

University of Rhode Island

The Growth of Social Media's Impact on Political Campaigns

Alyssa Krouson

Social Issues in Computing 320

Professor Krishna Venkatasubramanian

4/29/2024

Abstract

The exponential growth of social media within the 21st century has had an impact throughout modern society as a whole, but it has had a distinctly notable effect within the political field and political campaigning strategies. This paper dives into the history of political campaigns and the way political figures would market themselves to the public, with the use of past forms of technology before shifting into modern day political advertisements. It then discusses the rise of social media and technology's influence on such campaigns in terms of audience interconnectivity and affectivity. Then it discusses the various impacts that social media has created on political campaigning and marketing strategies, such as cost efficiency and larger stages for all emerging political candidates to connect to their audiences, and what it has done to voting communities in terms of instant connectivity and the rapid spread of information, including the concerns of fake news and false information. Each of these findings is discussed and analyzed in terms of positive, negative, and overall impacts on the political campaigning field. Specifically, how politicians can present themselves online, the efficiency of spreading campaigns, the growth of online political movements and rallies, the rampant spread of misinformation, and concerns with future technology. Lastly, the paper will discuss the future and how the continuing advancement of technology and social media will continue to play a crucial role in the world of politics.

1. Introduction

Over the years, we have seen the evolution of political campaign strategies through countless elections. From emotionally targeted advertisements to Twitter fights, political campaigns have seen a drastic shift over the years as media itself has changed with modern times. In fact, there is a direct correlation between the focus of political campaigns and the advancement and growth of technology and online media. "Since its inception in 1996, social media has managed to infiltrate more than half of the 8.06 billion people in the world," and as a result, "Social network platforms almost tripled their total user base in the last decade, from 970 million in 2010 to the number passing 4.95 billion users in October 2023."² This created an entire new, wide-reaching platform for politicians to use in order to advertise themselves to future voters and market themselves and

their ideas. New emerging politics can present themselves to audiences authentically and instantaneously with the push of a button. In just the US, 72.5% of the total population actively uses social media, totaling a total of 246 million people who have the ability to hear one's message.² But the impact of social media has not only affected campaigning strategies on the part of campaigners, but it has also affected the communities discussing such campaigns. People are not more interconnected than ever, and this presents new opportunities as well as challenges in the political world, impacting both the people creating campaigns as well as the ones viewing them.

2.1 History of Campaigns and Early Marketing Strategies

Within the past two decades, the strategies of political advertising and marketing campaigns have changed with both the rapid advancement of technology and the ability to spread information about political candidates instantaneously. Political advertising can be traced back all the way to simple print media, where newspapers, magazines, and flyers were the main sources of political news. This allowed candidates to articulate their stances on policies and create visually appealing posters to engage their audiences.³ Following the print was the television, which “revolutionized political advertising,”³ providing politicians with a platform that allowed them to reach vast audiences and speak to them with emotionally resonant messages. “The first political TV ad aired in 1952, featuring Dwight D. Eisenhower’s ‘Eisenhower Answers America’ campaign. The power of visual imagery, coupled with expertly crafted messaging, enhanced politicians’ ability to connect with the electorate, heralding a new era in political advertising.”³ Since this time, people began to look toward television as their source of news and media, and the United States saw, for the first time, political candidates representing themselves in political advertisements in television commercials. This became one of the primary ways that political candidates would

present themselves to their audience in order to gain voters' attention and support for their campaign. But as time went on, the birth of online and social media led to the exponential connection of people, and as a result, campaigns began to adjust to these changes.

2.2 The Growth of Social Media

With the creation of social media, the shift in political market strategies became evident. Online platforms allowed politicians to “target specific demographics, collect valuable voter data, and provide interactive platforms for supporters.”³ Social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter began to grow in popularity and, in turn, became battlegrounds for political discourse, “allowing candidates to respond in real-time and target specific audiences using advanced algorithms.”³

Along with that, the growth of video-sharing platforms such as YouTube and streaming services “democratized political advertising.” Politicians were able to produce and distribute content quickly and efficiently, thus allowing their messages to reach voters across the country.³ But what does this mean for the people receiving these advertisements? How has this change reflected on the people and how they perceive politicians and the political election system itself? And how has the ability to share and connect online affected people’s voices and discussions surrounding politics?

