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## Social Media Engagement in the 2018 Democratic Primaries

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### Abstract

Social media's role in American politics has exploded in importance over the past decade. The 2018 primary season saw a massive rise in the amount of progressive, female, and younger candidates across the United States, particularly within the Democratic Party. This paper examines the role of social media outreach within the context of three case studies, all of which featured an insurgent, female, progressive candidate defeating their older, establishment, male opponents within their respective Democratic primaries. All three insurgent candidates maintained a higher rate of both social media output, personalization, and interactivity with the user base, which creates more engagement among voters and wider audiences on their social media accounts. This paper finds that candidates with greater amounts of social media output, personalization, and interactivity cultivate greater engagement among users than those without, implying that greater social media engagement results in greater enthusiasm among voters.

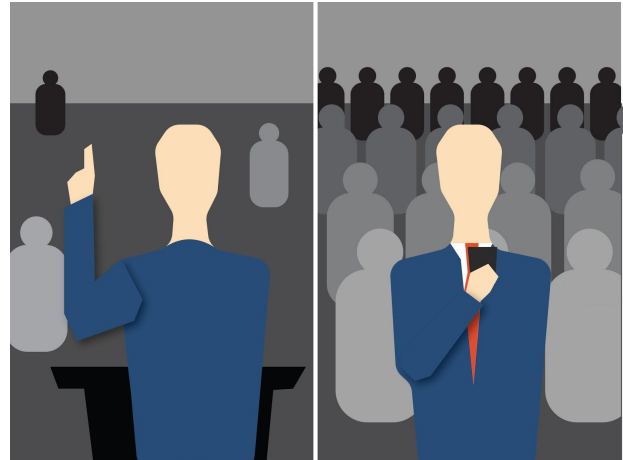
# Social Media Engagement in the 2018 Democratic Primaries

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Social media's role in American politics has exploded in importance over the past decade. The 2018 primary season saw a massive rise in the amount of progressive, female, and younger candidates across the United States, particularly within the Democratic Party. This paper examines the role of social media outreach within the context of three case studies, all of which featured an insurgent, female, progressive candidate defeating their older, establishment, male opponents within their respective Democratic primaries. All three insurgent candidates maintained a higher rate of both social media output, personalization, and interactivity with the user base, which creates more engagement among voters and wider audiences on their social media accounts. This paper finds that candidates with greater amounts of social media output, personalization, and interactivity cultivate greater engagement among users than those without, implying that greater social media engagement results in greater enthusiasm among voters.

**KEY WORDS:** social media; women in politics; social media in politics



## **Introduction**

In the 2018 election cycle, there was a surge in women candidates for Congress, particularly for seats in the House of Representatives. The Center for American Women and Politics (CAWP) (2018) noted 355 potential women candidates, nearly double the amount of candidates in 2015 (CAWP 2018). Among these candidates, 291 are Democratic women. In a similar vein, “progressive” (i.e., further left than “establishment” neoliberal Democrats) Democratic candidates ran for office in larger numbers than ever before. The Brookings Institute study (2018) found in June that there were 280 self-proclaimed progressive candidates running for both houses of Congress, nearly triple that of the 97 progressive candidates at the same time in 2016. These 280 candidates made up 41% of the Democratic candidate pool for the House in the 2018 primary election cycle. Of these 280 candidates, 81 won their primaries, a total of 29% of candidates (Karmack, Podkul, and Zeppos 2018). As a comparison, in the 2014 midterm election, only 60 candidates—17% of

the total House Democratic candidate pool—ran for office. Of those 60, 24 won their races. Bernie Sanders’s primary candidacy in 2016 was a likely inspiration for the glut of progressive candidates; their presence has made a noted leftward change on the mainstream Democratic Party, with the 2016 party platform being the most progressive in the party’s history (vanden Heuvel 2016).

Additionally, social media and its use has become increasingly necessary within the political sphere. In the presidential race of 2016, candidates paid millions of dollars in social networking site (SNS) ads, particularly on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, to court Millennial votes (Kuchler and Bond 2015). Ad expenditure on social media for the 2018 election cycle is expected to surpass \$1.8 billion U.S. dollars in total (Erdody 2018). It is simultaneously used as a tool for get-out-the-vote (GOTV) efforts, as facilitation between constituent-representative interaction, and as a channel for fundraising efforts. Its capacity for limitless SNSes, the most popular of which are Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter (Verto Analytics), allow for a wide dissemination of a political campaign or candidate’s message. In addition, social media has become a useful tool to reach young voters, as Perrin (2015) reports that 90% of young people use it, compared to a mere 35% of voters over 65 (Perrin 2015). Thus, it has become essential for politicians to have a presence on social media, as it is another avenue through which politicians may connect with voters.

