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PJMS Capstone Course

Politics on Twitter: Where Do We Go From Here?

“MY FRIENDS:”[[1]](#footnote-1)

This is how President Franklin Delano Roosevelt began one of his “Fireside Chats” on April 14, 1938. The country was in economic turmoil as it struggled to recover from the Great Depression, and Roosevelt took to the airwaves for the twelfth time in five years to comfort the soul of the nation. Previous presidents like Woodrow Wilson, Warren Harding and Calvin Coolidge had used radio to communicate with the general public before, but none did so like this.

On March 11, 1933, Roosevelt explained his motivation for beginning his series of radio broadcasts colloquially known as “Fireside Chats:”

“It is my intention, over the national radio networks, at ten o’clock Sunday evening, to explain clearly and in simple language to all of you just what has been achieved and the sound reason which underlie this declaration to you.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

Roosevelt conducted 30 Fireside Chats over the course of 11 years, in which he addressed the general public about national issues like the banking crisis and the progress of the Second World War. He spoke in simple terms and basic, relatable metaphors, referring to himself in the first person and directly addressing the people as if they were there in the room with him. “My friends,” he called them. And those “friends” responded, sending hundreds of telegrams to the White House during and after broadcasts with their reactions.

Roosevelt, dubbed the “Radio President,” and his Fireside Chats became widely known as some of the earliest instances of direct political-social mass communication. He displayed a distinct personality and gave a voice to the typically impersonal position of the president by communicating directly with the public in a format that had not been practiced before.

Since then, political-social communication has become a no-brainer. Television elevated the personal connection between politicians and the public so much so that Richard Nixon lost popularity due to his poor appearance in televised debates. But a new titan has risen in the field: the internet.

With the advent of the internet, politicians live no longer in their ivory towers in Washington, D.C. They are at our fingertips, and with Twitter, no more than 280 characters away.

THE HISTORY OF TWITTER

In 2006, just over a century after the invention and popularization of radio, Twitter emerged onto the internet scene. The platform is now known as “X,” but I will be referring to it as Twitter for the remainder of this paper. Jack Dorsey, Noah Glass, Biz Stone, and Evan Williams developed the platform as a side project of the podcasting platform Odeo. They dubbed it Twttr, a short-messaging service (SMS) with a social networking aspect. It gained traction after being promoted at the 2007 South by Southwest Interactive Conference, and by 2008, it was averaging 300,000 tweets per day.[[3]](#footnote-3) The platform started as a way for users to share short messages with friends and followers, but companies like Starbucks began to join after seeing the platform’s potential for advertising and interacting with customers. Eventually, journalists caught onto Twitter, and its use evolved again to include news as the platform provided easy and fast dissemination of information from across the world.

Twitter had become a hub for communication, advertising, interactivity, and news. The next logical step was the integration of political figures. The first most prominent instance of Twitter's political use is widely acknowledged as the 2008 presidential election between Barack Obama and John McCain.

Barack Obama, according to Joe Rospar of Blue State Digital, had community grassroots organizing in his DNA.[[4]](#footnote-4)  He was a relatively unknown senator, especially in comparison to his primary opponent Hillary Clinton, but had local support from niche communities across the country—passionate but disorganized non-establishment supporters. It was for this reason that Blue State’s consultants saw his potential in social media campaigning.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Obama worked with Blue State to build the social networking site My.BarackObama.com (MyBO), but the team also focused heavily on Facebook, MySpace, and Twitter. Eventually, he amassed 115,000 Twitter followers—23 times those of John McCain.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Many say that Obama’s social media campaigning is what won him the presidency. But what is it about social media, specifically Twitter, that makes it such a successful tool for politics when it was originally made for social connection?

TWITTER’S AFFORDANCES IN THE POLITICAL SPHERE

Twitter is a unique type of social media known as a microblog. Microblogs, as opposed to traditional blogs, function as platforms for shorter, more succinct posts—in Twitter’s case, limited by character number (originally 140, now 280—except for Twitter Blue subscribers). The format of the microblog was appealing to politicians seeking to change campaign and interaction tactics for a variety of reasons. For one, short sentences and phrases appeal to the less educated and simply less available consumer. In the political world, this is valuable for attracting supporters who may not have the time, bandwidth, or comprehension skills necessary to consume long-form speeches, e-mails, or reports. Microblogs also encourage more frequent posting rather than longer posts. This facilitates consistent engagement; rather than Roosevelt’s 30 Fireside Chats over the course of 11 years, politicians today interact with followers and potential supporters on an extremely consistent basis, with President Joe Biden tweeting about 800 times from the @POTUS Twitter account during his first 100 days in office.[[7]](#footnote-7) On top of all of this, microblogs require significantly less resources and effort than traditional blogging due to the short length of posts. Politicians can achieve the same engagement and impact of communicating with supporters without expending more resources than the salary of a social media manager.

