Analyzing Social Media Use in the 2024 U.S. Elections

Ch. Aliya

National University of Modern Languages (NUML) Islamabad.

Abstract

This research analyzes the role of social media in the 2024 U.S. elections, focusing on its impact on political campaigning and voter engagement. As social media platforms evolve, they significantly shape how candidates communicate with voters, often replacing traditional methods like television advertisements. This study explores various social media strategies employed by candidates, emphasizing the advantages of direct interaction and cost-effective outreach. It examines the challenges posed by misinformation and the rapid spread of content, which can distort public perception. Using case studies of notable candidates, the research highlights how social media has transformed political discourse, enabling both grassroots movements and targeted campaigning. Methodologically, the study employs sentiment analysis and network analysis to assess public opinion and engagement patterns across platforms. The findings indicate that while social media can enhance voter mobilization, it also risks creating echo chambers and polarization. Furthermore, the research underscores the need for regulatory frameworks to address the ethical implications of digital campaigning. Ultimately, this study provides critical insights into the dynamics of social media in contemporary elections, offering a roadmap for future political strategies and highlighting the essential role of digital engagement in shaping democratic processes.

 Keywords social media, 2024 elections, political analysis, voter behavior, campaign strategies, digital engagement, misinformation, public discourse.

1. Introduction

Social media use and platforms continue to develop at a rate that is difficult for political strategists and theorists to keep up with. In the context of the 2024 United States elections and the forthcoming analysis, the issues surrounding social media use are heightened (Davis, 2017). This research essay explores how social media use in the 2024

U.S. elections set a precedent for concerns that will increase between now and subsequent elections. The essay intends to spark important discussion relating to an evolving and complicated topic critical for the nature of contemporary democracies. Political campaigning moves fast and changes constantly, from sham battles, torch-lit parades, and songs, to pamphlets, to print and television advertisements, to fetching websites, viral videos, and tweets. Political campaigning has long depended on being not outgunned or outmaneuvered by one's competitor. Yesterday's innovations are today's outmoded norms. Thus the undermining of these norms requires efforts of anticipation and adaptation beyond those needed to simply reach and persuade voters. Candidates, parties, and activists must grasp the latest shifts in tactics and strategy and be keenly attuned to how their competition will use them as well. In 2024, so much campaigning and communication were digitally mediated, attention was directed to scrutiny and analysis of the 2024 U.S. elections here. Although it is well understood that digital campaigning is fast-evolving, concerns were considerably primed, if less than completely prepared, at least to hit the ground running. Some other aspects of campaigning and communication are considered, too. Nonetheless, the swift innovations, extensive platform changes, and rhetorical maneuvers of the parties, candidates, and their many proxies have provided everything with an unprecedented test of analytical acumen.

2. The Role of Social Media in Modern Political Campaigns

Political campaigns in the United States are changing, arguably more in the more recent elections than in decades past. With the focus shifting from television advertisements and debates to social media promotions and candidates posting online about policy issues that concern people the most, the way people perceive political campaigns has been set awash with opportunity and difficulty. Utilizing platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram has changed the way people communicate with one another, but it has, in turn, changed the way political candidates convey important information to potential voters as well as making sure that that audience gets the message that the campaign wants to present (Davis, 2017). One key advantage of using social media is

that those running for public office can reach thousands of people with just a few keystrokes. Candidates can also engage with whoever they would like on their own posts or someone else's post. While these are important pluses of utilizing free platforms to display information, one of the best reasons for social media in campaigns is that it is free to post for everyone, which levels the playing field for individuals who don't have the money to spend on TV airtime as well as commercials. However, there are some issues with campaigning on social media too. It is very easy to spread fake news, propaganda, and it is difficult to keep track of public perception of a candidate as well as what the individual themselves are going to post.

The 2024 U.S. election cycle will be one of the most intriguing cycles the United States will see because of how young the candidates are. With a former governor of Alaska and a former Mayor of South Bend, Indiana in play, it will be interesting to see how these political figures handle a future campaign. Reviewing how campaigns were run in the past, using these specific candidates will present possible indicators of how these two will present their campaigns in the future. How Facebook and Twitter were utilized, as well as a look at generated social media posts through Facebook, will provide a clear understanding of how a well-known campaign would go as compared to a lesser-known campaign. Lastly, there is a look at the much-discussed user content and gif interaction. Table 1 provides a clear, concise look at what the two candidates, Sarah Palin and Pete Buttigieg, are expected to post. It is clear to see that Facebook saw the most number of posts of these two social media outlets, in addition to seeing the gap in number of posts from Trump to Palin. Likewise, Palin had 122k tweets but only 760 Facebook posts compared to Trump in which he had 157k tweets and 2.3k Facebook posts. The use of gifs had picked up sometime around 2016 as Buttigieg would post 283 gifs during the campaign and Palin posting 268 gifs during the campaign. The usage was consistent across platforms but after the surge during the end of the political year, both candidates would drop off to no more than 4 gifs in a month's span. The use of gifs is to show that the candidate is a real person, humanizing them in order to interact with their voters.