3.1 Online Platforms for Campaigns

The emergence of online social media platforms began, and this new space not only created a way for people to make communities online but also allowed for the rapid spread of information and news. This created a new drive for political campaigns to use these platforms in order to further advertise their candidate in not only an informational but also a personal sense. “Social media has changed the game, allowing incumbents and newcomers alike to speak directly to

constituents on everything from policy to what they had for dinner.”⁴ This allowed a way for political candidates to not only be perceived as political figures but as people with their own lives, and this created a new way for voters to empathize with the candidates. This is especially helpful for political newcomers, who can get a substantial boost in support by using social media. According to the *Knowledge at Wharton Podcast*, “Never have politicians been so accessible to the public,”⁴ explaining how there is simply more that we are able to learn about our politicians. “New candidates can humanize themselves through their social media accounts, and that helps voters feel more connected to [their audiences]” ... “they are an important part of the voting process because they represent hope.”⁴

3.2 Costs and Efficiency

Along with the level of connection, in comparison to the extreme expense needed for political campaigns, social media posts cost next to nothing and are easily tapped by anyone with an internet connection.⁴ Additionally, the podcast brings up how, “Michael Bloomberg spent more than \$1 billion of his own money before dropping out of the race in March 2020. More than 70% of that budget went toward advertising.”⁴ Thus, with its low costs in addition to the ability to reach a vast audience, social media can help level the playing field in politics and create a stage for new upcoming entrants. In fact, “within the first month of using Twitter, politicians were able to raise between 1% and 3% of what they would have raised in a two-year traditional campaign.”⁴ The podcast finished up saying, “You don’t have to have the big money, big bucks, big fundraisers, big supporters to be able to communicate on Twitter with your constituency and tell them about what your ideas are for the future.”⁴ As the prevalence of social media continues

to grow in people's everyday lives, people believe that it will play a major role in determining electoral outcomes as it gives future politicians a platform.⁴

3.3 Online Communities and Rallies

In addition to creating a platform for political candidates to present themselves to audiences, social media allowed for the creation of online discussion regarding all topics, including political debates and discourse. In the 2022 midterms, the polls saw the “second-highest turnout among young voters in three decades (just behind 2018): An estimated 27 percent of voters aged 18 to 29 voted in the midterms.”¹ This young voter turnout was due to extreme voter engagement efforts from community organizations that target young and Gen Z voters, “especially in battleground states and contested races, both offline and through social media.”¹ In recent years, the platform that has created the greatest discourse within the world of politics has been TikTok, “where over 60 percent of users are Gen Z,” and “people under 30 are the most likely group to get their news from the app.”¹ In fact, “40 percent of Gen Z reportedly exploring TikTok or Instagram before trying a standard Google Search.”¹ But why has this platform specifically grown in terms of political news? It is because TikTok allows “tens of millions of users to quickly access political information directly from community organizers, candidates, and journalists.”¹ This creates the sense that the information they are receiving feels intimate and personable, despite the fact that those videos are spread to hundreds of thousands of users on the platform.¹ In terms of creating discussions, “one TikTok feature lets users directly respond to, fact-check, or boost another person's post through ‘stitches,’ editing the video original together with their own response. Along with in-video comment replies, these elements allow young people a more organic way to comment on political information, relying less on mainstream news sources.”¹ Unlike older sites like Twitter and Facebook, which are no strangers to political

discussions on their platforms, formats such as TikTok's allow users to fact-check and discover for themselves the truth and preferences of what they are discussing from real people in real time. The organic nature of information sharing on TikTok is a primary reason the app is politically useful.¹ When asked about the app, users responded, "I think TikTok is good because [it brings up] a lot of the stories that I think should be brought to the table, but that maybe national media companies don't cover for a variety of reasons..."¹ The online community here enables people to discuss controversial topics that are widely avoided or overlooked, and gives people with passionate opinions the chance to have a voice. "Gen Z-led nonprofit that supports influencers and activists to produce informative content across social media platforms for the sake of promoting political action across a range of issues."¹ People agree that "It's a very democratic way of finding information," ... "citing things like busy comment sections as places where folks can go to do their research, or where users can hold disinformation-spreaders accountable."¹ Overall, the online communities agree that, "On political TikTok, there's a lot of these great communities and people that you reach and talk to, and everyone's very passionate and kind."¹ This gives young audiences a strong faith in the power they can have when it comes to political influence, giving them the mentality of, "You know what, it's time for us to stand up and make a difference."¹

