# The Impact of Social Media on the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election

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## ABSTRACT

In the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election, Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram were frequently employed by both Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton and Republican candidate Donald Trump to release information on policy issues, criticize the competition, and attack the other party. In order to take a look at the social media action each campaign acquired between October 16th and October 22nd, 2016, the text of the most frequently released Facebook and Twitter posts by the campaign pages and the candidate pages for the two are examined. Sentiment toward the competition, discussion of the economy, and attack ads were recurring themes on the top 10 most frequently posted charts and graphs by both Democratic and Republic candidates. In order to accumulate and analyze the social media interaction data from these posts, Facebook post metadata, Facebook post message data, and Tweet metadata were scraped.

Among social networking applications, Twitter maintains a constructive search feature for OTS surveillance operations. In an analysis of "#Trump2016" and "#ImWithHer", Judea Pearl's do calculus was used to identify the most influential issues and adjust tweets that influenced voters. In the everyday American election, the most influential Tweet that will affect the Democrat/Republican party advocate choice was retweeted. Posts that influence voting patterns have been shown to come from substantial newscasters and celebrities, rather than from political figures. There was

weak evidence that negative remarks are more effective if they come from political figures. There was no proof that the cultivation of uncertainty in party politics has had a significant impact on the followers. Users who have followed a political figure have an overall bias in favor of their marked political party regarding their opinions. Results of this study include the existence of strong party-oriented three-edge nodes in the directed graph and the examination of how a node's endorsements are represented as a mean within the graph.

**Keywords:** social media, 2016 election, Twitter, Facebook, political campaigns, sentiment analysis, voter influence, candidate strategies

## 2. Introduction

Social media has quickly risen as a leading source of political news in the twenty first century. As social media evolves, the role it plays in each United States (U.S.) election continues to grow and develop. The use of social media in this election cycle had a significant impact on both candidates, as it was used to engage with the electorate, foster a burning desire to vote and debate, and promote their aspiration for elected office (Davis, 2017). When examining the use of social media in political elections, it is vital to recognize the dissimilarities between social media and traditional news media. The sharp incline in the number of people who use social media platforms in the U.S. has made it a common source of political news as sites like Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, and Instagram are used by online brothels and television programs as secondary sources of analysis. Social media has some distinct characteristics, such as its potential to be an interactive source of news and the capacity to be both a primary and secondary news source, that make it unusual in comparison to television and printed news sources. Additionally, the dissemination circuit for social media news is speedy and spontaneous, and its brief content is more fitting for dispersing breaking news and top stories (Billings, 2017). Social media also has the possibility to reach an immense fraction of the adult U.S. population and targets certain demographics in ways that conventional TV and printed media can't. These distinct characteristics played a substantial role in determining the prominence

of social media in the 2016 U.S. election cycle. Historically, candidates have taken to the airwaves and purchased campaign ads on TV soap operas and the stories heard on sponsored content. However, because of an evolutionary process, the advent of social media in the 2016 campaign landscape altered deeply rooted patterns. The 2016 U.S. Presidential Election is seen as a tipping point election, characterized by social media as an evolutionary force, rather than simply a static one. The aim of this paper is to provide insight into how this medium altered; the running of presidential elections in the U.S., and to understand how it influenced the electorate. In particular, this paper allows for analysis of the unprecedented trajectory of social media in 2016, as Republicans and Democrats marketed themselves in new and varied ways. Topics of debate will comprise the technology used by both parties and how it was integrated with traditional methods, the implications of endorsement of third-party actors in changing behavior as an extension of the 2010 Citizens United ruling, the role of media and news in facilitating attacks by the two candidates and party platforms, strategies employed to bridge the gap of legitimacy between grassroots efforts and mainstream narratives, the use of fake news and fraud, and attempts to co-opt the information cycle by both the swearing-in administration and third-party organizations.

## 3. The Role of Social Media in Politics

Social media has expanded exponentially in the last decade to encompass a large part of our day-to-day lives. Today, its use can be for more than just keeping in contact with friends, family, and acquaintances. Social media aids in fostering connections and sharing intimate details of daily lives. Discussing political beliefs on platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Reddit create an environment for like-minded individuals to connect in a virtual manner. This can inspire grassroots activism, where people can organize events or donation funds for particular causes (Billings, 2017). Social media apps have further expanded into the political sphere. Allowing for an individual to register to vote through the app, check their voting status, or where their polling place is. Connections can also be fostered among users and their elected officials.

