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Politics in 140 Characters or Less: Social Media Sites as a Platform for Political Discussion

Jamie Brackpool

I. Introduction

In recent years, social media has transformed into an ever growing communication tool capable of reaching vast sections of a given population. Facebook, Youtube, Twitter, and other social media websites have all become widespread instruments utilized to convey messages to large cyber audiences. With this being said, it is now important to understand the messages and audiences of social media to further our knowledge of the growing importance of these websites. The utilization and impact of social media is, however, a vast topic and unrealistic to cover within one paper; instead, this paper will largely focus on one social media website, Twitter, with only minor examinations of Facebook, Reddit, and Imgur. This paper will explore the online political culture by asking how social media sites facilitate political discussion during political campaigns and events such as debates. This paper will do this by first illustrating that recent political events and spectacles have generated mass tweets. The paper will then show, with the help of scholars Freelon and Karpf, how these tweets can be understood as political discussions. Finally, this paper will conclude with examples of political discussions in Facebook, Imgur, and Reddit to illustrate that social media's facilitation of political discussions is not limited to Twitter. After all this has been communicated, it will become clear that social media websites such as Twitter are developing into a tool that facilitates political discussion for an ever growing audience.

II. Political Events are Generating Mass Tweets

Similar to sporting events and award shows, political debates have become a spectacle for large audiences. Vast amounts of people are following these debates online and generating mass discussions. However, before undertaking an analysis of how social media, sparks online discussions, it is important to examine the scope of people conversing online in response to political debates. In order to do this, Three Twitter search terms were analyzed between the dates of October 20, 2015, and November 19, 2015, using the now-defunct social analytics website Topsy. Those terms were "Republican Debate," "Democratic Debate," and "Presidential Debate," all of which were routinely referenced in approximately

two thousand tweets per day prior to the first debate. Other scholars have used this method as a means of gathering data and their results suggest that this is an effective way to successfully gather primary data quickly and accurately (Joseph et al; Chan, Lopez, and Sarkar). For a visual representation of the data please refer to Figure 1.

On October 28, the Republican Party held their third debate, resulting in the term “Republican Debate” being referenced in approximately twenty-seven thousand tweets. The term “Presidential Debate” was referenced in approximately thirteen thousand tweets, and the term “Democratic Debate” was used in just under five thousand tweets (Topsy). The fourth Republican Debate was held on November 10, 2015, and generated similar results. On the same day, the term “Republican Debate” was referenced in approximately twenty-five thousand tweets and the term “Presidential Debate” was referenced in approximately seven thousand tweets, whereas the term “Democratic Debate” showed no difference from its regular two thousand (Topsy). The second Democratic Debate was held four days later on November 14, causing the term “Democratic Debate” to spike to around eighteen thousand tweets. The term “Presidential Debate” was referenced in around four thousand tweets, while the term “Republican Debate” was not referenced any more than usual (Topsy).

Tweets per day: Republican Debate, Democratic Debate, and Presidential Debate

October 20th — November 19th

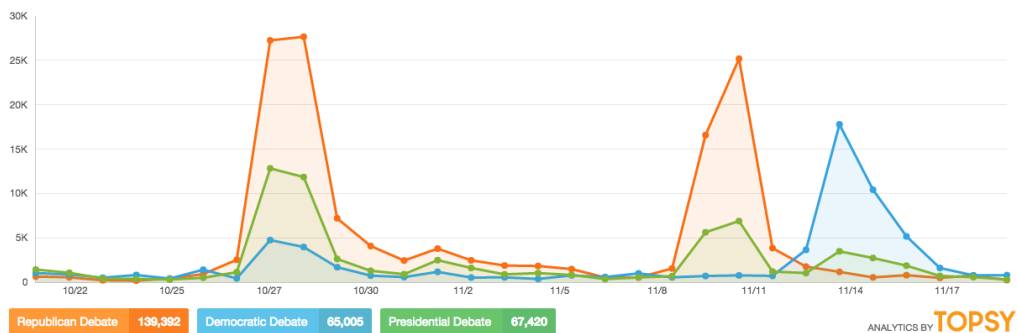


Fig 1. Screenshot from the website Topsy.com. Topsy. N.p., n.d. Web. 19 Nov. 2015.