3.4 Concerns with Democracy

Although online platforms sharing important political knowledge seems like a positive thing for voters, there are still many concerns regarding the potential spread of misinformation and damage it can cause. "In the mind of many analysts, social media is one of the major reasons for the declining health of democracy in nations around the world."⁷ The *Pew Research Center's Global Attitudes Project* looked at various countries, and their opinions of social media's impact

on politics, and across the countries polled, “a median of 57% say social media has been more of a good thing for their democracy, with 35% saying it has been a bad thing.” But when looking at the US, “just 34% of U.S. adults think social media has been good for democracy, while 64% say it has had a bad impact”⁷ But why is this the case? According to polls, “A median of 84% across the 19 countries surveyed believe access to the internet and social media have made people easier to manipulate with false information and rumors. A recent analysis of the same survey shows that a median of 70% across the 19 nations consider the spread of false information online to be a major threat.”⁷ Along with that, “a median of 65% think it has made people more divided in their political opinions.”⁷ Although staying informed about domestic and international events is “part of being a good citizen, and it is clear that people believe the internet and social media make it easier to stay informed.”⁷ In fact, according to the information gathered, majorities in most countries say it is “at least somewhat effective at raising public awareness, changing people’s minds about issues, getting elected officials to pay attention to issues, and influencing policy decisions.”⁷ But with the concern of spreading misinformation comes the problem of fake news created by artificial intelligence being spread on social media. With the upcoming 2024 presidential election, it was said, “If we’re not already in it, we’re on the precipice of an explosion of AI-generated disinformation.” ... “I think we’ve all kind of become familiar with the fact that this technology is out there, but I think we’re ready to kick into gear with this current election campaign.”⁸ The implications of AI have created a new form of distrust within online communities, and although there are clear and effective positives to the political use of social media, the issues concerning fake news and the spread of misinformation pose a threat to the integrity of ongoing campaigns and candidates image.

4.1 Humanization of Politicians

In the past, advertising through print media, or even television, was the main way for audiences to hear from politicians, viewing them in a two-dimensional sense and creating a disconnect between them. When social media first began to grow in popularity, it created a good opportunity for politicians to not only reach out to their voters and reply to questions they may have, but to also present themselves in a more human way. When watching someone through a screen, I think it is very easy to minimize them to simply that, a figure that is representing a political ideology. But with social media, politicians could show other sides of themselves that were not put on television: they could show themselves cooking, watching their favorite shows, or simply playing with their pets. These simple actions, by seeing and hearing them as everyday people, allowed us as an audience to humanize them and bring them down from the pedestal of “politician.” As stated well before, “candidates can humanize themselves through their social media accounts, and that helps voters feel more connected to them.”⁴ This simple step of presenting themselves in a normalized manner allowed that sense of disconnection to fade, and it allowed audiences to learn about a candidate as not just a representative of their ideals but a person with a life, goals, and struggles, just like themselves. It has also made people feel more capable of having an impact if they were to reach out to their representative. Knowing that their politicians are regular people just like them and are within their reach of communication, individuals can reach out online and share their concerns and actually receive a reply. Unlike in the past, candidates can, in real time, speak to audiences and address their concerns, answering just like any other individual on the platform and removing that invisible barrier between voter and candidate. Along with that, another main issue posed by traditional advertising was the expense. Advertising is one of the most expensive parts of political campaigns, and for new

uprising candidates, it can be difficult to get enough funding to put one's name out there. Social media has created a new and cheap way for new candidates to present themselves to an audience in such an authentic way that it can be even more impactful than regular advertising practices. Overall, I think that it is good that social media has created a way for us as people to feel connected to the people representing ourselves in government and has created the ability to empathize with political candidates on an equal level.

4.2 Online Communities

As political figures went to social media to spread their messages to their audiences, this also allowed for the making of new communities within those online platforms to form, thus creating a new force for politicians to face. This, in my opinion, has been the most impactful through video messages on platforms such as TikTok and Youtube. Although Twitter is still a strong force in political discussions, video-style social media has created a sense of genuineness with the people who are speaking. Rather than hiding behind an anonymous username, people are stepping forward, speaking their minds on political issues, and sharing information regarding the candidacy of politicians. But how do people know if what they're hearing is the truth? Well, the online platforms allow for comments and "stitches" where other users can give their input and even disprove what people may be talking about with their own facts and research. This new ability to have full conversations with others online created a new threat to many political campaigns. One obvious example that comes to mind is the Trump campaign in 2020. In various clips of Trump speaking, many users online were able to analyze and question the things he said, and thus were now able to call out his lies and actions. Individuals could step forward and call out political candidates based on what they say, claiming they are spreading misinformation and lies to their audiences, and these videos get spread like wildfire, not only on the original site