Social media and women in politics are both areas of study that have an ample body of supporting literature, but the connection between them is a topic that, while not niche, has been less frequently documented. Shannon McGregor and Rachel Mourão (2016) examine voters’ engagement with women politicians on Twitter, and Moran Yarchi & Tal Samuel-Azran (2018) conduct similar research with Facebook users. Both teams of researchers found that women candidates were more engaging with their social media user base than their male opponents, leading one to question whether social media serves as an equalizing or indeed beneficial platform for women political candidates.

One aspect of this research that has been neglected is a comparison of insurgent versus incumbent usage of social media, and different levels of engagement. For this study, I analyzed three Democratic primary races, measuring candidates’ social media output, engagement with voters, content personalization, and content virality. In a primary season full of upsets, particularly for Democrats, I sought to determine how varying levels of social media outreach, and subsequent engagement from the user base, differed among the six candidates.

## **1. Literature Review**

### ***1.1. Women, Politics, and Social Media***

McGregor and Mourão (2016) reference a large body of literature that acknowledges media’s bias against both women politicians and women political candidates, a literature that Yarchi and Samuel-Azran (2018) also acknowledge within their own study of Israeli

female candidates' interactivity on Facebook. One example is Bystrom, Robertson, & Banwart's (2001) study of gubernatorial races that featured both male and female candidates. Traditional media has also focused on the male candidates, giving them more exposure on news networks than female candidates (McGregor and Mourão 2016) and, in news coverage, focusing on the gender divide in regards to policy differences, appearance, and demeanor. Scholars consistently agree that women face gendered challenges, particularly with voter perception of them, regarding readiness for office, personal characteristics, and demeanor (McGregor and Mourão 2016; Wagner et al. 2017). Voters consistently consider politics to be a more masculine endeavor, and as such many women tend to portray a more masculine side to themselves to voters (McGregor and Mourão 2016; Wagner et al. 2017; Yarchi and Samuel-Azran 2018). Bystrom, Robertson, & Banwart (2001) found that traditional media's portrayal of women gubernatorial candidates, while not necessarily more demeaning, were indeed more stereotypical than their male counterparts, particularly in regards to a focus on the candidate's traditionally feminine aspects, such as focus on the woman's children, family, work-home life balance, etc. (Bystrom, Robertson, and Banwart 2001). Interestingly, McGregor & Mourão (2016) found that, at least on Twitter, this gender divide was also found to transfer over onto Twitter in the form of demeaning hashtags.

For the most part, however, social media breaks down the filter that traditional media

provides, and allows women candidates to send out their own message directly to potential voters. Both Yarchi and Samuel-Azran (2018) and McGregor and Mourão (2016) found that on social media, women candidates were more engaging than their male opponents, though in McGregor and Mourão (2016)'s research, this effect was negated in the case of female-female races. Engagement was determined by the SNS user base's response to the candidates' social media posts, either in the form of likes and shares on Facebook (Yarchi and Samuel-Azran 2018), or likes and retweets on Twitter (McGregor and Mourão 2016). Thus, in both studies, the female candidate consistently out-engaged their male opponent, though content analysis was not included in the studies. These studies' results speculate that social media can serve as an equalizer between male and female politicians, who have usually been disserved by traditional media (McGregor and Mourão 2016; Yarchi & Samuel-Azran 2018).

### ***1.2. Social Media and Young Voters***

Social media is also a defining, if not dominant, part of younger Americans' lives. Perrin (2015) finds that 90% of young adults (ages 18-29) use social media, and a total of 65% of all Americans use social media. The number has only risen since 2015, as social media usage continues to become more widespread. Social media is unique in its ability to connect, inform, and mobilize citizens, as well as provide an interactive space for debate, deliberation, and potential broadening of viewpoints (Zuckerman 2018). Social media algorithms provide for a natural combination of

a user's SNS feed with news stories, upon which many users stumble accidentally (Beam et al. 18; Media Insight Project 2018). Millennials' constant connectivity to social media means that they are exposed to these news-pushing algorithms more frequently than members of the older generations, like Generation X or Baby Boomers. An increased exposure to news stories has been found to correlate with an increase interest in news, current events, and politics (Beam et al. 2018).

