2019

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The Technology Gap Across Generations: How Social Media Affects the Youth Vote

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Yamiemily Hernandez is a senior at Seton Hall University with plans to graduate with a B.A. in Political Science in May 2019. The objective of her senior thesis was to study how social media affects the political behavior of young voters. After graduation, she plans to pursue a Master’s in Public Administration.

There appears to exist today a generational tug-of-war between Millennials and Baby Boomers. Baby Boomers tend to see Millennials as lazy kids who do not appreciate the value of hard work, spend all day glued to their cell phones, and expect successes to be handed to them on a silver platter. Millennials seem to think that Boomers have harbored all the wealth and success in America without thinking about future generations; they cannot wait for Boomers to retire and create vacancies for key positions in companies. While the accusations generations make against each other rely on stereotypes and may not be entirely truthful, the reality is that the age gap between the Millennial generation and the Baby Boomer generation is one of the largest generational gaps in American history.

Generational differences play an important role in American politics. The defining characteristics of each generation and the emerging age gap have the power to shape politics, elections, and voting trends both now and in the years to come. In a nutshell, Millennials are becoming increasingly liberal in their views and the older generations, like the Baby Boomers, tend to hold more conservative views. Young citizens are less religious, more concerned about social and public policy issues, and favor an activist government. They stray from traditional values and are more accepting of different social groups. Several factors go in to determining how a generation of voters will identify politically and how they vote. Some of the factors that influence political behavior include parent-instilled values, inherent political background, education, political environment, and the media (Fisher, 2014). There also exists a newer and much different explanation for how young voters vote the way that they do: the emergence and usage of social media. Understanding the social media explanation could be significant for the future of campaigning and elections. This paper will analyze the evolution of social media usage in the 2008 and 2016 presidential elections and the ways in which social media influences youth political behavior.

BACKGROUND

The Pew Research Center characterizes the Millennial generation to be those born between the years 1981 and 1996. In 2018, Millennials are people aged 22 to 37. Those born in 1997 and onward are currently nameless as researchers attempt to delve up a name that fits the characteristics of the generation. The Pew Research Center calls those born between 1997 and later “Post-Millennials,” a name that appears to be sticking in modern research but has not yet been officially determined. Classifying generations is relative and not an exact science. Different data sources have different interpretations of what constitutes each generation. For that reason, the term “Millennial” will be used loosely in this paper and the term “youth” will instead be used. For the purpose of this paper and since various data sets with differing age information are used, “youth” will be citizens that are of voting age between the ages 18 and 29. The youth vote is an interesting bloc of the American political system because it appears that young citizens are passionate about social policy issues, yet do not hit the polls come election time. The voting rate over time for citizens between the ages of 18 and 24 decreased significantly from 50.9% in 1964 to 38% in 2012 (File 2014). Voting rates fluctuate through time.
and as people get older, they tend to vote at higher rates. When looking at recent presidential elections, the voting rate for people between the ages of 18 and 29 increased from 39.6% in the 1996 presidential election to 45% in the 2012 election (File 2014). Despite the increase in voting rates, young voters still cast the least number of votes than any other age group. People who are 65 years and older tend to vote at the highest rate than any other age group. In 1996, 69.1% of people over the age of 65 voted in the election and that number consistently increased to 72% in the 2012 election (File 2014). In the 2004 and 2008 presidential elections, the voting turnout gap between young voters and older voters narrowed; however, it widened again with the 2012 election. Despite young people making efforts to vote more, they still remain the group with the lowest voting rates.

