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Conclusion: Message Control at the Margins

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Conclusion

Message Control at the Margins

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In the introduction, we identified four key themes that would guide the series of independent yet intersecting analyses that would follow. As those themes were explored and answers were provided to the questions being asked, a series of lessons for operating in the social-media-driven political environment emerged. These lessons shape the larger conclusions that can be derived from the collective efforts of the analyses herein.

The first important lesson that candidates and others must remember is that the fundamentals of running a campaign—developing a message that voters will buy into, targeting potential voters who will be the most amenable to support the candidate, reaching those voters, and then getting them to turn out and vote for the candidate—are just as critical in this new media age as they have always been. Certainly the context that candidates, campaigns, interest groups, and others offering a different message face requires them to try to distinguish themselves via an increasing array of new outlets so that their voice will stand out from the competing forces. What the various conclusions of the analyses presented in this volume show, however, is that success is far more likely to come to those who blend traditional campaign fundamentals with modern social media than to those who ignore or underemphasize the former while focusing on the latter.

The seemingly revolutionary nature of new and social media causes people to forget a simple fact about them: new and social media are tools to convey a message, not the message itself. To be sure, social media affect how information is structured and delivered, the speed with which it can be delivered, and the rawness of the information with no spin and no editing. Often, though, as the preceding studies show, political actors utilize the new tools of social media simply to present information in the exact way in which it was originally disseminated, without assessing the greater impact that new media could have in promoting the content of the message.

By contrast, consider the Coffin Handbill discussed in this book's first pages. In its day, the use of printed posters constituted an advanced technological media tool. Yet it was the content, especially the striking visual of the six black coffins, that made the handbill such an effective campaign advocacy tool against Andrew Jackson. The 2012 presidential election's version of the Coffin Handbill

may have been an advertisement called “Stage,” run only in Ohio during the period between Mitt Romney’s securing of the Republican nomination and the Republican convention. The ad was produced and run by Priorities USA, a Super PAC formed to promote President Barack Obama’s reelection. The ad recounted the experience of a worker who helped erect a stage in the factory where he worked. The stage was set up to announce that the worker’s employer had been acquired by Romney’s company, Bain Capital, which was shutting down the factory and firing all the employees. The effect of this advertisement resonated with Ohio voters; indeed, a Republican strategist concluded early into the general election phase of the election, “that ad alone has killed Mitt Romney in Ohio” (Blumenthal 2012). As was the case with the Coffin Handbill, the impact of the “Stage” advertisement demonstrates that no matter what form of media outlet is utilized, the person delivering the message must have meaningful content to convey for consumers to be interested in the message.

A second important lesson that the chapters in this volume demonstrate is that in many ways the effects of social media usage occur at the margins. For example, both perceptions derived through social media mechanisms and the relationship between online and offline participation is conditioned by numerous factors. Further, social media usage in the political realm seems concentrated among the attentive publics and governing elites. Although such usage provides another mechanism to reach out and disseminate information to the mass public, social media has not, at least yet, had a substantial impact on the nature of the mass public’s involvement in the political process. As a result, the emphasis on social media in the political context may not seem proportional to the effects it has.

The better way to frame this impact, though, and the true lesson to be learned, stems from the fact that many key political victories are earned at the margin. For example, the 2012 presidential election was almost entirely waged in nine key battleground states, which together constituted only about 20% of the nation’s population, and with even greater concentration on a mere handful of counties that were seen as potentially swinging the election in those states. Or in the legislative process, the signature piece of President Obama’s first term in office, the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (Obamacare), passed the House of Representatives by only seven votes (219–212). In this highly divided, partisan political context, the smallest sway in support or opposition for one’s point of view can make the difference between winning and losing the most important political battles. If there is a factor that has been shown to have an effect at the margins, it is not something to be dismissed but to be emphasized. The consequences of social media in the political context fall into this category and thus do in fact warrant the level of interest and inquiry it has and will continue to receive. Moreover, if a person or group can identify ways to utilize social media more effectively, to more efficiently incorporate social media usage into its overall

political operations, to better tailor its message in a way that is enhanced when delivered through new and social media outlets, or to better mobilize even a small portion of the mass public, that person or group stands to reap the political benefits of doing so.

Another important lesson harks back to the normative questions concerning the allegedly negative effects that new media's democratization of political discourse has facilitated by lowering the barriers to entry to the social media marketplace of ideas. As a starting question, is democracy enhanced simply by summing up the amount of political expression and participants in the process? In many ways, a greater quantity of expression—with its related increase in the number of issues discussed, the depth of their exploration, and the size of the audience reached—is not just a worthy goal but a fundamental component on which our nation's political structure rests. Indeed, the crux of the Supreme Court's basis for striking down many campaign finance regulations on First Amendment grounds relates back to this very notion.¹ In this light, the ease with which citizens can add their voice and ideas to the ongoing political discourse, even if doing so expands the breadth of political discourse but not the depth, can be nothing but a democratically positive outcome.

A reasonable criticism of this position can be made, however, by asking whether the qualitative nature of that increased public engagement matters, too. That is, should *more* democracy be as valued as *better* democracy? Should we treat the negative, hostile, and personal attacks often found in mass political discourse in social media outlets as a “plus” for democracy so long as it means that an additional person who might not be doing so otherwise is expressing him- or herself within the context of a political discussion? This volume does not attempt to answer those questions directly, but it does offer the lesson that such matters need to be considered when assessing the impact of social media.

The potential of enhanced participation of ordinary citizens in the political discourse through means of new and social media leads to one final thought with which we want to leave readers and future researchers to consider. Over the decades, scholars have continued to observe a transition from *party*-centered campaigns, in which the political parties and their leaders direct their candidates' campaigns, to *candidate*-centered campaigns, in which candidates are in control of their own campaigns (Maisel and Brewer 2011). As seen in this volume, though, social media promote the importance of the individual within the context of the political process generally and in campaigns specifically. Individual citizens can add their thoughts to the political dialogue just as easily as anyone else. Moreover, the ease of obtaining information could help close the gap between attentive and mass publics, meaning that political appeals may need to go to a broader base of individuals. Candidates and campaigns, for their part, have already started to design social media tools and to implement social media strategies to target and reach individual voters (Scherer 2012; Shear 2012).

All this leads us to our final question, one that can only be answered with the passage of time: will the advent of social media in the political context usher in yet another era, that of *voter*-centered campaigns? Voter-centered campaigns are ones in which voters can be part of the campaign dynamic instead of being passive receivers of information—in which voters can inject themselves into the campaign process, candidates proactively reach out to individual voters to develop voters' loyalty to that candidate, or as with the Romney 47% comment, a bartender in his late 30s with a video recorder or smart phone and the luck of being in the right place at the right time to capture a comment not meant for widespread dissemination and consumption could help determine who becomes the next president of the United States. Since all these events have already taken place, the foundation for a voter-centered campaign system may well have already been laid. Although individuals may not be able to control campaigns in the same way as parties and candidates have done in the previous systems, the widespread incorporation of social media in our daily and political lives may allow individual voters to affect political outcomes at the margins, which as we all know is where key political victories are earned.

Notes

1. See *Buckley v. Valeo*, 424 U.S. 1, at 19 (1976) (“A restriction on the amount of money a person or group can spend on political communication during a campaign necessarily reduces the quantity of expression by restricting the number of issues discussed, the depth of their exploration, and the size of the audience reached”).

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