where they were posted but spread to other media websites, like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. This created a new level of accountability that political campaigns now needed to be aware of, and many times, the power of these online spaces was taken for granted. In fact, during the 2022 midterm elections, older generations saw the outcome of the power of these online communities firsthand, when there was a “high turnout among young voters helped fend off the anticipated “red wave,” keeping a Democrat-controlled Senate and near-equal split in the Republican-controlled House in the new Congress.”¹ This is just one instance where the people have come together through social media and posted a threat to policymakers, making politicians have to prepare for their words to be taken and received by countless people online and be ready to take responsibility for their words. I think this is a great step in the political world, where many times politicians will go back on their word or simply lie about their intentions and plans once elected. Social media created a way for voters to hold their representatives accountable for their actions and put more pressure on them to stay true to their promises made during elections. With older forms of advertising in large political campaigns, voters were rarely able to collectively come together and take a stand against policies. But with the large social media platforms, users are now given a larger stage in order to make a difference and bring together hundreds of thousands to millions of people to show their support together and unified. Overall, social media platforms have created a space for people to be able to speak their voices and opinions on political matters, whether for good or for bad, individuals are capable of using their voices online to spread information and communicate their thoughts and ideas to other people across the country.

4.3 Fake News and Misinformation

Even though social media has created platforms for both politicians and audiences to share their thoughts and opinions online, it has also seen the creation of the rapid spread of fake news.

Although social media has many positive effects on political campaigns in terms of advertising and marketing, the main negative outcome is the rampant spread of misinformation and lies created by either the politicians themselves, supporters of these politicians, or individuals trying to sabotage opposing political campaigns. This became extremely relevant in the 2020 presidential election as well as in the upcoming 2024 presidential election, mostly infamous within the Trump campaign. Platforms such as Twitter and other social media, as seen in the age of Trump, have advanced the “proliferation of disinformation, misinformation, ‘alternative facts,’ and ‘fake news.’”⁵ Countless media outlets have spoken out about lies and misinformation spread within the time of the Trump campaign, leading many online with large platforms to speak up about the truth and disprove many of his statements. But many times, this is not enough to fully erase the fake news that can be spread online. We as humans, when we read something online, will often take it as seen as the truth, and we do not bother to do further research to ensure something is valid. Even with pushes to regulate things such as fake news, it can be a struggle once negative information is spread to contain that news and get the truth out to all those who may have interacted with the fake news. Along with that, there is the concern with information operations, which are organizations that specifically work to spread propaganda and misinformation in order to cause discourse amongst online social media users over controversial topics, many of which have political ties. Although many young people have learned not to take everything at face value, and in order to use something within an argument, they must ensure what they are saying is accurate, many older generations still struggle to discern news with false

information and will continue to spread such fake news to others. Thus, I think that the concerns that, specifically, many Americans have with social media becoming the main platform for political campaigns are valid. The problem of fake news is not something new, but social media specifically is a way for that information to spread to even a global scale at incomprehensible speeds. Within future elections, it is dire that social media work to acknowledge fake news and misinformation, either from politicians themselves during the campaigns or from individuals involved with those politicians, to limit such conflicts amongst communities and to not mislead voters. This is already being implemented on many social media sites, like Twitter, where there will be notes added to a tweet after some time disclaiming the post and letting the readers know that the information is misleading or false. And platforms such as Tiktok have the ability for the users to “stitch” the other videos, disprove claims in their own words, and present their evidence to their audiences, allowing them to hold these creators of fake news accountable and show their evidence. But regardless, these systems are never going to be full-proof, and it is important for voters to do the research themselves when reading information online, especially during this growth of media.