When young voters do vote, they tend to vote Democratic and lean to the left politically. Dr. Patrick Fisher, a professor of Political Science at Seton Hall University, calls the Millennial generation a “political outlier” since the young voters are the most Democratic age group in the nation. Young people tend to base their views and cast their votes depending on which candidate they approve or disapprove of winning the election. For example, Fisher states in his article, “A Political Outlier: The Distinct Politics of the Millennial Generation,” that Millennials at the time supported John Kerry in the 2004 presidential election over George W. Bush mainly because of Bush’s unpopularity (Fisher 2017, 37). The trend where job approval plays an important role in political affiliation continues in 2016-2018 as 27% of Millennials approve of Trump’s job performance where as 65% of them disapprove of him during his first year as president (Pew Research Center 2018). The overwhelming disapproval towards him by young voters is synonymous with the idea that Trump failed to appeal to the youth vote while running for office, thus pushing Millennials more to the Democratic Party. Millennials now are also more inclined to be Democratic due to their root support for Barack Obama. In the 2008 election, Obama won two-thirds of the Millennial vote and, without the support from young voters, would have lost re-election in 2012 (Fisher 2017, 36). While Trump ran a campaign that appealed to older voters, Obama used his popularity with young Americans to swing the youth vote towards the Democratic Party. During his presidency, Obama knew how to appeal to young voters and he used social media platforms to connect with them, a somewhat revolutionary technological tool for the time.

Social media, despite being a fairly new phenomenon, has taken its hold in American society and has in many ways changed the lives of the people that use it. According to the Pew Research Center’s Social Media Fact Sheet, social media usage among the United States population has increased from 5% of adults in 2005 to 69% of adults in 2018. Young people between the ages of 18 and 29 were the first to adopt social media platforms into their daily routines and they continue to be the leading users of social media. As of January 2018, 88% of people between the ages of 18 and 29 use at least one social media website. Only 78% of people aged 30 to 49 reported using social media, and 64% of people aged 50 to 64 reported using social media. People aged 65 or older continue to be the group with the least number of social media users at only 37% of reported users (Pew Research Center 2018). While young people stand out for their technology usage and are the leading users, they are not entirely outpacing people of older generations. The percentage of Millennial social media users has not changed much between 2012 and 2018. The percentage of Generation X and Baby Boomer social media users, however, have increased between those same years by 9% and 16%, respectively (Jiang 2018). Millennials beat Generation X and Baby Boomers when it comes to smartphone ownership, but not by much. Generation X even outpaces Millennials when it comes to tablet ownership (Jiang 2018). The fact that older generations are incorporating technology and social media into their daily routines highlights the implications that social media has on American society.

The influences of social media touch almost every citizen, yet it appears that young people dominate social media usage, particularly by embracing a multitude of social networking websites. Facebook and YouTube are the two most frequently used social networking sites by both
young and older generations. Around 68% of adults reported using Facebook and three-quarters of those users reported accessing Facebook daily (Smith and Anderson 2018). 81% of young people between the ages of 18 and 29 use Facebook, and that number is not much higher than the 78% of 30 to 49-year-old adults who use Facebook as well (Pew Research Center 2018). YouTube, by comparison, is used by nearly three-quarters of U.S. adults by 2018, with 94% of those being young adults between the ages of 18 and 24 (Smith and Anderson 2018). There are also differences between age groups in the various platforms used by each group. On average, for young people between the ages of 18 and 29, 91% use YouTube, 81% use Facebook, 68% use Snapchat, and 64% use Instagram. For older people, particularly those between the ages of 50 and 64, the most used platform is YouTube with 68% reported users, followed by Facebook with 65% reported users, Pinterest with 26% reported users, and LinkedIn with 24% reported users (Pew Research Center 2018). Twitter, however, is the only social media platform that adults in the U.S. tend to use rather consistently even if less people report using it. The statistic is surprising considering the media attention that Twitter tends to get, particularly around the current President’s tweets. The social media platforms with the largest gaps are Instagram, Twitter, and Snapchat. Young people are more likely than any other age group to use those platforms (Pew Research Center 2018). For example, 78% of people between the ages of 18 and 24 use Snapchat compared to 54% of people between the ages of 25 and 29 (Smith and Anderson 2018). The number tends to drop drastically even though the age groups are not too far apart from each other. The social networking site that a person visits affects the information that he or she is exposed to and receives. This is important when it comes to analyzing the new ways that adults in the United States view and absorb their news and make decisions about candidates and campaigns.