Social media's inherent interactivity has led to an increase in participatory politics, or, as Cohen and Kahne (2015) define it, "interactive, peer-based acts through which individuals and groups seek to exert both voice and influence on issues of public concern" (Cohen and Kahne 2015, 8), which they argue is mostly powered through youth efforts. Constituents can now directly interact with their representatives, or their would-be representatives. Petitions can amass thousands of signatures and subvert or reverse entirely unpopular proposals. Viewers of national televised political events, such as town halls or debates, can discuss its implications and happenings with other viewers on a real-time basis even though they may be separated geographically. Whether or not it is deliberate, the introduction of social media and its mainstream usage has led to a more participatory, rather than deferential, relationship between elected representatives and their voters. By a "participatory" relationship, I mean interactive, and I will use the two terms interchangeably. As young people have the largest share of social media use, one could theorize, as Cohen & Kahne

(2016) do, that it is young people leading this shift through social media to a more equal and participatory relationship between politician and constituent.

Social media has been found as a powerful motivation tool for Millennials to get involved in politics, at least regarding online political activity (Kahne and Bowyer 2018). Because of its ability to reshape politicians' and constituents' relationships to be more equal, participatory, and interactive, politicians cannot afford to ignore the impact of social media in the political sphere, especially since Millennials are now the largest, most diverse generation in America (U.S. Census Bureau 2015). To ignore the Millennial vote is to ignore the changing atmosphere within politicians and younger voters who will eventually become the bulk of their support. While Millennials may vote less frequently than older voters, that will not always be the case, as Millennials' vote share will increase over time.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1. Hypotheses**

Out of preliminary research into social media usage between, among, and by political candidates, two separate hypotheses arose:

H1: The insurgents' social media feeds will be more participatory and more personalized than their establishment opponents'.

H2: A more personable and participatory social media feed will lead to greater engagement from constituents.

H1 is grounded upon the assumption that the younger insurgents are more frequent users of social media than their opponents, and their increased frequency allows them more familiarity and freedom with how social media works. H2 is grounded upon the assumption that social media users—the voters, in this case—would see the politician interacting with a potential voter, and be encouraged themselves to interact in case they received a reply from the politician. In a broader sense, both H1 and H2 contribute to the idea that more engaging social media equates to more effectiveness, which naturally would refer to and be measured by increased voter turnout, and thus an election win. However, it would be nearly impossible to determine whether social media, as opposed to other variables, played a decisive role in a 2018 primary win. Thus, voter turnout is not considered.

### **3.2. Measurables**

Because I sought to examine a candidate's social media output and that output's responding engagement from users, I turned to two of the most popular SNSes on the Internet: Facebook and Twitter (Vertico Analytics 2018). I measured the output in two primary ways: by raw output, or total amount of posts, and by “viral” posts. I limited the raw output to the four months leading up to the primary, as multiple studies have found that rough time period is the most frenetic in terms of campaign activity on social media (McGregor and Mourão 2016; Yarchi and Samuel-Azran 2018). Data collection began March 26 for NY-14; June 4 for MA-7; and February 3 for KY-6. It ended either on the evening of the

primary election, or within two days afterward. In terms of raw output, and as a general disclaimer, I began the study fully expecting Cortez's numbers to be inflated, as she has become a national figure of sorts in the aftermath of her primary election. However, it would be impossible to determine how inflated these numbers are: neither Twitter nor Facebook allows users to see when a post was liked, retweeted, or shared. For the purposes of this study, if Cortez had an example tweet in May with 50,000 likes, I would not and could not know if the 50,000 likes (or any possible breakdown of this number) were contemporary to the time of the tweet's publication, or retroactive in the aftermath of Cortez's election as she gained name recognition overnight.

As for measuring viral posts, I distinguished “virality” on both Facebook and Twitter. Viral Facebook posts required at least 100 or more reactions (“likes”) or shares; viral Twitter posts required 1,000 likes or retweets. The reason for this difference is that Twitter's retweet feature is much more common and accepted within the culture of Twitter, and Facebook's sharing feature is less common. Both retweets and shares achieve the purpose of spreading a particular message: if Candidate A tweets something, and Voter B retweets this message with their own addendum to their 400 followers, and those 400 followers retweet this altered message to their followers, a tweet more quickly becomes viral. However, this is less rapid spread of a singular message is less likely to occur on Facebook; when sharing Facebook posts, people are brought back to the original

post, rather than encouraged to spread Voter B's version of the reshared message.