Twitter also supports non-reciprocal following, which distinguishes it from sites like Facebook on which users must follow each other mutually to see posts. This format makes Twitter an ideal networking site for politicians because of their ability to amass a wide following of supporters who feel connected with them without having to “follow back” every individual account.

Other affordances of Twitter make it an ideal breeding ground for political activity, for example, the retweet feature. The retweet feature is one of Twitter’s most iconic, after its debut in 2009. The “RT” allows users to repost messages from other accounts to their own. This is valuable for politicians as it is a form of endorsement—without having to make their own post, a politician or campaign can endorse the words of others and attach their own credibility to the post.

Twitter also offers the reply and quote tweet features, which enable and encourage interaction between users and their followers. These features are advantageous for politicians as they build two-way communication between constituents and their representatives or candidates which in turn, builds trust and support in that individual.

The hashtag enables politicians and their bases to effectively build movements and organize posts around simple words and phrases. Using catch phrases for campaigns or political activity has been common for decades,—think “We Like Ike”—but the hashtag has revolutionized the reach and recognizability of these phrases. The 2016 election saw a swarm around hashtags like #ImWithHer, #FeelTheBern, and #MAGA, all of which became iconic symbols of support for Hillary Clinton, Bernie Sanders, and Donald Trump, respectively. While these slogans may not have started on Twitter, the hashtag soon became a part of the phrases because of their frequent use on the platform (and on other social media platforms like Instagram).

These affordances make Twitter an advantageous and attractive platform for hosting political activity and explain why it has been a hotbed for politics for so long now. However, the platform is changing—and fast. This paper seeks to raise the question for politicians and their campaigns-- “What now?”

FINDINGS

To answer this question, I explored existing literature on the subject including studies, published works, and news articles. More importantly, I consulted experts in the field including a campaign media strategist and a doctoral candidate studying the norms of public opinion and discourse in media.

The future of politicians’ use of Twitter is complicated. According to literature and testimonials from political actors, politicians and their campaigns are trapped in a back-and-forth with the platform as time goes on. The value is immense, as are the drawbacks. Political media strategist Ty Stevens believes that the most significant value offered by social media is its ability to access audiences in a way different from that of legacy media like television and newspapers. “Social media can offer a fairly low-dollar way to hit targeted audiences in a very niche fashion,” he says. As explained before, focusing advertising efforts online is inexpensive both monetarily and resource-wise compared to buying television spots and print advertisements. But more important to Stevens is the point of targeting audiences. Twitter, like other online mediums, allows users to target their posts toward niche audiences through the use of algorithms and manual posting to specific groups with hashtags and quote tweets. Twitter-specific functions like hashtags and quote tweets have been cited as fundamental for the emergence of niche communities like Black Twitter, a specific space created by users on the platform to connect on topics of interest to the community like social advocacy and cultural similarities.[[8]](#footnote-8) Other groups, like the LGBTQ community, have used Twitter to form niches through the platform’s ability to cultivate exclusive spaces around specific hashtags and replies. Politicians can tap into these niche communities in a way that isn’t possible with television, which is restricted by geographic DMAs. If a politician sees potential in a specific community of constituents, they can use these specific spaces to reach out and garner interest from users. And, as Stevens emphasizes, it is extremely low-cost. “That saves resources, and it gives me extra manpower, potentially for low-cost. So there’s so much value-add there. They don’t cost you anything but give you real value.”

Andrew Trexler, a doctoral candidate at Duke University who has worked in the campaign field and studies public opinion, agrees that targeting niche communities is a powerful tool for politicians, especially those seeking financial support from outside their electoral district like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. “Using social media, where you can very easily cross that geographic space and make a connection with somebody who is not part of your constituency,” he says. “That person may still be willing to give you a donation to support your campaign and your advocacy.” Sounman Hong found in a study that political social media use can lead to more donations from outside a politician’s constituency than from within, supporting this theory.[[9]](#footnote-9) In a political world that requires immense funding to run campaigns, having the ability to reach wide audiences in an affordable way through social media makes it extremely valuable for politicians to continue engaging on Twitter.