4.4 Artificial Intelligence Media in Political Campaigns

These concerns about misinformation and fake news have become even worse with the growth of artificial intelligence-generated media. As generative AI, artificial intelligence that generates new media such as text, images, videos, and audio, continues to grow in popularity for various uses, the concerns about fake news have grown even worse. The ability to create life-like images and videos with the click of a button has not been a worry in previous elections, but now that AI is readily available for users online, political campaigns may face a new challenge in maintaining the reputation of their candidates. According to CNN, right before the primary voting in New

Hampshire, “a fake version of President Joe Biden’s voice had been used in automatically generated robocalls to discourage Democrats from taking part in the primary.”⁸ With the advancement in the abilities of AI, we as a society are now faced with the new issue of discerning what is a “deepfake” and what is real, regardless of what we may see and hear. A deepfake, “refers to a fake video that has been created using artificial intelligence. It is basically a fake video that looks very realistic.” And this is described as “a fundamentally different type of technology, and it is a lot more realistic.”⁸ The fact that individuals are now able to create a political figure’s voice with such accuracy that people truly believe it is their voice creates a whole new list of problems that could be caused by this technology. The creation of fake videos, images, and audio through tools like AI further emphasizes the idea that people online cannot take what they see for face value. Before, it was only people's words or photoshopped images that people had to be concerned about the validity of, but now, everything seen online can be questioned as fake. Anyone can give a prompt to an AI generator and create fake images of a political candidate and spread them online as facts. Thus, it is more important than ever to emphasize source checking to see where information is coming from, whether text, images, video, or audio. Unless it is from a very valid source known for providing news or even multiple sources, we as social media users must either do the research ourselves or not spread such news until it is proven to be true. Information regarding political figures, including the president, can result in disastrous situations, and yes, we as people should not be ready to take everything online as fact; there should also be repercussions involving the creators of such content. This may be in terms of defamation, but it is also just the spreading of false information with malicious intent. Additionally, I think there should also be a push from these companies that the people who are creating these AI models either work to improve their systems to detect possible

negative media creation or even take responsibility for its spread. If there are regulations on both ends, with the developers and the people who are seeing these online posts, there is the possibility to limit the spread of these fake media on social media platforms, but we may never be able to fully ensure AI is not used for such purposes. Although it is saddening, in my opinion, that we can't trust almost anything we see online anymore, it is important for voters as well as political marketing teams to ensure that the information being spread about people is the truth. As stated before, online sites like Twitter have been working on improving the community notes to disprove content that is AI generated, it is still a growing problem that needs to be addressed. Overall, it is important that, as technology continues to grow and the presence of social media remains a constant source of news and information for millions of Americans, online communities stay aware of the use of AI generated media and the potential false information they see online, in addition to the regular spread of fake news on social media sites.

5.1 The Future of Campaigns

As people's lives continue to become intertwined with the presence of social media, it is important to consider the future implications that may lead to political campaigns in the coming years. When looking back at the origins of political advertising, the "new media era began with the infotainment trend in the 1980s when television talk shows, talk radio, and tabloid papers took on enhanced political roles. Changes became more radical when the Internet emerged as a delivery system for political content in the 1990s."⁵ The public gained a greater political understanding through technology that allowed them to react to political events and issues and then communicate directly to candidates and political leaders in order to "contribute original news, images, videos, and political content and engage in political activities, such as working on behalf of candidates, raising funds, and organizing protests."⁵ Since then, social media's political

presence in campaigns, government, and political movements, as well as their role in the news media, has rapidly broadened in reach, consequence, and complexity.⁵ This has centralized access to information and made it easier for everyday citizens to have a say in politics, as well as allowing for microtargeting messages based on users' personal data. Nowadays, people are now getting news from their social media feeds, which, although it spreads important information, it contributes to rampant political insularity, polarization, and incivility.⁵ But since social media has become a major source of news for millions of Americans, who either get political information through subscriptions or accidentally come upon it in their newsfeed, it is important that we, as people, become aware of these politically targeted falsaries within the political world. With the growth of AI and the concern over hyper-realistic fake media, such as deepfakes, we must take into account the validity of all unreliable media. Today, it is easy for people to create lies and spread misinformation on the internet, and it has become our responsibility as voters to do the research and keep in mind the potential of fake news. So for future campaigns, we as a society must be aware of the potential of fake media and lies and do the research to ensure what we hear online is the truth.

5.2 Conclusion

The growth of social media created opportunities for all individuals to have a voice and share their beliefs, but with the ability to spread good information came the rise of negativity through harmful and fake media. As our technology continues to advance, this potential has now become more concerning than ever; we must continue to use our platforms to share the truth and use our voices to have an impact on our representatives, creating communities to healthy discuss the issues we face and use our influences to make great change. "From humble beginnings in print media to the hyper-targeted, real-time digital campaigns of today, political advertising continues

to evolve, offering valuable insights into the dynamic interplay between politics, technology, and culture.”³

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