The Different Factors in a Community that Influence Political Involvement on Social Media

Lauren Yoakum, Peyton Cook, Guimin Zheng

Introduction and Background

For the majority of U.S. history, politicians and potential leaders would spread their messages and policies through speeches, rallies, and conventions. Yet, in seemingly the blink of an eye, a new element has been added to the political strategy of spreading the U.S. policy message: social media. Now, ideals and opinions can be spread faster than ever, and any one person can have unlimited access to this new, unchartered technological landscape.

With all this unlimited access, and in such an abrupt way, there is little to no research that evaluates the impact on human's social- and political- behavior. From the Donald Trump twitter campaign of 2016 to newly developed platforms made only for specific political parties, the part that social media has played in leadership styles has vastly changed; and its impact must be studied.

Unfortunately, because social media is a newly introduced concept, there isn't much data at all that can distinguish its connection to leadership and political impacts. Meanwhile, as political leadership increasingly depends on social media platforms, many small communities in the U.S. that cannot afford internet, as well as communities with smaller populations who may not represent a "huge" following on social media, may not experience the same new involvement that other, larger communities do. Because there are so many factors up in that air that social media involvement depends on, it's imperative these factors are further researched in regard to political involvement, because without political involvement, these communities will not receive the same representation that others do.
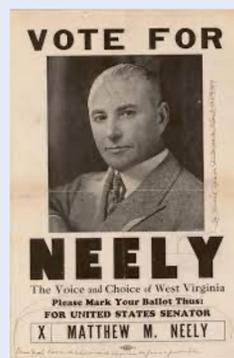
Figure 1. A Senate campaign poster for Democratic nominee Matthew Neely, 1954
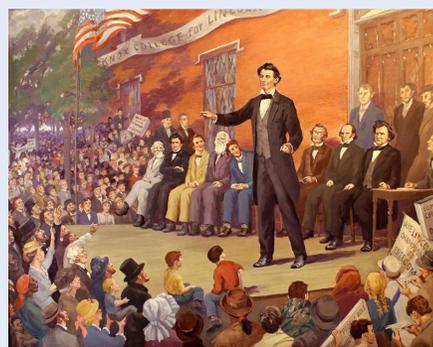
Figure 2. Painting of Abraham Lincoln campaigning at Old Main building at Knox College, Illinois, 1858

Figure 3. A comparative display of the "X" logo (left) and the previously-used Twitter logo (right).

Figure 4. X (Twitter) Profile header for current Mayor of LA, Karen Bass

Research Methods

For this study, both quantitative and qualitative research methods were used. Firstly, qualitative content analysis was utilized in order to collect all the necessary social media accounts involved. This method was also used to lay out and understand what factors could be applied to each community, given what the public has informational access to, such as population size, average gross income, etc.

Secondly, it was necessary to apply quantitative research methods, in that the data analysis program "R" was used in order to determine the correlation between social media involvement and different independent factors. By applying quantitative content analysis, more descriptive statistics were also able to be achieved, such as variance and central tendency, that allowed us to understand further how correlated the values are, and later apply to the findings when determining a conclusion.

Figure 5. Political cartoon by Jimmy Margulies, 2019

Figure 6. Political cartoon by Pat Bagley, feature in The Cagle Post, March 2020

Results

After much qualitative and quantitative data analysis, there proved to be three main factors that determined how involved community leaders are with their designated social media platforms. Firstly, a high correlation, found through quantitative analysis such as the "R" data program, measured correlations between the following factors:
- Above average income communities and increased social media political involvement (SMPI)
- Below average internet access in communities and decreased SMPI.
- Below average population communities and decreased SMPI.

Ultimately, the data concluded that the main factors contributing to less political involvement had to do with how economically a community was developed. Population, average income, and internet access are higher in more developed communities in lower in lesser developed ones; when taking this into account, we can prove that these communities lack the same political involvement that larger, highly developed communities have.

That being said, these results are not applicable to all situations; there were many outliers, for example, in which the average income was significantly lower than the national average, despite having a larger population. In these particular instances, it was found that population still played a bigger role in determining social media-based political involvement. However, despite population being the largest determining factor in political involvement, it's important to note that average income and access to internet both still play a very large influential role.

Figure 7. Emma Nguyen, "The Political Power of Social Media"

Community Percentage Access to Internet, Correlating Tweets Probability

Percentage of Population (With Internet Access)

0.97-1.00 | 0.93-0.96 | 0.89-0.92 | 0.85-0.88 | 0.81-0.84 | <81
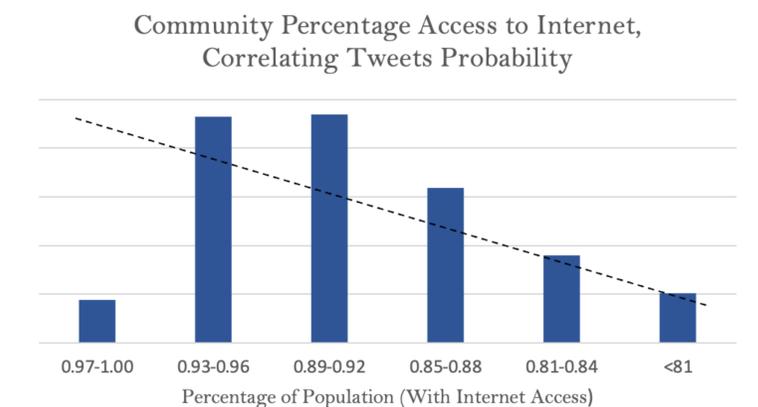
Figure 10. Graph depicting community populations and their access to internet; displays general correlation with the number of tweets posted by community leaders.

References

Conclusion

The three largest influential factors when it comes to social media-based involvement were ultimately population, internet access, and average income. The qualitative results from these three factors all designated that the lower the factors' values were, the less political involvement there would be. To simplify, if a community has an average low income, low percentage population that has access to internet, and a lower population, the social media-based political involvement would also be very low, proving as a negatively high correlation.

It's very important to understand what these broadly applied results imply. Firstly, they prove that certain representatives are more willing to work with their representees if they are more economically developed. This tendency could be very problematic, in that individuals in certain communities may not feel as seen or heard by their leaders simply due to their socioeconomic status, which ultimately leads to cycles of exclusion and social prejudice.

In addition, these results also inversely apply. Meaning, highly-developed communities are much more likely to receive more political involvement. This consideration further implies the unequal dispersion of involvement between various communities, further contributing to biased representation.

To sum, it's important to know the correlation between these factors and social media-based political involvement, even if it may not impact you as an individual. At the end of the day, increased knowledge leads to awareness, and awareness leads to change- one day, hopefully this change will lead to equal political involvement with all communities.