Beyond affordability, political activity on Twitter also leads to a more personal relationship between constituents and their politicians, changing the relationship in the same way that Roosevelt’s Fireside Chats did decades ago. Politicians are forced to tweet in short sentences and phrases, breaking down comprehension and attention barriers to more heavily involve their constituents. They also have the opportunity to share information about their personal lives, which brings users closer into their world and humanizes the politicians. While this does raise concerns of parasocial relationships in which users feel as though they have a genuine personal connection with the politician, there is still much value to be had in constituents feeling bonded to and invested in their politicians more than before.

Despite the benefits, there are many reasons for politicians to become discouraged from using social media like Twitter. One of the dangers of political action on social media that Trexler points out is that of misunderstanding audiences. He refers to the issue of homophily on social media between politicians and their audiences. Homophily on Twitter has been studied by scholars like John Parmelee and Shannon Bichard in their book *Politics and the Twitter Revolution*, who find that audiences are more likely to follow and engage with politicians who share their political views—with whom they have a homophilous relationship. Hong’s study on self-selected audiences supports this homophily theory as he finds that most users self-select political information that matches and reinforces their ideological positions.[[10]](#footnote-10) Homophily between politicians and their audiences results in less media users seeking out diverse opinions and in Trexler’s view, can result in politicians taking harsher stances on issues than they normally would. “Many politicians use social media as spaces to take stances that appeal to their base,” he says. “It’s relatively easy for a politician to take a hard stance on a particular issue… on social media, because most of the people who are going to see it are their followers.” While legacy media used to focus on persuading possible voters who may be subjected to viewing an advertisement, social media advertising focuses more on mobilizing currently secured voters, which often involves pandering to already held beliefs and taking even stronger positions on those beliefs. This positive reinforcement contributes to an already growing culture of extremity rather than appealing to the median voter.

What’s more, politicians have also struggled with realizing that parts of their constituency may not be represented on spaces like Twitter. “I think a big challenge for politicians and campaigns is trying to balance their responsibilities to their broader constituencies that are not on social media,” says Trexler, “while still being able to use social media as a medium of communication to their advantage.” According to Pew Research Center, only 23% of Americans are on Twitter at all, let alone politically active on the platform.[[11]](#footnote-11) This discrepancy can lead to a misunderstanding of loyalties; the more that politicians use Twitter as a tool for polling and message testing, the more they will depend on such a small sliver of their audience for both support and information. “There are a lot of people on social media who may use it infrequently, they’re just observing,” Trexler says, “and those people have real opinions, and they vote.”

Despite these issues, many politicians and their campaigns clearly see the affordances of Twitter as more valuable than the potential dangers that come along with them—every member of the 117th Congress has a registered Twitter account. With an increasingly online population, politicians see Twitter as a necessity. But, as stated before, things have begun to change, and a new discouragement toward Twitter use by politicians has emerged.

In 2022, South African entrepreneur Elon Musk acquired Twitter for $44 billion and served as the platform’s CEO until June 2023. Throughout his tenure as CEO, the tech world—and the political world—was whipped into a frenzy by the number of alterations made by the billionaire. He disbanded Twitter’s existing Trust and Safety Council and fired members of the platform safety team just before the 2022 United States midterm elections before promptly reinstating former president Donald Trump’s previously banned account (as well as notable others including neo-Nazi Andrew Anglin). Musk also implemented a subscription-based verification feature, overhauling the platform’s previous system of legacy verification badges, leading to difficulties in identification of prominent figures and brands, and a disproportionate boost for paid subscribers’ posts in the algorithms. In April, he applied the label of “state-affiliated-media” to many journalistic outlets like NPR and PBS, who then decided to abandon the platform entirely due to a perception that the platform was undermining their editorial independence and credibility. NPR and PBS are now at the forefront of a flurry of journalists and others leaving Twitter (now rebranded as “X”) out of concern for the platform’s future.[[12]](#footnote-12)