Over the same time period, a search was conducted measuring the number of tweets that referenced the names of major running candidates: Hillary Clinton, Bernie Sanders, Donald Trump, and Jeb Bush. In all instances, each name saw impressive spikes. A Google search of each candidate, along with the dates

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when that name was referenced the most, was also conducted. “Hillary Clinton” was mentioned in roughly seventy-four thousand tweets on October 22 after her testimony in relation to the Benghazi attacks (Topsy). “Bernie Sanders” was mentioned in close to fifty-nine thousand tweets on November 4 after he proposed a movement to stop drilling on public land and called for the writing of a bill aimed at legalizing marijuana nationally (Topsy). “Donald Trump” was mentioned in an astounding one-hundred-and-thirty thousand plus tweets on November 8 after he appeared on Saturday Night Live promoting his election campaign (Topsy). “Jeb Bush” was referenced close to fifty-two thousand tweets on October 28 and around twenty-seven thousand tweets on November 10, which were both dates for Republican debates (Topsy). Analyzing this information, a clear pattern becomes evident, namely, that social media facilitates political discussion by serving as an easily accessible tool to reflect upon and debate political events. The drastic increases in tweets mentioning each candidate after his or her respective participation in a political event illustrates that people are utilizing Twitter as a means to debate politics.

In response to this information, the counter argument could be given that the number of tweets generated by political events is largely insignificant, especially when compared to other tweet-generating spectacles. For example, the number of political tweets pales in comparison to the number of tweets generated in response to the World Series, which was referenced around 210 thousand times on Twitter after Kansas City won the 2015 World Series (Topsy.com). In response to this argument, it should be noted that significant jumps in tweets referencing politics in response to major political events indicates that Twitter is being utilized as an important tool for facilitating political conversations, even if such tweets are fewer in overall number than those regarding the World Series. The fact that thousands of people following each political event chose to convey their opinions via Twitter, not to mention other major social media outlets, suggests that social media has become an invaluable tool for large numbers of people to express their views in an increasingly informed political landscape.

To further the point that political discussions are, in fact, occurring on social media websites, one must also look at the increased honesty and straightforwardness required in politics and the meaning behind this shift. Social media demands this increased honesty and straightforwardness because users have the ability to become investigative journalists with a few clicks of the mouse. This means that politicians partaking in public diplomacy on social media websites, a strategy that American and British diplomats have emphasized for national Branding, must proceed with caution (Zhang 1313). Public diplomacy can be infested

with misinformation, meaning that many potential voters online are subjected to biased, state-published opinions. Although to some extent this is true, the rapid growth of social media has produced an army of eager social media users ready to combat misinformation. This has led scholars to observe an increase of honesty and truthfulness in online politics (Zhang 1327). This reality has two significant implications. First, the fact that more people than ever before are discussing and combating false political information on social media demonstrates that social media sites are increasing the number of people discussing politics. Second, the growing portion of honest political information posted on social media indicates that the political discussions taking place on websites like Twitter are more likely to be based on accurate information. Although this second point does not necessarily tie back to the main argument that social media facilitates political discussion, it does show that political discussions occurring online are based on credible information, and, as such, ought to be studied.

III. Mass Tweets can be Understood as Prompting Political Discussions

Now that it has been demonstrated that thousands of people are voicing their opinions on Twitter, the question remains: Is anyone actually paying serious attention to these political tweets? As previously noted, there are an abundance of voices sharing their thoughts and opinions during political debates and spectacles, but whose voice really has the most influence? A study conducted in 2010 helps provide an answer. In that study, political scientist James Fowler worked with Facebook's data-science team to observe sixty-one million Facebook users during the 2010 congressional elections. The study involved sending one percent of the study group an 'informal message' at the top of their newsfeed encouraging them to vote and sending another one percent no message at all. The remaining 98% received a social message from Facebook which was the same as the informal message but also included the profile pictures of six random friends who had clicked the 'I voted' button (Corbyn). Fowler then studied the data to see how many of each group's members clicked the 'I voted' button. Results indicated that those who received the informal message, as well as those who received no message, showed no change in voter turnout. Those who received a social message, however, were two percent more likely to click the button to say they voted, and while this number might seem small, in the context of voter turnout two percent is a significant jump (Corbyn). This study not only shows that social messages are more engaging than generic messages but also that users who received a notification indicating that their close, real-world friends had voted were more likely to say that they voted themselves. The study, in its attempt to determine the effective-

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ness of social media as a tool for increasing political engagement, uncovered data suggesting that users are much more likely to be influenced by their ten closest friends than ‘casual online acquaintances’ (Wihbey). In other words, this study suggests that posts made on social media can contribute to bringing close friends, who might otherwise be unengaged with politics, into the political spectrum, resulting in a proliferation of political discussions.

