for social media to be used in a significant manner, as O'Rourke did.

5.8 CLOSE TO THE FINISH LINE

As the election drew closer, social media became even more crucial to the campaign. It was time for it to get voters to make a choice and get to the polls after months of building an audience on social media, one that the opponent lacked. The O'Rourke campaign garnered a large amount of support and more people expressed their endorsement towards O'Rourke by following the page or commenting on various posts throughout, generating more followers.

Election Day was May 29, 2012, and by April 21 there were over 10,000 people interacting on the Facebook page (Wancho, 2012). The numbers are even more surprising, for by May 12 there were over 50,000 people interacting with the page and the campaign felt strong that this amount of growth would turn into votes at the polls. In the end, after May 19 there were over 75,000 interactions with the page coming from people following it, commenting, and sharing posts with friends (Wancho, 2012). This momentum let the campaign establish communication with a population that was only growing and would get to the polls in the few days left of the campaign. The people did get to the polls and O'Rourke defeated Reyes 23,248 votes to 20,427, which is 50.5 percent to 44.4 percent (El Paso Times 2012). The election did not go into a runoff and El Paso had a new Congressman for the first time since 1997.

5.9 ENGAGEMENT OF VOTERS THROUGH EDUCATION

The campaign knew that it was an uphill battle to challenge an incumbent of many years, so it also had to bring new voters to the table, those that looked for candidate information and information on the process of voting. The campaign created a simple Frequently Asked Questions section after they received many of the same type of questions on Facebook (Wancho, 2012). In these questions, they addressed the meaning of a primary and its function, how to register to vote, and the meaning of early voting. From personally working several campaigns, I have learned that getting people out to vote during early voting is extremely important because votes cast during this period usually indicate the outcome of an election since those results are released as soon as the polls close on Election Day. This is why the O'Rourke campaign needed to make sure voters knew how to show their support for him and they made a map showing all of

the early voting elections and emphasized that they could vote at any location around the city and not at their voting precinct.

The other crucial factor in educating the public is guiding people to the correct place to vote on Election Day. The County of El Paso does not provide a simple tool to find a polling location, so the campaign decided to create one (Wancho, 2012). People entered their first and last name, hit enter, and were given their Precinct information, including address and hours of operation, as well as a map to pinpoint the exact location of the polling place. This tool was valuable to the campaign for two reasons – it generated voters for O'Rourke and it allowed the campaign to see how many people used the tool, with about 1,000 voters using the system by Election Night (Wancho, 2012). Voter turnout is already extremely low across the country, especially in El Paso, and the campaign did not allow people to find excuses not to vote, since they provided the tools necessary at their fingertips. This is a great contribution to the region of El Paso, since O'Rourke for Congress sparked excitement at the polls and new voters were engaged through a campaign that they believed in on social media and on the ballot.

5.10 CONCLUSION

Beto O'Rourke has significantly changed the campaign landscape through his historic election in 2012. Building such a following that translates at the polls demonstrates that campaigns should not just *use* social media to have an online presence, instead social media should be incorporated as an integral part of a campaign and creative posts constructed on social media sites could be converted into votes. It is a standard set by O'Rourke and a hidden secret, since campaigns have probably not come across the techniques his campaign used to create support. This is probably because many campaigns have not found a starting point to explore

social media in a correct manner - as scholars across the country have noticed. I believe that in a few years scholars will be looking back and not understanding why social media did not become significant sooner than it will in the future. O'Rourke now has a tremendous following on Facebook, over 40,000 people, and uses this to communicate about the important issues being discussed in the House of Representatives, by explaining the reason for his vote, or asking people for feedback about issues that he does not know how to vote on (Facebook 2015). He still does photo contests and displays pictures that generate great discussions, like highlighting his interns or showing old pictures of El Paso. It is safe to say that elements of the "Beto O'Rourke for Congress" campaign have translated to the Office of Congressman Beto O'Rourke.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

Social media is a unique method of communication that has been used into politics over the past several years. It is a tool that has puzzled campaigns during this time - therefore it has not been an essential component for many campaigns. Similarly, scholars have found it difficult to measure its effect on politics. Campaigns may simply not know how to use social media and have not devoted enough time to learn about using it in their campaigns. As a relatively new force, there are not many social media experts that can consult on campaigns, so even if a campaign wanted to hire an expert as they would with any other important position like finance, management, and operations, there are not many readily available.