The engagement with these posts—i.e., how social media users (who may be potential voters)—was separate from the post output itself, and was measured through Twitter and Facebook's reaction (likes) and reshare (retweet or share) functions. Accordingly with H1, the presumption is that the more viral posts a candidate has, the more engagement they will generate. While related to H1, but unable to be concretely researched, one could also theorize that the candidate who receives the most engagement from social media users will be the one to ultimately win the election, as engagement on social media serves as an electronic form of word-of-mouth hype.

Content analysis was not the goal of this study. However, to determine engagement and personalization, some content analysis was necessary. Thus, the subject of a particular post was noted in two cases: if a tweet or Facebook post went viral, or, if virality was not plausible, if there was personalization involved. The easiest way to categorize personalization would be information about the politician's private life, either through pictures of family or pets, discussing personal habits, et cetera. However, what coders may consider "personalization" is extremely subjective, and some posts may not have been counted as personal. Other categories of posts' content analysis included policy (e.g., calls to abolish ICE, regulate Facebook, or express support for LGBTQ+ Americans); campaign updates (e.g., endorsements for the politician, events that the politician attended, and release of campaign

videos or events); current national events; and partisanship (e.g., critiquing Republicans, a candidate's opponent, or Trump). It is important to note that these categories are not the focus of this research, and only served background informational purposes. Their inclusion in the Appendix is not meant to be cohesive or to be completely accurate as to the post's content, only to get a generalized, broad sense of what the politician was discussing in that particular post.

To test H1, I made note of every candidate's direct reply to a Twitter user—because both personalization and participation were Twitter-exclusive data—and every instance of personalization, and tabulated these instances into a single spreadsheet, in addition to data sheets of raw engagement numbers, including feed follower amounts. H2 could not be so easily quantified as H1. Instead, to either support or disprove H2, one must draw inferences from the results of H1. I discuss these inferences further on in the paper.

In addition to politicians' social media output and engagement with voters, I collected several other background data. County demographics were tabulated with the nonpartisan data aggregation firm DataUSA, and election district demographics were compared using data from the Congressional Census Reporter, another nonpartisan data aggregation firm that uses data from the U.S. Census. I also sought background information in the form of campaign finance data, as reported to the Federal Elections Commission (FEC). Specifically, I sought data regarding the six campaigns' social media versus traditional



media ad expenditures. While this data would not necessarily support either H1 or H2, they provide useful clues for a campaign's outreach priorities: expenditures indicate which groups of voters campaigns attempt to target for outreach. Additionally, it serves to provide context to a potentially shifting focus within the realm of ad expenditure. As an example, if Candidate A spent more money on newspaper ads than Facebook ads, then, based on the election results and other gathered data, a researcher may be able to infer the usefulness or relevancy of newspaper vs. social media ads in a time of a shifting culture. While the campaigns' ad expenditure, and the elections' measured voter turnout, cannot be tied to concretely support or disprove Hypotheses 1 & 2, they will still be discussed as valuable context to provide a more complete picture of this study's results and its outward-reaching impact. I have limited my research to three case studies:

Case Study 1: New York's 14th Electoral

District. Joseph Crowley, the incumbent Democrat, has served in Congress since 1999. He was endorsed by the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee (DCCC), which is the arm of the Democrat Party exclusively devoted to electing Democrats to the

House of Representatives. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, his primary challenger, had never before held public office.

This primary was June 26; Cortez won.

Case Study 2: Massachusetts's 7th Electoral

District. Michael Capuano, the incumbent Democrat, has served in Congress since 1998, and was endorsed by the DCCC. Ayanna Pressley, his primary challenger, held name recognition as a Boston City Councilor for years; she had never held higher office until she ran for Capuano's seat. This primary was September 4; Pressley won.

Case Study 3: Kentucky's 6th Electoral

District. This was an open primary, as the 6th District was held by a Republican representative. Jim Gray was the Democratic candidate favored by the establishment Democratic Party, and had been endorsed by the DCCC. Amy McGrath was another political neophyte. Like Cortez, McGrath had never before held public office. This primary was May 22; McGrath won.

