TWEETING NEGATIVE:
Determinants of Negative Campaigning in the 2011 Gubernatorial Elections

Marija Anna Bekafigo, University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg, MS, USA
Allison Clark Pingley, University of South Carolina, Spartanburg, SC, USA

ABSTRACT

The use of negative ads in traditional election campaigns has been well-documented, but the authors know little about the use of Twitter to “go negative.” They content analyze candidate tweets from four different gubernatorial elections in 2011 to understand how candidates are using Twitter. They coded 849 tweets to explain the determinants of “going negative” on Twitter. The results show that while tweets are overwhelmingly positive, candidates go negative by tweeting about policy. They believe this supports the innovation hypothesis, with Twitter being a more conducive forum for policy-based messages. Other determinants of negative campaigning such as competitiveness of the race and campaign funding were consistent with the normalization hypothesis.

Keywords: Appeals, Campaign, Elections, Gubernatorial, Messages, Negative, Twitter

INTRODUCTION

Since the Internet has opened many new avenues for candidates and parties to reach voters, one of the primary questions researchers must answer is whether campaigns are using the Internet in a novel way or if Internet campaigns are being waged in the same manner as traditional ones (Druckman, Kifer, & Parkin, 2010; Dulio, Goff, & Thurber, 1999; Johnson, Braima, & Sothirajah, 1999; Xenos & Foot, 2005)? 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 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. Even though social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter are relatively new, candidates and parties have taken advantage of them to wage campaigns online. Twitter was only created in 2006, with Barack

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Obama being the first presidential candidate to utilize it for campaign purposes in 2008. By 2012, 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 paper 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 see given the traditional campaign literature. However, we also find candidates go negative by tweeting about policy. We believe this supports the innovation hypothesis, with Twitter being a more conducive forum for policy-based messages.

This paper will proceed 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 advertisements 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, it would be likely that candidates would post negative tweets on Twitter.

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 & Grofman, 1995). Based on this literature, tweets are analyzed for negativity, and the mentions of policies and/or personal attributes.

Some candidates are more likely to go negative than others. For instance, incumbents are less likely than challengers to go negative mainly because they already have an established voting base (Skaperdas & Grofman, 1995). This encourages incumbents, who are also often frontrunners, to take a more positive approach to campaigning, which is thought to appeal more to undecided voters (Damore, 2002; Skaperdas & Grofman, 1995). However, challengers, who are often trailing in the polls, may go negative in an attempt to undercut the frontrunner’s support (Damore, 2002). Competitiveness may also affect the message tone, with negative campaigns more likely to take place in close races.
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