However, the mentioning of politics on social media websites, such as Twitter, by casual online acquaintances should not be overlooked. The work of Freelon and Karpf illustrates this point, demonstrating that the tweets of acquaintances, and even strangers, have some significance in prompting political discussions. Freelon and Karpf demonstrate this point in their explanation of the viewertariat and the influence of tweets. According to Freelon and Karpf, “the viewertariat includes sports stars, average citizens, comedians, musicians, and parody artists. Turning off Twitter may indeed give reporters a more focused view of the debate itself, but it also narrows their view of the broader political spectacle and how non-journalists make sense of it” (Freelon and Karpf 391). This quote outlines how the absence of social media limits how many voices a voter can hear, which essentially means two things. First, viewing political tweets allows people to understand how non-journalists understand political spectacles, which theoretically allows for a more complex, multifaceted understanding of politics and, therefore, more complex debates. Second, the tweeting of major political events enhances the popularity of politics and allows even more people to hear and respond to political messages. The more people come into contact with politics through Twitter, the more likely people are to discuss politics in general, both online and offline. Thus, the tweeting of political spectacles helps facilitate political debates by simultaneously spreading awareness and bringing new viewpoints to the surface.

Having established that mass tweets responding to politics prompt political discussion, this paper will now narrow its focus by identifying different types of tweeters and the different ways they facilitate discussions of politics. Freelon and Karpf identify six different type of political tweeters. While all six types occupy a unique space in the political landscape, this paper will only explore two categories of tweeters. These two categories are the political elites and bridging elites, arguably the most influential groups in terms of facilitating political discussion. Freelon and Karpf describe these groups as follows:

Political elites include elected officials, pundits, high-profile consultants, and campaign surrogates. We judged non-political accounts whose owners had Wikipedia pages as famous enough to count as bridging elites. Most of

these were musicians, actors, sports figures, and other celebrities. (Freelon and Karpf 397)

The first category, and perhaps the most significant in terms of social media, is the bridging elites, who tend to have a strong follower base on Twitter. Given the size of their following on Twitter, the bridging elites have the potential to reach a large population of Twitter users who do not normally follow politics. An example of this category would be Olivia Wilde. During the first presidential debate between Barack Obama and Mitt Romney in 2012, Olivia Wilde tweeted, “Mitt is smirky, sweaty, indignant and smug with an unsettling hint of hysteria. And he wants to kill BIG BIRD” (Wilde). Wilde’s tweet was in reference to Mitt Romney’s proclamation that he was going to stop the subsidizing of the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS), despite his love for Big Bird. The tweet was retweeted over four thousand times, meaning not only did Olivia Wilde’s followers read her tweets, but the followers of the four thousand plus re-tweeters were exposed to it as well. Furthermore, the action of recomunicating this political tweet shows that someone wants to bring attention to the tweet and is prepared to discuss its political message. This clearly illustrates that the tweets of the bridging elites in response to politics help facilitate political discussions. It should be noted, however, that Freelon and Karpf use the example of Olivia Wilde to caution against relying on bridging elites’ tweets as one’s sole source of political information because such singular dependence on potentially uninformed, unqualified commentators might promote misinformation (Freelon and Karpf 397). While Freelon and Karpf’s caution is certainly valid, the example of Olivia Wilde still illustrates the central point that the tweeting done by bridging elites helps facilitate political discussion by allowing political topics to reach a wider audience, even if a portion of that information may not be reliable. Whether that inherent unreliability outweighs the positives of increased political discussion does not fall within the purview of this paper.

The next major category of tweeters is the political elite. Essentially, this category consists of politicians who possess education and insight into the matters being discussed during debates and often use social media to reach out to voters. This category of tweeters can draw specific attention to political issues through Twitter, giving their viewers further information to discuss. *The Washington Post’s* analysis of the October 28, 2015, Republican Debate and the resulting conversations on Twitter provide several examples of the influence of the political elite. The purpose of the study was to examine which candidates taking part in the debate received the highest percentages of the conversation on social media, while

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also analyzing which tweets in particular got the most attention. The top three tweets related to the debate came from Democratic candidates Bernie Sanders and Hillary Clinton, two longstanding members of the political elite. Sanders' tweet regarding the Republicans' stance on climate change was the most popular debate-related tweet, while Hillary Clinton's jab at the Republicans' view of women's health care was the second (Moyer). Bernie Sanders also posted a picture of the Republican candidates posing for the debate, with the comment, "which one will the billionaire class choose? #TheirMoneyTheirVoice #GOPDebate," which won the third most popular tweet of the night (Moyer). The success of Sanders and Clinton's tweets during the Republican Debate shows that candidates who are not directly involved in a given debate can still use social media sites such as Twitter to share their opinions and thereby facilitate political discussion.