Americans are not only using social media for entertainment purposes, but they are also using it for information and news. In their 2017 study through the Pew Research Center, Elisa Shearer and Jeffrey Gottfried reported that 67% of Americans got some of their news from a social media website. The majority of social media news users are young people between the ages of 18 and 29, and 30 and 49. The percentage of Americans aged 50 or older who use social media for news increased from 45% in 2016 to 55% in 2017 (Shearer and Gottfried 2017). Facebook and YouTube were among the top networks for news. Out of the 66% of adults that reported using Facebook in 2017, more than half of those users, 45%, reported getting their news from Facebook. Out of the 58% of reported YouTube users, 18% of them got their news from YouTube. Snapchat is another networking site where young people in particular get their news; 21% of young Snapchat users out of the 82% of reported 18-29 aged users in 2017 got news from Snapchat (Shearer and Gottfried 2017). While the number does not seem staggering, the fact that young people even consider getting news from websites that are not always credible makes it questionable that young voters are making the informed decisions that they should be when it comes to evaluating politicians and news events. Despite the growing trend towards getting news on social media, Shearer and Gottfried argue that news consumers still get their news from traditional sources, such as cable TV, local TV, and the radio. Many news consumers even get their news from multiple sources, often a mixture of social media and traditional news sources (Shearer and Gottfried 2017). Traditional news sources themselves are also using social media to promote the news and to engage a wider audience. For example, virtually all newscasters and reporters on television networks have some sort of social media account that they use to showcase news stories and engage listeners and readers throughout all hours of the clock, even when news consumers are not sitting in front of their TV sets.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

Social media has very quickly become a tool not just for news but also for political commentary and civic engagement. According to a study done by the Pew Research Center in 2012, 66% of social media users used a social networking site to engage in some sort of civic or political activity
Younger social media users are more likely to use the tools for civic activities

% of users of social networking sites or Twitter who use social media these ways

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Ages 18-29</th>
<th>Ages 30-49</th>
<th>Ages 50-64</th>
<th>Ages 65+</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Like/promote political material</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encourage others to vote</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post thoughts on issues</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>31%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Repost political content</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>32%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Encourage others to act</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>33%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Post links to political stories</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>27%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Belong to political group on SNS</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>14%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Follow officials/candidates</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>25%</td>
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The 2012 Pew Internet Project found that out of the social media users surveyed, 38% of them used social media to “like” or promote information related to politics. 35% of social media users used the networking websites to encourage others to vote. Democrats are more likely than any other political affiliation to encourage people to vote on social media (Rainie et al. 2012). The sites are not only used to encourage voting, but they are also used to encourage others to act, especially if it is an issue that the social media user is passionate about and supports. 33% of social media users used the sites to repost political content that was posted by others in an effort to share information and spread the news about social issues.

Social media is where candidates showcase themselves and where they can connect with voters. Voting behavior is significantly influenced by a politician’s posts, tweets, and overall Internet activity since voters, particularly young voters, tend to look online first before making a voting decision (Sharma and Parma 2016, 8). In his thesis for Georgetown University, “Social Networking Websites and Voter Turnout,” Bryan Boroughs finds that accessing political content on social media platforms increased the likelihood that someone voted in the 2008 presidential election. After performing a regression analysis on data collected from a survey by the Pew Research Center, Boroughs finds that younger voters were significantly affected by political content on social...
media websites. People in their 20s were 9.3% to 16.5% more likely to vote after viewing political content online whereas people in their 80s were 3.9% to 5.6% more likely to vote (Boroughs 2010, 21). A person’s exposure to and usage of social media can affect their political behavior. Another effect that social media could have on voters is social media’s ability to organize people and recruit volunteers to act for or against a particular issue. Accessing political content on a social networking site can be “more effective at motivating other potential voters and altering the political discourse” (Boroughs 2010, 1).

