

Chapter 11

Do Campaigns “Go Negative” on Twitter?

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ABSTRACT

The use of negative ads in traditional election campaigns has been well-documented, but we know little about the use of Twitter to “go negative.” We content analyze candidate tweets from four different gubernatorial elections in 2011 to understand how candidates are using Twitter. We coded 849 tweets to explain the determinants of “going negative” on Twitter. Our results show that while tweets are overwhelmingly positive, candidates go negative by tweeting about policy. We believe this supports the innovation hypothesis and argue that Twitter is a conducive social media forum for policy-based messages due to its highly partisan nature. However, other determinants of negative campaigning such as competitiveness of the race and campaign funding were consistent with the normalization hypothesis. Our mixed results are consistent with other studies on social media and suggest there is still much to be learned from this tool.

INTRODUCTION

It is undisputed that the Internet has opened many new avenues for candidates and parties to reach voters (Jungherr, 2016). Even though social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter are still relatively new, candidates and parties quickly added the virtually free communication tools to their repertoire to wage campaigns online. As with any new communication tool, an important question to ask is whether campaigns are using the Internet in a novel way or if Internet campaigns are being conducted in the same manner as traditional ones (Druckman, Kifer, & Parkin, 2010; Dulio, Goff, & Thurber, 1999; Johnson, Braima, & Sothirajah, 1999; Xenos & Foot, 2005)? This chapter will examine how candidates are using Twitter, and specifically whether they use it to “go negative.”

The normalization thesis (Bimber & Davis, 2003; Margolis & Resnick, 2000) suggests that candidates are simply using social media to amplify messages already being sent through traditional avenues, whereas

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the innovation thesis (Foot & Schneider, 2002; Johnson et al., 1999) proposes that online messages and campaigns are unique. Internet campaigns are not simply replications of traditional campaigns and therefore scholars must examine how politics are being played out online. We contribute to this puzzle by examining messages on Twitter to determine if campaigns go negative.

Twitter was founded in 2006 and Barack Obama was the first presidential candidate to utilize it for campaign purposes in 2008. By 2016, all the presidential candidates and the majority of lower-level candidates were also campaigning on Twitter. While there is little doubt that the new medium has changed the face of campaigns and challenged the dominance of television (Johnson et al., 1999), we still are trying to understand how and why. Internet campaigns contain higher quality and quantity of information and have an interactive component not possible on television (Corrado & Firestone, 1996), but is the message the same?

This chapter seeks to understand one essential component of the Internet campaign—the message. In particular, we examine campaign rhetoric on Twitter and ask: do candidates go negative? By content analyzing over 800 tweets from four gubernatorial races during the 2011 election cycle, we find competitive races and campaign funds to be determinants of negative campaign messages on Twitter. These findings are in line with the normalization hypothesis and what we would expect to find given the traditional campaign literature. However, we also find candidates go negative by tweeting about policy. We believe this supports the innovation hypothesis and argue that Twitter is a more conducive forum for policy-based messages than television due to its partisan nature (Bekafigo and McBride 2013; Parmalee and Bichard 2012).

This chapter proceeds as follows: First, we examine the traditional media literature on negative campaigns as a baseline for our expectations of the types of messages gubernatorial candidates might be posting on Twitter. Next, we examine the literature on campaigns online and in social media. We position ourselves on the side of the innovation hypothesis and explain why campaigns on Twitter should be different than traditional ones. We then discuss our data, methods, and proposed hypotheses in the third section. Finally, we reveal the determinants of going negative on Twitter. This research is significant because it contributes to the innovation/normalization theory by demonstrating candidates' use of negative campaign messages on Twitter.

Negative Campaigns on Traditional Media

The longest lasting appeals made by candidates are negative (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995; Damore, 2002; Jamieson, 1992; Jerit, 2004; Kaid & Johnston, 1991). Even though most voters claim to dislike negative messages, they are thought to be effective (Martin, 2004). Studies of political messaging have shown that candidates use negative ads because they are memorable and stimulate interest in campaigns (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995; Jamieson, 1992; Jerit, 2004; Kaid & Johnston, 1991; Lau, Sigelman, & Rovner, 2007; Martin, 2004). Following a similar rationale, candidates will post negative tweets on Twitter in order to gain votes.

In traditional campaigns, negative information can be “arousing and attention grabbing” to potential voters (Martin, 2004). Negative campaign messages tend to focus on issues, particularly those that are salient and thought to be “owned” by the opposition party (Damore, 2002; Martin, 2004; Skaperdas & Grofman, 1995). Aside from policy positions, negative messages will also often target candidate's character or personality—for example traits such as competence or trustworthiness (Skaperdas & Grof-

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