The very public departure of NPR and PBS from the platform has led to many questioning their own allegiance to Twitter and encouraged the political world to take a second look at their dependence on the platform. Senator Tim Kaine told NBC News that he is considering leaving Twitter, and Representative Jamaal Bowman expressed a desire to leave the platform directly related to the effects of Musk’s purchase. However, Bowman stated why he isn’t leaving in plain language: “We have a responsibility to communicate to all of our constituents, so if we take that away we might be missing a lot of them,” he said in an interview. Ocasio-Cortez explained that she will leave Twitter when it “becomes so difficult to use that I’m not able to use it as a form of effective communication.”[[13]](#footnote-13)

The political world has grown to see Twitter as just that: another form of “effective communication,” the same as television and radio were for politicians in the past. The changes implemented by Musk’s leadership and the difficulties of audience misinterpretation are just par for the course when the platform provides so much value to political actors who need to reach an online audience. “In the absence of a clear and compelling alternative, you kind of have to continue what you do,” says Stevens. But with this sentiment, he raises the question: what if there was an alternative?

The concept of an alternative to Twitter has been common in the media sphere in past years, with outlets like Time posting articles touting “The Best Twitter Alternatives if You’re Ditching X” in July of this year. The article has subsections that read like a holiday gift recommendation list: “Best for finding your community: Mastodon,” “Best for supporting Black-owned businesses: Spill,” “Best for hanging out: Discord,” and “Best for getting off Twitter as quickly as you can: Threads.”[[14]](#footnote-14) But despite all of these options, none have taken off in a way that can encourage people to abandon Twitter.

So why haven’t these alternatives seen success, despite the general dissatisfaction with Twitter? We can look at this problem through three lenses: barriers to entry, network effects, and affordances. Twitter has historically had a very low barrier to entry; making an account is free, and sending a tweet is extremely simple. It is well-known for the tight-knit networks built by users on the platform like the aforementioned Black Twitter as well as a strong network of journalists and news outlets who use the platform due to its focus on brevity that makes it appealing for breaking news reports and featured articles. Twitter also hosts a range of affordances, most of them user-generated and unique to the app, as mentioned earlier. Other platforms that are touting themselves as possible alternatives have proven to lack in these three categories. Mastodon faced challenges with its barrier to entry; the creators sought to develop an open-source, community-driven platform, but its complexity on the technical side confused potential users who were originally attracted to Twitter for its ease of use. Former Twitter users also were discouraged by a lack of the affordances that they were used to. Consequently, Mastodon was unable to grow the mass network needed to increase its value to users and funders. Threads attempted to overstep the barriers to entry and network effects by automatically creating accounts for Instagram users, making it easy to join the platform and find communities you had previously built. However, the affordances of the platforms were drastically different. Instagram was a photo-based platform with strong communities based entirely around the visual medium, while Threads offered only the short-messaging service functionality modeled off of Twitter. Audiences were drawn to Threads from the outset, and it saw immense popularity in its first few days but was too drastically different for users to understand and appreciate the transition.

The direct network effects of Twitter are massive. The platform has been growing and evolving for years through user engagement, creating niche communities that have made it so popular and valuable. Until these Twitter communities leave en masse—and to the same place— politicians will stay where they are in order to maintain the support they have already garnered. “You don’t want to squander a whole playing field on an opponent,” says Stevens frankly. “[Politicians] always have to be that presence. They can’t not have a presence while their opponent does.” To Stevens, and rightly so, politics is still just a game, and the game must be played where there is an audience to watch it.

As stated before, politicians and their campaigns are trapped in a back-and-forth relationship with the platform. Twitter is massively helpful to politicians with small budgets trying to reach a large audience, but they face challenges of homophily and non-representativeness when overusing the platform. The incremental changes to Twitter push away politicians who seek to maintain ethical credibility and ease, but the necessity of reaching online audiences before their opponents pulls them back. Alternatives exist, but none hold the power that Twitter seems to exert over the population.

When Roosevelt moved to radio to reach the people in a new, personal way, it was revolutionary. It changed how people interpreted and interacted with politicians. Twitter changed the political world in a similar way, allowing politicians to reach an online audience like they never had before. It unveiled feature after feature that facilitated new forms of political engagement and built a modern political sphere.

What is next for politicians? Has Twitter reached its tipping point? As with many questions regarding the internet, we can’t say for sure. Politicians follow the people, and the people are divided. It appears that until there is a viable alternative, political campaigns and actors will remain on Twitter due to its unique affordances as a platform, despite the changing environment upon which it exists.

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