SOCIAL MEDIA AND VOTING
Social media’s most appealing and unique characteristic is the mere fact that it is a virtual place where people can socialize with one another. The social interactions made online, however, mirror the ones made offline. A big part of elections and campaigning is candidates communicating the issues with the American public. The ways incumbent candidates win reelection are by reaching out to constituents, communicating with them, and making sure that they know that their voices will be heard once they are in office. Not only do candidates use social media to connect with voters, but voters also use social media to learn about candidates and encourage others to vote for particular candidates. Young people in particular are susceptible to a phenomenon called the “social vote,” the idea that people are likely to vote if those in their socialized groups are voting (Rainie 2012). 74% of registered voters belong to the “social vote” cohort (Rainie 2012). Talking about voting and encouraging others to vote happens in several ways: through face-to-face conversations, by phone, in e-mails, and, more recently and effectively, through social media. Young voters are more likely to utilize the last method yet are also susceptible to being encouraged to vote through face-to-face conversations with people close to them. According to a study performed by Lee Rainie of the Pew Research Center during the presidential election of 2012, 54% of registered voters had face-to-face conversations with family and friends to encourage them to vote. The percentage was compared to the 22% of registered voters who let others know online on Facebook, Twitter, or another social networking site that they were planning to vote and how they were voting. 29% of young voters between the ages of 18 and 29 used social media to announce their vote compared to the 14% of voters aged 65 and older (Rainie 2012). Figure 2 below shows how each age group was encouraged and have encouraged others to vote.

Figure 2

Robert Bond, Christopher Fariss, and others performed an experiment in which they analyzed the influence socializations on Facebook had on voting turnout in the 2010 U.S. congressional elections. They focus not only on a single user’s voting behavior, but rather how a social media platform can affect a user’s friends and friends of friends’ voting behaviors. In their experiment, 61 million Facebook users were randomly placed into one of three groups. The control group logged into Facebook on Election Day and viewed their Facebook feeds as they normally would. The second group logged into Facebook and saw a banner on the top of their news feed announcing that it was Election Day and encouraging them to vote at their polling place. The third group saw the same banner as the second group, except the banner also included a list of the user’s friends who had voted and an option for the user to share that he or she voted. After reviewing the users’ voting rates, it was found that the third group who saw that their friends had voted were more likely to vote in the midterm election than either of the other two groups (Bond et al. 2012). Bond and Fariss’ experiment has several implications for the
future of political mobilization through social media. In the 2008 presidential election, 25% of voters between the ages of 18 and 29 said that someone contacted them in person or on the phone to encourage them to vote for Obama (Keeter et al. 2008). This form of political mobilization worked, especially at a time where social media was a fairly new concept and not yet accessible to all people. As Bond and Fariss’ experiment and the studies performed by the Pew Research Center show, social media is a useful tool for political mobilization. Not only is it popular, but it is also a cost-effective way of reaching young voters in a form that they will understand and accept. Communication is the key component to social media and its positive effects on voting behavior. It is not just a post on social media telling people to vote, however, that encourages people to vote; it is also the encouragement of family and friends that has great influence. Even though a message encouraging someone to vote is online, the social pressure that comes with seeing one’s friends vote is often enough to change or influence a person’s offline voting behavior. The results of Bond and Fariss’ experiment show that strong links on social networks translate to the real world as well.

2008 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION
The 2008 election resulted in a victory for the Democratic Party as President Barack Obama won the presidency against Republican senator John McCain. The 2008 election was historic in not only did the country elect its first African American president, but it was an election that had an unusual high voter turnout among young voters. The number of voters under the age of 30 rose by 3.4 million between 2004 and 2008 (Payne 2009, 3). Young people between the ages of 18 and 29 represented 18% of the electorate in 2008 (Payne 2009, 4). 66% of young voters under the age of 30 voted for Barack Obama, which widened the gap between young voters and older generations and pushed the overall youth vote toward the Democratic Party (Keeter et al. 2008). Young people not only went out to vote in this election, but they also volunteered for the Obama campaign, attended events, and donated money (Keeter et al. 2008). The votes from young voters in 2008 themselves were not, however, the contributing factor leading to Obama’s victory like they were in the 2012 election as Obama was running for re-election. What contributed to Obama’s election was the fact that young people were so actively involved in the campaign process. A lot of the political activity was done through social media and other means of digital technology.