Through TurboVote outreach, the program has opened the door to targeting the people that are historically not interested in politics. Partnering with hundreds of major universities across the country has allowed for the registration of new voters. The micro study at The University of Texas at El Paso was successful in its trial run and can definitely improve in years to come. New people are registered to vote, but there is a component that is still missing – making sure participation happens. Once this is achieved, then working on informing more people about issues will be the next step in informing voters to elevate their political sophistication. Like with social media, a strategy to mobilize voters beyond registration needs to

Working for an elected official has helped me discover methods of reaching out to the community. Through the Office of El Paso County Commissioner David Stout, I have noticed that people that actively engage in county government are those that are at least over the age of 40. This is highly important, for outreach strategies must be tailored to fit every person's needs. The office has found that face-to-face meetings work best because it develops a valuable relationship, especially with senior citizens since it makes them feel highly valued and are the

ones that seek the most solutions to problems they face. The pressure to use social media is not as rampant as a campaign since the day-to-day functions require working for constituents and not asking for votes. For now at the county level of government, social media usage slows down and used to highlight what the office is working on. It is also due to be slow in county government because it is an office that does not receive the amount of volume that a Congressional office may receive. In future research, the use of social media after the campaign ends and a person takes office work should be studied.

The tide will change when more campaigns figure out the formula in a way that Beto O'Rourke did in his treacherous Congressional bid. For now, the takeaway of the effective function of social media is that components must be created around it and data provided by sites like Facebook must be curated to reach followers of the page that in turn share posts through their own personal social media accounts and allows the page to reach an audience beyond the number of followers on a campaign page. As seen in O'Rourke's campaign, Facebook was more effective than Twitter in reaching a broader audience and strategic contests where users submit pictures are highly effective.

The efforts made by the Beto O'Rourke Congressional campaign set a standard for other campaigns interested in using social media. The ability to create an operation that bet a great amount on social media when it had not been used in a time where it has been difficult to figure out this phenomenon was a risk that paid off. The team took an in-depth approach to social media rather than just posting messages and pictures hoping they gained popularity. In my content analysis of the campaign I realized that Brian Wancho's leadership allowed for the discovery of using the campaign page to reach an audience that they did not officially have – the connections of those that already followed the page. A contribution that stems from the work of

Wancho and this campaign helps guide scholars in a direction that can further research the causality between creating specific posts on social media that are interesting and reach out to the friends of the followers of the pages. The key is for campaigns to be creative in crafting social media posts, draw people's attention through interactive posts that require more feedback than just an opinion, and a campaign with technological sense to bring the operation together.

One of the biggest setbacks in this thesis was the countless hours spent trying to find the best way possible to study social media. Limitations existed in currently available national surveys, for they are not as readily available as approval rating for presidents. The questions in the surveys found were not sufficient enough to provide independent and dependent variables to create a model. Instead surveys had one good question and another useful question in a different survey, which could not be used in conjunction. Once I realized that the models I was attempting to compose were lackluster, I made the choice to scrap them and instead use literature, analyze studies, and personal experiences to transmit the message of the difficulty of studying social media, as I had many problems myself. Timing could have also affected this thesis, since I expect to see more data available for use in the next election cycles, especially after the 2016 Presidential Election.

As context is also important in political science, it is important to note that Beto O'Rourke's campaign takes place in a very unique part of the country where the population is 81.2 percent Hispanic, 13.3 percent White, 4 percent African American, and other minorities make up the rest of the population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). It can be easily seen that this community is mostly Hispanic and that this demographic has been key to recent elections. Accordingly, it is natural to connect this Congressional race to ethnicity since the incumbent, Silvestre Reyes, is Hispanic and the challenger, Beto O'Rourke, is an Anglo looking to

substantively, if not descriptively, represent a population that is predominantly Hispanic. This large population of Hispanic voters obviously saw the need for change and decided not to elect the incumbent to another term.

This is also a community that is on the border and this make a difference since with this geographical location comes a need for policy innovation in Congress where legislation on immigration is quite challenging despite high demand. Reyes had a reputation for pushing more militarization of the border whereas O'Rourke saw the region more as an intertwined community that must work together to bring about change. This simple difference in views is already a huge change from the Reyes administration and portrayed by O'Rourke's supporters as more representative of a population that has friends and relatives on both sides of the border. As far as the use of social media on O'Rourke's part, I do not believe this tool is affected by ethnicity at this point in time, since it is a field that is still being figured out and before throwing an ethnic factor into the mix, it is better to figure out how to operationalize social media first.

One other factor that could be analyzed going forward is the fact that O'Rourke had a hefty amount of young people working and volunteering for his campaign – thus maybe having an age group turn out to vote that does not usually vote, much less in a Congressional election, even if it was a presidential election year. There is a vast amount of information for continued research and once it is embarked upon, the next phase will be to explore the influence and impact of social media in the region by not only race/ethnicity but also age, sex, gender, and other typical variables that are taken into consideration in political science. In doing so, one can argue it is most practical to continue first focusing at the local level before moving on to state and finally national level politics, building on more at each level to finally reach a general feel of social media and its effect on elections at the national level.