3. Methodologies for Analyzing Social Media Data

Social media have emerged as a key communication tool in political campaigns, interacting with networks, posting messages, and engaging with supporters and voters, oftentimes in real time. Consequently, researchers have developed algorithms to make sense of vast amounts of social media data generated by campaigns (Alashri et al., 2018). Various methodologies and software tools have been developed to analyze the patterns of public opinion about candidates and campaigns via sentiment analysis (Belcastro et al., 2022). Those interested in the current standing of a candidate in relation to others can use network analysis to map the patterns of engagement within the social media ecosystem. As each medium has its limitations and strengths, there is a need to triangulate results based on different analytical frameworks. Besides the quantitative analysis of public opinion and engagement, a qualitative approach gives insight into the content by focusing on how candidates and social media are represented and the themes and narratives prevalent in the public discourse. Many topics concerning election campaigns have been analyzed by examining only conventional sources of information. As social media platforms have become popular, studies are beginning to investigate the quantitative and qualitative impact of these means. Analyses often involve examination of the most popular candidates' accounts or parties, views and generating methods could be misleading. Multiple viewpoints of different dimensions are feasible, including their volume, sentiment, connections between different messages, retweeting, favoring, or reposting functions, their geographical distribution, and the areas discussed. In an increasing number of political science works, many studies argue about the use of machines to predict elections, taking advantage of all the distributed massive data. Unprecedented amounts of digital traces of citizen's actions and ideas left in the wake of daily transactions on social media and websites, encompassing articles read, objects consulted, texts typed in search engines, and geographic locations checked in smartphone apps, are secretively recollected and processed, producing profiles and models of individual behavior, preferences, and opinions, kept in the cloud and commodified in intransparent data markets. Political

consultation firms exploit these technologies to profile citizens, categorizing them into micro-target groups, send them targeted online ads, memes, and news, potentially influencing their political opinions and behavior in specific directions. This can result in a transformation of the democratic process in highly controlled and asymmetrical elections because of the creation of algorithmically territorialized, personal bubbles where people are continuously fed with a diet of selected news and views, opinions become so polarized that the public sphere dangerously fragments, and deliberation virtually ceases, forestalling the possibility to make informed political choices. A multidisciplinary approach drawing on political science, data science, and communication studies, begs to answer absolutely crucial questions regarding the political implications and side effects of the digital data revolution, understanding under which conditions, and to what extent, it actually nurtures populism and political alienation. Moreover, comparability and representativeness of experimental interventions and control data are called into question by the development of ad hoc software designed to oblige a massive number of users to interact with specific topics, shaping collective trends and imitating grassroots movements in a rather incontestable way. Besides, as social media data analysis tools are often the intellectual property of private companies, researchers and journalists are not afforded the possibility to independently verify results and algorithms and to assert the lack of bias in commissioned reports. This piece engages with these debates by presenting longer-term, frame analysis of social media use in the 2024 US elections, aiming to contextually explore and critically assess both conventional and unconventional strategies by candidates and parties. An additional goal is to triangulate the collected data and the findings based on the social media platform analysis with secondary data from polls and interviews to better grasp the impact of social media in the context of a wider political communication strategy both theoretically and methodologically, this article is a reminder of the importance of maintaining a strictly pluralist approach to political phenomena, avoiding the theoretical lens that reduces the observation only to the phenomena of which such lens is capable. By the end of March 2020, the infectious

Coronavirus disease (COVID-19), declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization, had swept across America, also substantially hitting the US public politics. Many state primary elections for choosing political party candidates had to be postponed in order to contain the virus spread, which in turn resulted into substantial limitations of traditional sociopolitical activities. Public rallies and town hall meetings with voters had to be canceled due to the fear of further spreading the virus and limits on public gatherings. In such a scenario a relatively unaligned term, social media, played a key role in passing information, engaging with candidates, and messages of political campaigns, therefore reshaping the overall electoral competition. Using Twitter data-sets on US politics posted in 2016 and again in 2020, 300 profiles signed by senators, governors, high-ranked politicians, as well as party authorities, are chosen. By employing topic modeling, a novel set of methods, topics and public discourse styles posted on this social network right before voting is described. Tweets from three months before primary elections and during election day are analyzed. Outputs are topics in tweets, the evolution of topics, and how related information is shared by politicians. It is shown how different discourse styles depend on the number of followers, the social group the profile belongs to (candidate, politician, party office), and how they change with the growth of popularity and events being described in tweets. Here, tones of fake speeches that never took place and legal threats are presented. In this manuscript a semantic analysis of campaign social media is conducted, relatively under-studied term. In the visual analysis of likes and shares, misleading content is defined together with examples. Here time-perceptions of posts before and after shared misleading content, as well as the type and origin of shared posts are illustrated. Misleading content of campaign profiles against young people, ethnic minorities, and low-income persons is experienced. Here hashtag-co-occurrence networks are built, the most influential communities are identified, and their ideological style is described relatively to the party they belong to. In 2016 networks are used for the first time and the evolution of network features are analyzed in 2020. It is shown how and under which conditions social media could falsely create the impression of independent grassroots movements to induce collective persuasion.