Another example of tweets by political elites facilitating discussion can be found in the 2015 Canadian Federal Election, which helps to illustrate that the main argument in this paper can be applied beyond the American political scope. In the 2015 Canadian Federal Elections, Green Party leader Elizabeth May used Twitter to participate in a live televised debate hosted by *The Globe and Mail*. The Green Party leader was not invited to the debate, since *the Globe and Mail* chose to include only the three main party leaders: Justin Trudeau of the Liberal Party, Stephen Harper of the Conservative Party, and Thomas Mulcair of the New Democratic Party (NDP) (Hume). Although *the Globe and Mail's* decision was arguably justified, May's exclusion left her in a position of vulnerability. While the three other leaders were given access to a platform capable of reaching a sizable and attentive audience, May was left as a spectator. Instead of forfeiting her chance to share her voice, May took to social media and advertised the fact that she would be taking part in the debate through Twitter. This opportunity allowed May to immediately answer the questions posed in the debate and provide arguments against her opponents. *the Globe and Mail* quoted Steve Ladurantaye, head of Canadian news and government partnerships for Twitter, as saying, "you wouldn't know she's not there in a lot of ways. She's inserting herself into the conversation regardless of location and geography, which is cool" (Hume). Essentially, Twitter allowed May to effectively include her viewpoint in a federal political debate. As a result, those viewing the debate were exposed to an opinion that would have otherwise been excluded. With an additional professional political viewpoint added to the viewers, more complex and different oriented discussions could have ensued. Thus, the use of Twitter by politicians helps facilitate political discussions.

Furthermore, it is worth noting that Twitter can continue to facilitate political discussion long after the original tweet is made. Baym's concept of storage

and replicability, applied to May's participation in the debate through Twitter, illustrates this point. In this context, storage refers to how content is maintained, stored, and made readily available. Replicability, on the other hand, refers to the ability to make copies of the message (Baym 10). In terms of storage, May's tweets were available and accessible well after the debate finished. It would, therefore, be plausible that someone might read one of May's tweets while scrolling through Twitter at a time well past the original tweet date and possibly even engage in a discussion regarding the matter. Thus, Twitter and other social media sites are able to facilitate political discussion instantaneously and over time. Tweets are also highly replicable, since Twitter allows users to 'retweet' content with which they agree or disagree. Because of this feature, May's comments reached voters in a way that the other candidates could not. It also meant that May's messages were far more likely to reach people who did not follow the debate at all or even those who were not following the election. The retweet feature means that a user could come across one of May's tweets without following her or the debate. The tweets were also presented as graphics on the screen during the televised debate so that May had access not only to social media users but to those watching the debate itself. This means that Twitter brought the attention of May's opinions to an extended number of people to discuss, demonstrating that Twitter facilitates political discussions

The ability to rapidly respond to content is an important aspect of social media that allows for opinions to be discussed, contested, and clarified. On one hand, this provides an invaluable communication model for voters to express their grievances and opinions. On the other hand, politicians like May are provided a platform for not only clarifying their positions but also responding to their constituents in a more direct, approachable manner. While at first glance Twitter and other social media might seem frivolous or inconsequential, these new tools for communication should not be overlooked by either voters or politicians regarding the ability to discuss politics.

As has been demonstrated in this paper through numerous examples, such as Elizabeth May's debate tweeting, Twitter serves as an excellent platform for individuals to share and discuss their political beliefs. However, more so than any other type of media outlet, Twitter can also function as a trusted source of information. In an age of increasing skepticism surrounding public officials, Twitter provides voters a glimpse of the authentic person beneath the public mask, or at least, so we think. According to Delia Dumitrica, a scholar of social media and with those three websites "are imagined as a solution to the wider problems of democracy: deceitful politicians; civic apathy; lack of information and rapport