The 2008 election was also historic for the reason that it was the first national election where social media played an important role in influencing voting and political behavior, especially among the youth. The 2008 election became the first election where more than half, 74%, of internet users went online to get political information (Smith 2009). Young people between the ages of 18 and 29 relied mostly on the Internet instead of newspapers, magazines, or the radio to get their political news. There is also a greater shift towards getting information from websites that share a person’s political views instead of visiting websites that do not have a particular view or challenge the user’s view. In 2004, 22% of online political users between the ages of 18 and 24 reported getting information from sites that shared their views and that number increased to 43% in 2008 (Smith 2009). Democratic-leaning websites gained more traffic than Republican-leaning websites during the 2008 primary (Payne 2009, 11). The partisanship seen in today’s political arena translates to online spaces as well. People were not only visiting traditional news media sites for the purpose of information-gathering, but they were also gravitating towards user-generated media sites and blogs. Unofficial websites are not always credible sources of information, but they do generate political engagement and conversation. 38% of voters communicated with others about the election online and 59% used either e-mail, instant message, or Twitter to send or receive information about the campaign (Smith 2009).

The growing use of social media to empower the youth vote could explain why Obama won in 2008. Looking at social media and digital technology use from a party perspective, Obama’s online political supporters were much more active during the campaigning process of the election
than McCain’s online political users. Even though supporters of John McCain were more likely than supporters of Barack Obama to be Internet users, Obama supporters were more engaged politically online (Smith 2009). Figure 3 below shows the ways that Obama voters were active politically online compared to McCain voters.

Figure 3

When running for office, Obama worked to secure the youth vote by making youth voters a priority. He met with student leaders and listened to their needs. Obama was extremely popular with the youth. It can be explained with the fact that young people tend to lean to the left in their politics. Obama’s campaign realized the growing potential social media had to mobilize young voters and he fully took advantage of it in order to secure the youth vote in several states. Even though both presidential candidates were active on their Facebook profiles through the campaign, Obama managed to secure more online supporters than McCain. By November 4, 2008, Election Day, Obama had 2,418,576 supporters on Facebook whereas McCain had only 624,705 Facebook supporters (Payne 2009, 13). In her thesis for Western Kentucky University, Ashley Payne used a data analysis program to create a breakdown of each candidate’s Facebook page to determine the differences between them and why Obama’s page was the most effective. Of all the components described, both candidates appeared to include most of the same information on each of their pages. Both candidates included links to governmental websites, YouTube videos of their speeches, and general contact information. Obama tended to take on a “less is more” approach on his site since he lacked a lot of the information that McCain had listed on his Facebook page. What Obama also did differently was include special interest pages for particular groups, such as young voters, women, veterans, and minorities (Payne 2009, 22). This is part of the reason why Obama boded well with young people. He appealed to minority groups and assured them that their voices would be heard. Throughout the course of the election, Obama and McCain sent a series of updates to their followers on Facebook. While Obama sent eight updates, McCain sent only three. McCain’s updates called for his supporters to participate in the campaign. They also emphasized traditional values and his accomplishments as senator. Overall, McCain’s online campaign took on an approach that called voters to action. Obama’s updates also encouraged supporters to participate politically in some way. His updates, on the other hand, called for change and hope for a better future. Overall, Obama’s updates emphasized working together as a common force (Payne 2009, 23). The updates worked to mobilize voters throughout the campaign season and to encourage people to get involved and go vote. In a survey Ashley Payne conducted of 320 college-aged students, 89% of respondents felt that Obama utilized social media better than McCain did in the 2008 election whereas 11% thought that McCain did a better job (Payne 2009, 24). Many of the respondents also felt that Obama behaved like them and understood them, which is perhaps one of the many reasons why young people tended to vote for Obama. One could argue that Obama’s success with the youth vote is simply due to the fact that young people are more Democratic than any other age group. While that may be part of the reason for Obama’s large youth following, his utilization of social media was also a contributing factor since it got many people to become engaged politically.