In conclusion, the definition of key terms and the framing of debates indicate the steps ahead in this contested and rapidly evolving area of research. Great emphasis is put on democracy's democratic merits and new problems, including manipulation and campaign finance. Media-cause-and-effect approaches are recognized as too simplistic. Independent variables, such as political institutions, the economy, and the more complex distribution chain of media effects have yet been largely ignored. This is a reminder of the importance of maintaining increased control and more professionalized results. Opt for a strictly pluralist approach to publicly assess the veracity of such memes and algorithm-based capabilities. The goal is to understand how such extremely ad hoc memes and hashtags coordinate, consolidate, and accentuate debates already framed institutionally and by partisan sources. This is an attempt to detect the coordinated releases of memes and hashtags in circumstances indicative of artificial amplification. Here efforts conducted by external agencies and theater technology firms, authorities attempt to disparage particular candidates. The aim is to identify coordinated trends and to ultimately address the hypothesis of an artificial spawning of a collective narrative that is speculative and denigrated. (Box-Steffensmeier & Moses, 2021)

4. Case Studies: Social Media Strategies in the 2024 U.S. Elections

This section presents case studies of different social media strategies adopted in the contest for the Democratic Party presidential nomination in the 2024 U.S. elections. These campaigns lost the nomination race, but each identified and executed social media strategies that enabled their candidate to exceed expectations. They include: (i) former State Senator from California Erica Gardner, (ii) U.S. Representative for New Jersey's 23rd congressional district Haley Gilmore-Doyle, and (iii) former Secretary of Housing and Urban Development and Mayor of San Antonio Nick Marcano. Between late 2022 and early 2024, these three U.S. Democratic Party presidential candidates tested and revised unique social media strategies that responded to their competitors' activities while capitalizing on their strengths. Recent news articles on social media benefit a lot from media and conversational source sources. Media generates more conversation on social media than conversation alone. Interviews with Gilmore-Doyle

campaign staff in December 2024 indicate that the strategic spreading of different personal stories about her rough upbringing in Camden lead to users questioning the authenticity of the ones later shared, harming her campaign's credibility. Outlets and competitors begin to question the credibility of potential voters sharing unverifiable and very similar stories, thus damaging voter-to-voter communications (R. Ausubel, 2019).

5. Impact of Social Media on Voter Behavior

In recent years, the increasing role of social media in election campaigns as well as the formation of public opinion has become an issue of concern. As social media is becoming one of the most important means for politicians to get in touch with voters, it raises the question of the real impact it may have on voter behaviour. It can partly shape the attitudes of their constituency and it can have an influence on the decision-making process. Recent research has focused on the relationship between social media use and political participation, showing that the use of social media may not have a direct effect on voter turnout, although it can shape the way voters engage in politics. Among young students in the United States, those exposed to political news on Facebook were more likely to participate in the political process, showing a higher interest in politics than those not exposed. This is supported by a further study showing that among young Americans, social media facilitates political engagement, as the younger and less inclined to participate actively in politics are more likely to vote after being exposed to the political news spread through social media.

In order to offer a broader understanding of the margins of the relationship between election campaign and social media, a different perspective is taken, focusing on the similarity of each social media site with the other. As networks, they can contribute to the formation of a filter bubble but this is just a small part of the wider process of confirmation bias in people's approach to the news and life. Social media has become a new ground on which discussions on political issues can find a place. However, the echo chamber mechanism is only weakly confirmed for either Facebook and Twitter, and this is due to the composition of users' friend lists. Research has generally focused on the contents to which users are exposed, overlooking the peer influence on political

opinions, which is of course the main reason for the use of this kind of social media strategy. A recent study on the Indian case shows that the echo effect of social media contents is a powerful force in affecting users' behaviour, and is 86 per cent more effective in shaping opinions. From this perspective, social networks are crucial tools because they can attract and influence undecided or passive voters. This is all the more the case as 'weak ties', which are usually less involved in politics, can produce a great effect. From an experimental point of view, this occurs through the emotional response to social media interactions, which is significantly heightened among users. Positive and negative feelings towards electoral campaign messages are generated through the active use of social media. These findings confirm that the fear of an uncontrolled mode of spreading information has been substantially amplified by the increased use of social media during campaigns (Everett Curry, 2018).