between citizens and politicians; insurmountable gap between citizen's concerns and politics" (Dumitrica 54). Dumitrica claims that the key to winning voters is authenticity. The argument is that voters want to understand the 'real' politician because once they 'know' the person they think they can anticipate what kind of a leader he or she will be (Dumitrica 57). In the 2010 municipal elections in Calgary, Alberta, "authenticity was articulated in relation to two traits the politician had to exhibit: a genuine concern for citizens and their problems, and a willingness to share their private life" (Dumitrica 61). According to voters, these sorts of personal obligations could only be fulfilled via social media. Not only did they believe social media was a tool for conveying authenticity, they were confident in their ability as voters to tell when a politician was pretending to be authentic (Dumitrica 61). Therefore, it can be understood that Twitter and other social media outlets function as a means for the population to further engage in politics on a personal level by studying the candidates and reflecting upon their social media presences via online discussions, both with fellow voters and with the politicians themselves.

Some argue that the overwhelming supply of political tweets during live debates is meaningless given that, in the primary debates, a candidate's social media presence is not always taken into consideration by either party's social elites. These party elites ultimately end up deciding who is going to run for office, largely based on the reception of candidates in mass media (Tucker). However, the party elites cannot afford to continue ignoring social media while only listening to mass media journalists. With the proliferation of social media sites generating a preponderance of meaningful dialogue and real, active political engagement, the Democratic and Republican Parties ought to pay much closer attention to candidates' online reception. How a candidate is discussed in mass media may have a significant impact on a candidate's chance of winning his or her party's nomination, but without the approval of the people, in terms of personality at least as much as policy, no candidate can win a General Election, and while traditional media still has a role to play, when the actual Presidential Election occurs mass media alone does not tell the whole story (Tucker).

IV. Social Media Facilitating Political Discussion Expands Beyond the Example of Twitter

Through the evidence put forth above, it is clear that Twitter is facilitating political discussions by helping to spread political information and ideas to a growing audience. That being said, it is now important to consider whether Twitter encouraging political discussions is an isolated occurrence or whether all social

media websites facilitate such discussions. Is Twitter the only social media website assisting political conversations, or are Facebook, Imgur, and Reddit contributing as well? To answer this question, this paper will briefly examine how politics intersects with those three websites.

To understand whether Facebook is helping to encourage political discussion in the same manner as Twitter, a look at Facebook's role in the October 13, Democratic Debate is required. The debate took place between Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders, and immediately after the debate CNN released a statement claiming that Hillary Clinton had won. Controversially, there was a CNN Facebook poll that showed Bernie Sanders as the clear winner at 81% (Sanders). Although many have claimed that CNN tried to hide evidence that Sanders won due to CNN's sizable donation to the Clinton campaign, these claims were false. The truth was that CNN simply received data from a different source to justify Clinton's win (Sanders). What is interesting about these debate results is that they illustrate how Facebook serves as a tool for people to communicate and debate their political opinions. Through Facebook, people were able to voice their thoughts on who won the debate without consulting any traditional mainstream media outlets. As journalist Joshua Tucker puts it, these "people [engaged in political discourse] in the course of their own lives, without prompting from scholars, journalists or public opinion firms; without agreeing to participate in a study or focus group; responding to the debate in real time sharing their opinions about the debate, the candidates, the election, the issues, etc." (Tucker). Through this quote, Tucker is clearly claiming that Facebook served as a means for these people to actively engage and discuss politics, suggesting that Facebook, like Twitter, can facilitate political discussions. Reddit, just like Facebook and Twitter, can also help facilitate political discussions. A perfect example of this would be the 2016 Democratic primary election, where candidate Bernie Sanders collected a strong following on Reddit. The Reddit community developing around Sanders started when 23-year-old Aidan King created a channel called r/SandersForPresident. He started the community over a year before Sanders announced his candidacy for the presidency (Krieg). Aiden's channel began with a community of less than 3000, but by December 16, 2015, it had grown to over 100,000 subscribers. This subreddit included recent news about Sanders' initiatives and Sanders' new endorsements as well as general discussion about the campaign's success (Krieg). What makes this form of social media unique is that it facilitates an overwhelmingly narrow point of view since subscribers to the channel likely only receive pro-Sanders propaganda. Despite this obvious bias, the channel became an open forum for people to discuss Sanders and his political platform, as well as Sanders' competition. While

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this political discussion admittedly has a narrow focus, the fact that such a strong, vibrant community existed for so long speaks to Reddit's capacity to foster meaningful political discussion.