In summary, while social media has not (at least not yet) provided an easy avenue for lowering voter costs, it has helped to engage voters and potential voters on the array of social networks available on the Internet. Overcoming the cost – in both dedicating time and effort – towards becoming a rational voter remains as great and key a challenge as ever, but social media tools, if applied properly, can potentially help people close the gap and better maximize voter turnout. Perhaps having events on social media that encourage people to have Election Day viewing parties will motivate a person to go out and vote to not be left out. Facebook has already digitized the "I Voted" sticker on their website, allowing users to post when they cast a vote – a tool that can motivate friends of said user to go out and cast their own ballot. Furthermore, there is also a cost assessed with state laws across the country, where it is easier to register in some states via the Internet, and others where people still need to register via paper methods that may be harder to access. If voting could be done online, it would likely increase turnout because people have such complex schedules that making time to vote may not be an option, allowing them to participate at a moment's notice at their desk at work or on their mobile devices on the go. Instead, the current and continuing process that occurs at voting stations requires more time and effort on the part of the voter to take part in Election Day and have their vote counted.

The difficulty that comes with voters is that they are not entirely engaged, but it can also be stated that they are not ignorant. Instead they often take their information from political elites and manage that information in a way that allows them to figure out where they land on the political thermometer (Villalobos, 2013). By following this, people are inclined to craft their opinion on issues by the work that is being done by elected officials that represent millions across the country. A good example is Beto O'Rourke informing everyone about the complex work he has in Washington, D.C. and explaining his votes to the followers of his social media

accounts. This is a great contribution to society, and it allows people to not have to get into the weeds and figure out dense language in bills and puts in a small snippet that thoroughly explains his position on the bill and what it does. These substantive summaries can increase sophistication, but the downfall is that not all elected officials are providing these summaries and it is difficult to force elected officials to do anything even if it means providing education to people in order to increase their knowledge. For future studies, it would be interesting to analyze Congress and see which ones provide these updates on their social media sites and even create polls asking people if they find the information useful or if they simply skip over the content entirely. Judging by the amount of comments and likes each of the Congressman's posts get, there must be some value to this type of education that O'Rourke and others across the political spectrum can provide.

It is still difficult to operationalize social media, and there is no clear answer, but this study was a step in the right direction. As seen in O'Rourke's campaign, he really made it an essential part of his campaign to engage users and turn them into voters. The next step that is needed is better understand and capture how one can make the engagement happening on Facebook, Twitter, and other sites translate into voting. This thesis has been a call to action – as to what still needs to be done and has provided a springboard for other scholars and politicos to understand the complexity of this phenomenon. In the future, to address the engagement that largely lives and dies in cyberspace and does not translate to Election Day, it would be ideal to conduct a survey to see if people believe the first thing they read online via social networks. As stated, the level of sophistication seems to be low on these sites and it would be interesting to research (through a survey or experimental approach) whether, when, and under what circumstances people take extra steps to find more information on the events and actions they are

reading about a certain candidate or world event. Additionally, to engage the community on new

technologies, a class on social media etiquette could be conducted to all different types of age

groups to increase sophistication and show them examples of what factual information is and

what may be false.

For now the future holds a positive outlook and a slow guidance towards fine-tuning the

operationalization of social media. The 2016 race has commenced and already many campaigns

have used social media frequently. Campaign announcements by Hillary Clinton, Ted Cruz, and

others have been promoted via social media sites, signaling that they have both placed a value on

using social media to mobilize voters. The posts that 2016 contenders have published have been

more creative and often showcased through videos, pictures, and quotes from speeches made by

candidates in order to reinforce their platform. I hope that 2016 brings an election that sees an

increase in social media and learns how to tackle it head first to ensure success at the polls.

Candidates need to work on earning this vote and social media can be a tool they can use to

increase the much-needed participation of this demographic.

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Vita

Born and raised in El Paso, Texas, Joshua Acevedo began his collegiate career at the University of Texas at El Paso in 2007. In December 2012, he completed his degree in Microbiology with a Concentration in Chemistry. A few months later, in August 2013, he enrolled in the Political Science Master's Program at the same university. While attending school, he became a member of the Fraternity of Alpha Kappa Lambda where he grew his leadership skills and became president of the organization in the last year of his undergraduate career. Halfway through his graduate career in the summer of 2014, he was competitively selected to participate in an academic and internship program in Washington, D.C. through the University of Texas System's Archer Center Graduate Program in Public Policy. While in the nation's capital, he had the opportunity to intern in the Office of Congressman Beto O'Rourke. Today, Joshua works in the Office of El Paso County Commissioner David Stout where he has his dream job and executes his passion for public service.

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