2016 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION
Social media and its usage have changed and evolved tremendously between the 2008 and 2016
presidential elections. Where before social media was beginning to take its hold in American politics, it is now the norm. Candidates in the 2016 election used social media much more regularly than in 2012, just four years prior. In 2008, the most used social networks by campaigns were Facebook, YouTube, Myspace, and Flickr (Payne, 2009). In 2016, two of those sites were obsolete. In 2012, Obama used nine social networking websites while Republican nominee Mitt Romney used five (Enli 2017, 52). The use of social networks was consolidated to include mainly Facebook, YouTube, and two newer media channels, Twitter and Instagram. In fact, Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton announced her run for office through a tweet. In January 2016, 44% of U.S. adults reported using social media to learn about the election. 24% said that they went directly to Trump or Clinton’s direct social networking sites for news and information about the election compared to the 15% who looked at the candidates’ official websites (Pew Research Center 2016). At the time of the Pew Research Center’s study of social media use in the 2016 election, Trump had almost 10 million followers on Twitter, while Clinton had 7 million followers and Independent candidate Bernie Sanders had 3 million followers. On Facebook, Trump led the way with followers again with 9 million followers, which was double the followings on Clinton’s or Sanders’ pages (Pew Research Center 2016). Trump’s extensive following can be attributed to his celebrity status and outlandish activity on social media that drew people in just to see what he would be willing to say next. Where social media was once a strategic campaigning tactic that was used for professional purposes, it now takes on a more laid-back and casual approach, particularly with President Donald Trump’s incessant and fiery tweets. Clinton in particular exercised a lot of message control in what got displayed on her social networking sites (Pew Research Center 2016). Trump used a non-traditional approach when it came to social media campaigning. Figure 4 below shows the tweeting style of the two main candidates in the 2016 election.

Almost 82% of Clinton’s tweets were deemed to be traditional compared to only 38% of Trump’s tweets (Enli 2017). Trump’s non-traditional style of tweeting can be seen as unprofessional, but it got people to visit his page and communicate about the issues surrounding the election. His non-conventional style worked to attract voters, which led to his victory. Clinton even attempted to mimic Trump’s style during the campaign and her attempt got her an extensive number of retweets (Enli 2017). Perhaps Trump’s style to brand oneself as a trendy candidate is the way campaigns should use social media to better interact with voters, particularly the youth, and appear more relatable to them and their interests.

A main development in campaigns’ use of social media in 2016 was an increased use of images and video-sharing (Enli 2017, 52). During the campaign, Clinton posted about five videos a day on Facebook and Twitter and Trump posted a video almost daily (Pew Research Center 2016). During the election, Clinton was best known for her video capabilities. 27% of her tweets and 23% of her Facebook posts included embedded videos (Pew Research Center 2016). Sanders included videos in 21% of his Facebook posts and 9% of his tweets. Even though he used them, Trump did not tend to rely on videos to get his message across to the public (Pew Research Center 2016). When Sanders and Clinton included videos, their videos were campaign ads. Sanders posted videos of his rallies to show voters that he was fighting for the rights of the common people. Another popular form of visuals during the campaign was the use of infographics to share information about voting and other issues. Sanders and Clinton were more likely to use the infographics, which depicted large text and quick facts around an eye-catching or interesting fact (Pew Research 2016). The use of
infographics appeal to young voters who want information quick and are easily drawn to dramatic statistics or facts. Videos and pictures make campaigns, and ultimately the candidates themselves, much more interactive with the American public, especially since there is little opportunity for voters to actively speak with the candidates online. The use of videos and pictures poses a threat to traditional media methods, such as TV and radio, because now social networking sites have the same capabilities of visual and audio that appeal to an audience. The total shift from traditional media to the new social media has not yet happened since people still use a mixture of both, but a total shift could have profound implications on political communication.

The 2016 election was variably different from any of the previous elections that have incorporated social media into the campaign process. Trump, Clinton, and Sanders all used social media extensively throughout the campaign season but in different ways and with different results. All three candidates posted on their social media at similar rates of five to seven Facebook posts per day and 11 to 12 tweets on Twitter per day (Pew Research Center 2016). Despite posting at similar levels, however, Trump’s posts received much more attention and captured a greater audience response. Figure 5 breaks down how many times each candidate posted and the extent of the audience’s responses.