Social media has worked on democratization of potential political issues. Social media allowed for the escalation of this issue to national importance. The Ferguson protests after the shooting of Michael Brown would not have been as big had it not been for Twitter, Tumblr, and Reddit. Yet, the democratization of important issues as well as the democratization of political thought can bring about issues of its own. These include the rapid dissemination of fake news (Davis, 2017). The ease in which fake news could become viral on social media during the 2016 election was formidable. Facebook's 'trending page' had to restructure their algorithm after the presidential elections as it was exposeur as being hence to conservative articles. Online echo chambers are also created thanks to the democratization of political issues. At times this could further make divisiveness on political issues. Subconsciously or not, people friends with a similar thought style due to Facebook's algorithm allowing only things from their conservative/liberal friend on their news feed. In turn, they will only see fake news or a bias view on a certain political issue. In regards to political campaigns, social media is seen as favorable agent for utilization due to their capacity to build brand relationship and their ability to formulate participatory bearing to their users. Political organizations began focusing contacts with supporters on digital communication. Social media became the hub for political information. A correlation between social media and civic engagement has been observed. There is a massive jump in weekly news consumption due to social media, rising from 49% to 79% since 2008. Facebook users get their news almost exclusively from Facebook and Twitter users tend to stick with Twitter in terms of news source. Due to that, it is very crucial for political organizations how they present their candidate or political issue on particular social media network. Additionally, suggests that online political engagement is negatively related with low-information sources. Social networks or social media in general creates an array of opportunities for different forms of civic engagement. Social media can enhance conversation and engagement in political processes. It can be used to simulate one-on-one conversation, but reaching a much wider audience. Knowledge of how interaction on social media influences voter behavior and opinion is very valuable for political organizations

during campaigns. Analysis of sharing, liking, or commenting on political websites of any kind on Facebook, it is determined that this unique behavior is solely generated by the ongoing 2016 presidential election. This behavior is mainly induced during political events of the campaign (primary night, televised debates, etc.) as well as other events leading to changes in the funding, the characterization, or simply the campaigning actions of the candidates or the Democratic and Republican national committees. Itinerant independent politicians of the race have also altered the sharing behavior. Over the entire course of the granting process, shares largely comprise URL links from external domains while public opinion undergoes large swings a very consistent with an enticing echo chamber effect. There is a rhythm of the research conducted, followed by findings. There are multiple tables and figures included, which assist in the more succinct summary. (Ncube, 2021)

## 4. The 2016 U.S. Presidential Election: Overview

The 2016 U.S. Presidential Election, arguably the most controversial U.S. presidential election, began in August 2015 with the announcement of the first Republican candidate, Donald J. Trump. Although Trump was initially not considered a threat to his fellow Republican candidates or Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton, the primaries were unpredictable. Democratic candidate Bernie Sanders and Republican candidate Ted Cruz were alarmingly successful in winning early-state primaries and marginalizing more established candidates. By May 2016, Trump and Clinton were considered the presumptive candidates for the November 8 election (Jin et al., 2017). As the candidates hastened their campaigns, leaks of damaging information plagued both candidates, and the discord between the candidates and their supporters erupted in nationwide violent clashes (Davis, 2017).

On November 8, Election Day, most experts and pollsters believed Clinton had a slight advantage over Trump, citing Trump's inexperience and his scandals relation to former Democrat voter registration and vulgar comments about women and immigrants. However, the outcome was not as predicted; with 46.1% of the popular vote, Trump defeated Clinton's 48.2%. During the elections, social media gained

explosive popularity in providing voters with immediate information about campaign events, fact-checking, and other news, while also allowing voters to respond in real time. It was only realistic for the voters to respond on social media – most often via Twitter and Facebook – since 62% of U.S. adults consumed their news through social media in 2016. In addition to Trump's surprising victory, U.S. social media forums, primarily Twitter, played a significant role in the elections. Key moments from the election sparking nationwide outrage and celebration were live-tweeted at unprecedented rates, while campaign information was most accessible through Twitter. For instance, Trump announced his presidential campaign via Twitter on June 16, 2015.

## 5. Social Media Strategies of Candidates

For the 2016 U.S. presidential election, candidates incorporated innovative social media strategies. The 2016 presidential election represented a seminal moment in U.S. election history, shaped by the backdrop of a long-standing political system starting to grapple with rapid technological and social change. Social media forever altered candidates' modes of public communication and methods of engaging with voters, whitening the lines between persuasion, political information, and political engagement. These platforms were employed by candidates in often diverging ways to engage authentic content, reaching voters where they could not have been reached before, and mobilizing voter support. The aim of this analysis is to explore the social media campaign strategies as employed by candidates and their effects on voter turnout and engagement during the presidential primaries (Davis, 2017. This analysis investigates the deployment of social media platforms by candidates during the race for the party nominations. Perceived authenticity dominated the social media strategies, ranging from manufacturing spontaneous interaction on social media walls, setting a candidate's social media sphere amidst a backdrop of high-engagement content, and posting totally unfiltered messages on the social media by the candidates themselves. Candidates also drew on these platforms to shower affection (and policy recommendations) on various states, or discuss debate outcomes around each other.