Further attesting to the significance of this online political discussion, Sanders' campaign formally recognized Aidan's Reddit page. Originally, Aidan's Reddit campaign just wanted to increase voter registration drives and to solicit donors. However, the 'real world' benefits for Sanders' campaign grew dramatically in the beginning of August 2015 when, over the span of three events, Sanders witnessed over 75,000 followers attended his speeches in Seattle, Portland, and Los Angeles (Krieg). The only other candidate to attract similar numbers was Republican candidate Donald Trump who is also a popular figure on social media (Shaw). Sanders' campaign credited much of its success to the backing of young voters who have supported him through social media. This shows that the discussions taking place on Reddit had a significant impact in bringing more people to understand, accept, and support Sanders' political position, testifying to the importance of political discussions occurring on social media.

The site Imgur.com can also be used as an example to illustrate that Twitter is not an anomaly and that all social media can encourage political discussions. A cursory glance at Imgur reveals that political opinions are constantly shared. Pro-Sanders and anti-Trump content appear, anecdotally, to be the most prevalent political opinions shared, but there are traces of all politics viewpoints on the website. Although some of these political posts are distasteful to some and even ignored, there are still multiple comments on each political post, proving that people are, in fact, discussing their political opinions. Also, the group of people who simply view political posts and comments but do not comment themselves should not be overlooked. They have still been affected by the information posted and may be driven to discuss the message outside of Imgur. As a result of these various factors, Imgur has become a major force in facilitating political discussions, thus contributing to the notion that all social media can encourage political discussions.

V. Conclusion

Evidently, social media is becoming an increasingly popular tool for political discussion, but what does the future hold for social media and politics? Although nothing is certain, social media will likely continue to be a dominant tool for communication. In many parts of North America, social media sites have even been integrated into educational curriculums, not as a topic of study but as a tool for learning. For example, Edmodo is a social media platform that encourages students to participate in discussions with their peers online, whether in the class-

room or at home. These discussions are limited to members of the classroom and the emphasis is on using social media as a collaborative educational tool (Won et al. 389).

The discussions that Edmodo facilitates allows for collaboration, which takes place through “the discussion of ideas, comparing methods, and posting questions to the Edmodo feed” (Won et al. 389). This format represents an ideal platform to facilitate political conversations that would allow voters to gather knowledge and form opinions. What makes Edmodo unique is the concept of facilitator involvement. The job of the facilitator, who in most cases is a teacher, is to encourage participation, as well as to promote youth initiative (Won et al. 390). Thus, not only are youths being encouraged to use social media as a platform for collecting data, Edmodo additionally promotes a culture where everyone can contribute their voice to the discussion. This encouragement will hopefully result in a new generation of voters who are more inclined to partake in political discussion online instead of relying on social media purely as a tool for data collection.

As a result of social media being implemented into the classroom, researchers have noticed “evidence that youth appropriated SNFs [social networking forums] for collaboration with others” (Won et al. 389). Rather than simply viewing social networking forums as practical tools, youths are learning to appreciate the truly communal aspect of social media. If at a young age, students are learning to make these positive associations between social media and collaboration and learning, then it is safe to assume that they will carry on these practices throughout life. If this is true, the youth of tomorrow’s political opinions will likely be formed and expressed on social media as well. This is not to say that they will not learn through traditional methods but instead that social media is, and will continue to be, an important tool for forming opinions.

To understand the entire political culture that has manifested itself online is unachievable in twenty pages. However, this research paper has outlined the necessity of considering social media a serious tool for political discussion as well as the potential role future social media might play in forming the opinions of future generations. This paper also leaves the door open for further avenues of research, such as: what kind of political content gets circulated most frequently online; what the trends are in online political content, such as political satire versus political news; and what is the popularity and electoral success of digitally active politicians on multiple levels of government? Social media currently plays a significant role in political campaigning by facilitating discussions, and there remains tremendous untapped potential in this relatively new field.

As social media embeds itself further into our culture, it becomes increas-

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ingly important to understand the influence websites like Twitter have on our ability to understand the world around us. Clearly, social media has established itself as a legitimate and convenient way of gathering information and should, therefore, be critically studied. Fortunately, one of the most significant additions social media brings to political discussions is the ability for just about anyone to gain instant access to a large online audience, allowing everyone the opportunity to share their voice. Voters are successfully using social media to gather political information and form opinions on important issues, while politicians are capitalizing on the platforms' ability to communicate with an array of demographics quickly and effectively. Although bias is still present in social media, the format allows for multiple voices and opinions to be present in the discussion in a manner unprecedented in traditional forms of mass media.

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