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Midterm Candidate Participation in False and Misleading Election Discourse on Twitter

Keywords: twitter, user behavior, elections, rumoring, misinformation

Extended Abstract

Social media platforms provide an important communication vector for U.S. political candidates to engage with constituents and communicate stance on key issues. They may also offer a means of amplifying harmful election discourse. Such narratives threaten to interfere with participation and safety of election participants in addition to reducing trust in candidates and results [1]. Prior work has examined how users engage with election-related misinformation on Twitter [2, 3] and how general users interact with candidates for public office on the platform [4]. However, less is known about whether and how candidates themselves engage in the spread of election-related rumors. In this work we characterize candidate participation in false and misleading election rumors on Twitter surrounding the 2022 U.S. midterm elections. To do so, we examine the Twitter posts of 1,205 candidates who ran for office in 39 gubernatorial and 470 Congressional races from 19 September, 2022 through 1 December, 2022. Overall we find that while candidate participation in misinformation narratives is rare, those who do participate in election rumors are well connected within the community of public office candidates.

Data Collection: Through real-time monitoring in the fall of 2022, the Election Integrity Partnership[1] curated a set of 68 incidents of false or misleading claims, defined as any story or narrative shared on Twitter that may suppress or confuse voters, delegitimize elections, or interfere with election participation. We started from a dataset of over 1.4 million posts related to these incidents. We then obtained campaign, official, and personal Twitter handles for all candidates running in Senate, House of Representatives, or Gubernatorial races from Ballotpedia [2]. From the incidents dataset, we selected the posts that candidate accounts engaged with by tweeting, retweeting, or quote tweeting. This resulted in 105 posts affiliated with 32 incidents. We manually coded these posts to verify that each met the criteria for belonging to an incident and identified if the candidate's stance toward the election-related claim was one of *support*, *challenge*, or *neutral*. We assessed whether the candidate's role was *direct*, where the incident specifically involved the candidate's election, or *indirect*, where the incident claims were unrelated to specific elections or related to elections of other candidates. We collected all *following* relationships between the candidates' accounts to understand social ties of the group.

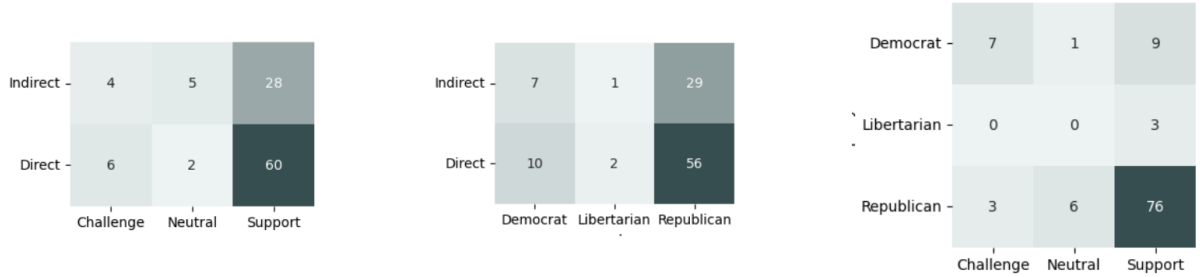


Figure 1: Examining the number of candidate tweets by role, political party, and claim stance

[1] https://www.eipartnership.net/blog/about-eip-2022
[2] https://ballotpedia.org/Main_page

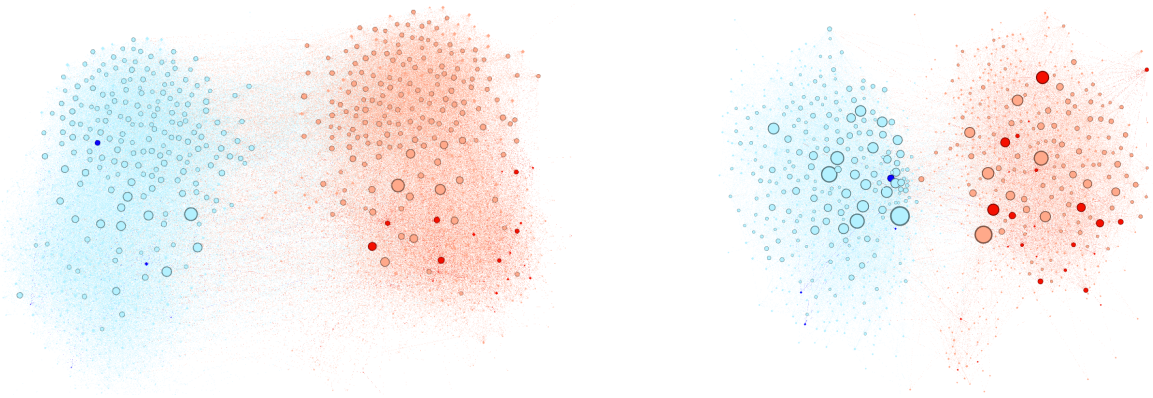
Results: We found that 42 candidate accounts, 2.80% of the 1,480 candidate accounts on Twitter, participated in discourse surrounding false or misleading election rumors. Additionally, 88.10% of accounts were from candidates' campaign accounts, which included posts by both office-seekers and incumbents; these accounts comprised 92.38% of the posts.

Figure 1 shows that the majority of candidates in support of these claims posted about incidents that directly related to their race and identified as Republican. Table 1 shows how

Table 1: Type of candidate engagement by stance and political party

		Stance			Political Party		
	Count	Challenge	Neutral	Support	Democrat	Libertarian	Republican
tweet	30	3.81%	0.00%	24.76%	2.86%	0.00%	25.71%
quote tweet	24	3.81%	0.95%	18.10%	8.57%	0.00%	14.29%
retweet	51	1.90%	5.71%	40.95%	4.76%	2.86%	40.95%

candidates were more likely to retweet in support of claims in an incident, whereas more tweets and quote tweets challenged claims. Democrats quote tweeted twice as often as they retweet and three times as often as they tweet. The majority of Republicans retweeted incidents, and they were least likely to quote tweet in response.



(a) All candidate accounts (b) Campaign accounts only

Figure 2: Nodes are unique accounts sized by their in-degree while directional edges represent a following relationship between the source and the target. Nodes are colored by Louvain method community detection algorithm with the blue nodes primarily constituted of Democratic candidates while the red nodes are mostly Republican candidates. Participator accounts are shown in a darker shade.

While very few candidates participated in false or misleading content, those that did have strong ties within the social network of candidates. Figure 2 visualizes the connections between candidates and shows very distinct communities pertaining to Republican and Democratic candidates. We considered the group of candidates who posted in support of at least one of the false or misleading incidents to be a *participator* while those who did not were considered *abstainers*. Within the network of campaign accounts, Mann-Whitney U tests showed that participators had significantly higher in-degree centrality than abstainers (Z=28580, $P<.01$) as well as significantly higher betweenness centrality (Z=33378, $P<.001$). When considering the entire network of candidate accounts participators had a significantly higher betweenness centrality than abstainers according to a Mann-Whitney U test (Z = 31447, $P<.001$) but the difference in in-degree centrality was non-significant. These results indicate that participators play a more

central role in the network of candidates than their peers who abstained from engaging in false or misleading narratives. Crucially, we also note that this difference is not due to the fact that most participators were Republicans. In fact, for both the campaign accounts network as well as the all accounts network, Democrats had a significantly higher in-degree centrality (campaign only: Z=176921.5, $P<.001$, all accounts: Z= 186251, $P<.001$) and betweenness centrality (campaign only: 189531 $P<.05$, all accounts: Z = 192576.5 $P<.05$).

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