There was also extensive employment of highly-targeted social media advertising on all three platforms, with one campaign taking this strategy to some of the most divisive political narratives, issues, and groups entertained by any presidential candidate in the modern era. The text also examines how the visual and narrative content of the social media posts worked to set a tone for meso-level social media strategies, with spillovers from the overarching framing utilized by respective campaigns in traditional media. Visual material often also facilitated switching between mediums, with social media often employed to direct viewers to webpages or to produce near-delirious viral loop potential. Rather than simply broadcast a message, policy, or event, it was this combination of strategies that together fed into the formation of character, a candidate's social media persona. From the scandal-mongerer to the aficionado who feasted on various claims, the formation of these characters would see the candidates' social media strategies often placed in lockstep with those in traditional and visual media. The broader character of social media, particularly its immediacy and interactive properties, allowed for some rather unique modes of engagement. These innovative strategies saw the co-option of both exceptionally cynical and relentless social media influencers amplifying campaign messaging and the creation of complex grassroots campaign movements on platforms traditionally unimportant in shaping campaigns. The effects were frequently powerful, contributing to some of the most divisive and outrageous political campaigns in decades, with substantial and unexpected cascading consequences. In contrast, such built-up expectation would make the minor declines in national voter registration and voter turnout seem almost benign. Among the polarized extremes so often drawn in discussions over the 2016 U.S. elections, these feedback loops of engagement are risked being overlooked. This does nothing to diminish their importance, with the feasibility of achieving electoral success now inherently contingent on a strong showing across an exhaustive array of engagement metrics. (Jacobs, 2022)

## 6. Impact of Social Media on Voter Behavior

Of the many campaign firsts of 2008 or 2012, the presidential election of 2016 will likely be most remembered for the influence that social media had on its campaign cycle. Not only did social networks shape political conversations and organize activists, but candidates also created new ways of communicating with the public that have also changed the way campaigns operate forever. Between videos on social media, secret videos showing bias in the DNC, the mass proliferation of 'fake news' in hyperpartisan outlets and the rise of Twitter storms, candidate interactions on social media began to shape the daily interactions between candidates, the press, and the voting public. Gone are the days where campaigns could control the slate that voters would consider. In 2016, political ads spread into the feeds of anyone on social media. The effects of this new type of mediated content have already started to be documented post-election to some extent. It's clear that the amount of discourse has been changed. Social media is important because of its unique potential to mediate political discussion in new ways, and who that mediates and who is reached matters (Everett Curry, 2018). The mere survival of traditional news outlets are threatened as an economy of attention has diverged into countless niche issue publications. Some work suggests that social media is acting as a 'shortcut' for both candidates and voters. So it's clear they have an ability to change what is being talked about amongst the public. However, less work has gone into how posts lead to discussions, how these facilitated interactions potentially translate to physical world actions and what implications those behaviors may have for election outcomes. This line of research provides a thorough analysis of how social media, during this past cycle, shaped voter behaviors and what that means for future elections.

## 7. Misinformation and Fake News

Critical issues of misinformation and fake news that became evident during and post 2016 U.S. Presidential Election are discussed in this viewpoint. An account of the widespread impact is provided, with special emphasis on priming voter intuitions and the public debate about this issue. Insights provided about potential downstream

effects on levels of trust within democratic institutions and the need for and exploration of policy responses. Digital misinformation has become a defining feature of political and electoral processes due to its broad repertoire, spectacularly controversial effectiveness, and huge impact. Social media platforms are used to propinquity and diffuse fake news. Critical insight is provided about how fake news occupy vast space using cascades analysis.

In 2016, the United States experienced one of the most controversial and intriguing presidential elections in its history due to the rise of the 'Twitter President,' who employed sophisticated strategies to gain a competitive advantage through the use of social media platforms. In the same year the UK, the decision to leave the EU was made by the government which led to a series of parliamentary upheavals. The positive experience of democracies is threatened by hostility; recent election observers and investigation missions emphasized recurring threats to democracy. It follows controversies surrounding international activities and the challenge democracy is facing due to the rise of autocrats from nations usually considered Western liberal. (Knuckey & Hassan, 2022)

## 8. Conclusion and Future Implications

The 2016 U.S. Presidential Election was transformative, at least in the sense of campaign strategies shaped by and shaping social media. Many scholars believe "this election will be spoken of in terms of a revolution in American politics" (Billings, 2017). Social media became a primary resource for political discussion and as a source of information about the campaigns. Politically active users took the opportunity to share or discuss information with others (B. Baldeh, 2019). Twitter and Facebook arguably have the highest potential for users to engage in political discussions. Social media platforms can empower groups or individuals to join a political discussion they may have previously been excluded from, facilitate democratic discussion in societies and improve the ability of groups to achieve social empowerment.

However, the same facilities also have the potential to perpetuate incorrect or incorrect information; an effect which is replicated across social media networks. The inclusion and misinformation of political communication across social media suggest larger discussions regarding the strength of liberal democracies in a digital context. There are still some lessons to be learned from this watershed election concerning the role of digital communications in democracy since social media has had a significant impact on the election strategy in 2016. There is more exploration of how social media influenced the election engagement and discussion of the implications of what is experienced for the social media use of future democratically contested societies. In December 2017, around 68% of all American adults said they were using Facebook, that was a modest rise from the 54% of adults who said they were using Facebook in 2012. In comparison to 24% who claimed they used Twitter, there were 15% claimed they used Instagram, and 13% claimed they used Pinterest. The results highlight the increasing evolution of social media platforms as a fundamental means of news and information sharing and emphasize the importance of policies that regulate accuracy and the creation of healthier online political dialogues in the future. Given the importance of the topic, there have been repeated calls to carry out further work to understand the interaction of social media and democracy.

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