Chapter 21
Presidential Elections Web 2.0

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ABSTRACT

Has social media changed voter participation in presidential campaigns? Prior research has found that advances in social media has resulted in candidates focusing more on the "ground war" and less on mass media. Nevertheless, candidates could be doing more to incorporate the internet into their campaigns. This is particularly true when using social media in a manner that could allow interaction between the candidate and supporters. Candidates had been structuring social media use in a manner that gave an illusion of interaction. This has recently changed as a result of the success of Republican nominee Donald Trump during the 2016 presidential primaries. This success had been in part because of his strong social media presence which has led to other candidates changing their social media use. This chapter explores the change in social media use in presidential elections and its impact on voter turnout.

INTRODUCTION

An important question for any candidate is, "how does he/she reach potential voters?" One method is through making personal appeals known as the "ground war." This campaign strategy, in the past, involved both phone calls and house-to-house canvassing. This method had taken a backseat to the "air wars" or using mass media such as television or radio to reach votsaers. Recently, candidates have started reconsidering the ground war. One reason campaigns are reviving this approach to campaigning is that the electorate has become more polarized. Because the political center is shrinking, it no longer seems logical to make broad appeals to the electorate. Instead, reaching out to the base with targeted messages is becoming a central campaign strategy. For example, until relatively recently modern presidential campaigns had spending 70-75% of their war chest on the "air war." In 2008, however, the Obama campaign only spent 50% of campaign funds on mass media and instead elected to focus more money on the "ground war" (Hershey, 2013).

The ground war has become easier with the widespread use of cell phone. A Pew Internet & American Life Project Survey (2012) found that during the 2012 presidential campaign, approximately 88% of registered voters own a cell phone and made extensive use of it for political activities. The survey also

found that smartphone owners were particularly apt to use their cell phone for political activities including fact checking political statements and taking part in political discussion on social network sites. A recent Pew Research Center study found almost two-thirds of those surveyed reported owning a smartphone with twenty-three percent of smartphone owners reporting that they used their phone to donate money to a political or charitable cause (2015). The fact that citizens are using their cell phones for activities ranging from fact checking candidate statements in real time to presenting their own personal views on social network sites has not been lost on candidates. During the 2012 election, candidates began adopting a number of strategies that used cell phones to reach the electorate including integrating mobile apps into their campaign strategy for connecting with the public. Finding avenues for reaching out to constituents through mobile apps have continued with the 2016 presidential election. One example is Snapchat, a mobile app that allows for the sharing of photos and videos. Presidential primary hopefuls including Senator Rand Paul (R), Governor Scott Walker (R) and Governor John Kasich (R) each experimented using the app to release campaign ads (Roth, July 30, 2015).

The widespread use of cell phones and an increasingly polarized electorate are two pieces of the puzzle that help explain why candidates are allocating more of their resources to the ground war. The final puzzle piece is social media. When the 2008 Obama campaign was redirecting its resources to more targeted messaging, the Internet was moving from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0 with the development of Facebook (2004), YouTube (2005), and Twitter (2006). Although his use of social media for communicating with potential voters was considered innovative in 2008, it became common place by the 2012 presidential election. For example, in 2012 President Obama announced his reelection bid with a tweet and a YouTube video while former governor Mitt Romney announced he was forming an exploratory committee by posting it on Facebook, in a tweet and in a video posted on his website. Currently there are a number of narratives coming out of the 2016 presidential primaries. One of the more dominant themes is the importance of social media. This can be attributed, in part, to Donald Trump. While candidates in previous elections used social media as a secondary tool for communicating with the electorate, Donald Trump has been using Twitter as a direct means of communication with voters. Others candidates have followed his lead by increasing the use of social media including Facebook and Twitter as part of their campaign (Lang, April 5, 2016).

What do we know about the effect of these trends on voter turnout? More Americans are now turning to social media for campaign news and smartphones are playing an important role in this phenomenon. These changes in voter behavior have not gone unnoticed by candidates who are adopting "ground war" strategies that utilize the widespread usage on social media and adoption of smartphones. Do the changes in how candidates communicate with the electorate encourage voter turnout? To examine this question, this chapter presents an examination of recent presidential elections and the role social media in mobilize voters.

BACKGROUND

Early researchers (e.g. Davis et al., 2009) predicted that the Internet would change political campaigns in four important ways. The first is through allowing the campaign to transmit information to others. Websites could be used to distribute information that would have previously been distributed through campaign flyers and brochures. This could make it easier for voters to obtain political information. Secondly, the Internet can be used to gather information including background information on opponents.

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