Part of the reason for Trump’s ability to garner such responses could be attributed to his sizeable following. Trump’s social media campaign, however, thrived on interaction with the public. Trump was the only candidate in the 2016 election and the first candidate in previous elections to engage so personally with the public, especially on Twitter (Pew Research Center 2016). On Twitter, Trump was more likely to retweet tweets made by the public than were Clinton and Sanders. Clinton tended to retweet her own campaign and staff accounts and Sanders often retweeted the news media (Pew Research Center 2016). When Trump retweeted a person of the public, he often wrote a response to the original tweet. A lot of the tweets he retweeted were compliments to him or comments that he wanted to challenge publicly. Trump’s retweeting method is revolutionary in a time where campaigns’ social media engagement with the public is already limited. The 2016 election was the first election since previous years to not offer Internet users the ability to create a fundraising page or comment on posted news articles. Sanders was the only candidate to allow supporters to make calls on his behalf (Pew Research Center 2016). The one-way communication and limited “voter-campaign interactivity,” however, were also evident in previous elections (Enli 2017). Candidates in the 2008 election only provided contact information on their webpages and rarely allowed for the public to actively participate in conversation. For example, only 3% of Obama’s tweets during the 2008 election period were retweets of the public
and that is more than Romney’s statistic for retweets of the public, of which there were none (Pew Research Center 2016). Trump’s method of retweeting ordinary people and responding to comments affords him the opportunity to interact with his supporters on a more personal level.

Another key difference between the 2008, 2012, and 2016 elections was that in 2008 and 2012, the candidates addressed specific voting groups on their websites. That disappeared in 2016 and was instead replaced by a page where each candidate could describe his or her position on a particular issue without going into details about specific groups (Pew Research Center 2016). Figure 6 below shows the specific voting groups that each candidate in each election.

Figure 6

It was interesting for the 2016 candidates to not make specific groups their priorities during campaigning. Obama’s specific target of young people and students allowed him to carry the youth vote into winning the presidency. Appealing to particular voters encourages political participation from otherwise marginalized groups. Despite not providing links for specific groups, both Clinton and Sanders attempted to appeal to the Spanish-speaking community by writing some posts in Spanish. All of Trump’s posts were in English. For the other candidates, 15% of Clinton’s Facebook posts and 6% of her tweets were in Spanish while 4% of Sanders’ Facebook posts and 5% of his tweets were in Spanish (Pew Research Center 2016). Their goal in doing so was to capture Democratic and Independent voters in key states.
2018 MID-TERM ELECTIONS AND BEYOND
The 2018 mid-term elections, while slight, saw an increase in voter turnout among the youth. According to exit polls, 13% of voters were between the ages of 18 and 29. While the age group accounts for the lowest percentage in turnout, it does not stray far from other age groups. Research shows that people tend to vote more often as they get older, which means that the youngest Millennials now will be voting more in the elections to come. Exit poll data shows that 67% of people between the ages of 18 and 29 voted for the Democratic candidate in the mid-term election. As Millennials outgrow Baby Boomers as the largest generation in the electorate, their Democratic leanings will alter the American political landscape.

American politics are already changing with the increased use of social media. There is research that shows that a person’s use of social media for political and civic engagement has a positive effect on voting behavior. This is true particularly for young people who are constantly exposed to social media on a daily basis. Viewing political content online influences how a person feels about a candidate and makes the person more inclined to vote. The social aspect of social media also plays an important role in how people, particularly the youth, are encouraged to vote and encourage others to vote. Knowing that a close friend or family member is voting for a particular candidate creates a social pressure that influences someone’s vote, even if that person has never voted before in an election. A lot of it has to do with the fact that humans are social creatures. Studies have shown that parents’ political affiliations and ideologies translate to their children. Social media facilitates that transferring of political information, not only among parents and children but also among distant family members, friends, and acquaintances.

The use of social media in campaigns is taking a greater hold than it has in the past. The 2016 presidential election was not the only turning point in the evolution of social media in campaigns. The 2018 mid-term elections also exemplified intense social media usage, particularly through the campaign of Democratic candidate Beto O’Rourke. O’Rourke was famous for his use of Facebook Live videos and communication with voters through social media. Even though O’Rourke lost the election to incumbent senator Ted Cruz, his use of social media in his campaign is an example that campaigns today, and the campaigns of tomorrow will follow. Whether a person uses social media to access or spread political information, engage politically, donate money, communicate with others, and encourage people to vote should be questions asked in future election exit polls. The answers to social media questions could be used to explain revolutionary changes in American politics in the years to come.

REFERENCES