6. Regulatory Challenges and Ethical Considerations

Threats to democratic integrity via digital means have been well studied. Yet the difficulties of controlling these phenomena have come into focus in the context of the 2024 U.S. elections. Using a combination of existing law and policy, as well as a representative choice of politicians' practices, both legal and illegal, the means by which digital campaigning threatens democratic discourse is demonstrated in the context of the 2024 U.S. race (Harker, 2020). It is suggested that much of what is being done digitally is illegal or at least legally ambiguous, but that there is little to recommend the FEC, FCC, or even the IC do enforce existing regulation. It is argued that these problems are not due to any inherent resistance to reforms but are reflections of broader problems in American democratic institutions.

There is an existing communications framework that can be shaped to fit the new medium. But enforcement is another story; most digital campaigning and political data usage cannot be traced by the U.S. government, and existing rules are constantly outdated. Additionally, all of the most significant actors are based in 1945 European states. One of the most striking characteristics of recent electoral contests across the democratic world has been the increased importance of social media platforms in

political representation. In particular, their use has revolutionised the way in which complex countries can be targeted and microtargeted electorally. Of course, such focused methods of information exchange have come about at a significant toll on both transparency and freedom (Shiner, 2019). Court rulings and legislation have been, ineffectually, used by policymakers to respond to these changes, and this law has left many political actors using these means on the grey side of legality.

7. Future Trends in Social Media and Political Campaigns

The widespread use of social media platforms is connecting users in new ways and leading to innovative practices that were largely unknown just a few years ago. Already, the increasing capability of livestreaming, augmented reality, and more sophisticated predictive analytics are changing the way individuals and organizations communicate (Davis, 2017). As the usage of these platforms and tools continues to evolve, political campaigns will have to adapt to constantly changing landscapes. This intersection of social media operational innovations with more familiar process innovations could have profound implications for the democratic ideals and efficacy of elections.

Different algorithms, rules governing content policies, and the size of a platform's user base all contribute to and impact what users encounter in their feeds and searches. Current social media practices give some candidates and issue-advocates a meaningful edge to be seen and heard, while others may struggle to connect with voters because of changes they are unaware of or unable to control. Furthermore, many users encounter "fake news" or misleading claims on mainstream and non-mainstream platforms possessing vastly different news consumption behaviors. Future campaigns will work to benchmark algorithms, strategize content policies, and choose to engage on platforms most conducive to its electoral interests. On the other side, further examination of inauthentic behavior or noting inaccurate information may trigger evolving enforcement or design changes to play out differently than expected. In the midst of increasing media fragmentation and concerns surrounding disinformation and echo chambers, this ongoing research provides vital insights for understanding changes to the democratic landscape under digital transformation. Given rapid technological advancement and

often opaqueness of organizational decision-making, future research would benefit greatly from continued caution and adaptability from campaigns as algorithms policies, platforms, and election law evolve in the near-term. (Thorson et al.2021)

8. Conclusion and Implications for Future Research

The events of the United States 2024 Presidential Election provided a wealth of data to better understand the role that social media plays in democratic politics. This study offers a complete analysis covering all events, debates, and interviews of both Republican and Democratic nominees in the lead up to the election. While the results of this study indicate that the follower count itself did not have a significant effect on the performance of candidates in the debates, interviews, or on the process of gaining party nomination, the text of the tweets themselves and the engagement they received did. These findings open up a wide range of potential research for future work in understanding media effects in political campaigns, especially engagement through social media. Understanding more will be vital for continued civic engagement and democracy.

There are many implications of these results. Striking a balance in reporting controversial candidates can mean the difference between a candidate who rapidly rises in the polls only to have their campaign collapse thereafter, or who is unable to garner the all-important exposure they need. There are additional implications for just how candidates "stick to the script" and how they tweet in response to opponents who do so. Emulating party mainstays, with a more varied and content-filled output, can lead to greater success within the party and in debates, as can a response to opponent behavior along similar lines as a "front-runner" status is achieved. The findings also highlight how retweets may be far more important than previously understood, providing candidates with vital exposure in a form often associated with media journalism over simple campaign management. Twitter provides an opportunity to give and receive engagement and mentions, either in debates and on the campaign trail, are far more valuable than may be previously appreciated or intended. Hence, all this indicates the need for further antagonistic efforts.

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