## 4. Findings

### 1.1: Aggregate Social Media Following

CANDIDATE	TWITTER FOLLOWERS	FB PAGE LIKES	FB PAGE FOLLOWERS
Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (NY-14)†	906,000	308,689	326,279
Joseph Crowley (NY-14)	4,403	3,412	3,464
Ayanna Pressley (MA-7)†	73,800	28,700	34,600
Michael Capuano (MA-7)	10,100	11,400	16,600
Amy McGrath (KY-6)†	67,600	N/A*	N/A*
Jim Gray (KY-6)	2,630	N/A*	N/A*

Figure 1: Social media following on both Twitter and Facebook (November 2018)

† Insurgent candidate

\* Jim Gray's campaign Facebook page had been deleted prior to this study; thus, Gray and McGrath's Facebook posts were not tabulated.

### 1.2: Aggregate Personalization and Participation With Users (Direct Replies)

CANDIDATE	DIRECT REPLIES	PERSONALIZATION
Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (NY-14)†	27	5
Joseph Crowley (NY-14)	1	0
Ayanna Pressley (MA-7)†	33	18
Michael Capuano (MA-7)	5	0
Amy McGrath (KY-6)†	4	0
Jim Gray (KY-6)	3	0

Figure 2: aggregation of candidates' direct replies and personalization tweets. These numbers are Twitter exclusive.

### 1.3: Aggregate Social Media Output, Engagement, and Virality

CANDIDATE	POSTS	LIKES	SHARES	"VIRAL" POSTS	% VIRAL
Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (NY-14) ✚	207	79,214	22,325	109	0.527
Joseph Crowley (NY-14)	138	6,531	506	12	0.087
Ayanna Pressley (MA-7) ✚	104	22,486	4,580	47	0.452
Michael Capuano (MA-7)	53	3,562	417	11	0.208
Amy McGrath (KY-6) ✚	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Jim Gray (KY-6)	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A

Figure 3A: aggregation of candidates' social media output across Facebook  
\*  $\alpha = 0.05$

CANDIDATE	TWEETS	LIKES	RETWEETS	"VIRAL" TWEETS	% VIRAL
Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (NY-14) ✚	472	592,699	188,728	117	0.248
Joseph Crowley (NY-14)	248	82,005**	12,114**	2	0.008
Ayanna Pressley (MA-7) ✚	419	52,194	11,905	10	0.024
Michael Capuano (MA-7)	409	28,069	5,896	1	0.002
Amy McGrath (KY-6) ✚	178	120,971	26,642	15	0.084
Jim Gray (KY-6)	171	2,073	757	0	0

Figure 3B: aggregation of candidates' social media output across Twitter  
\*  $\alpha = 0.05$

\*\* Crowley had an outlier in the data: his last tweet, a concession to and congratulations of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, garnered over 77,000 likes and 11,000 retweets. Without this tweet, his likes would have numbered 5,005, and his retweets would have numbered 1,114.

## 5. Campaign Expenditures

The first group of campaigns' ad expenditure was the Democratic candidates for New York's 14th congressional district for the House of Representatives, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Joseph Crowley. Expenditure data was limited to the timeframe of March 1 to June 30, 2018. The Democratic primary was on June 22. The Ocasio-Cortez campaign had a massive focus on digital advertisements and campaign literature: the bulk of online advertisements went to Facebook and Google, with the campaign spending over \$20,000 on each platform. Facebook ads were more frequently bought than Google ads. Literature expenditures—anything classified as “printing,” “flyers,” or other items that could be interpreted for campaign literature—totalled over \$15,000. Ocasio-Cortez did not purchase any traditional media advertisements, though she did pay \$1,500 to film an ad for social media (Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez 2018). This ad would later go viral on both Facebook and Twitter.

Crowley, as a contrast, did not pay Facebook or Google directly for online advertisement. Instead, his campaign paid numerous outside consultants, chief among them Red Horse Strategies (expenditures to Red Horse Strategies totalled well over \$200,000), for “digital advertising, telephone calls, canvassing services & mailing services” (Crowley for Congress 2018). Crowley also paid advertisement fees to New York newspapers in Queens, such as the *Queens Tribune* (\$508), the *Queens Times* (\$400), and *The Korea Times*

*New York* (\$1,200) (Crowley for Congress 2018).

Similarly, the other races mirrored the shifts in advertisement focus as demonstrated by the Ocasio-Cortez and Crowley campaigns. Ayanna Pressley and Michael Capuano, for example, were vastly different in their focuses: while both paid outside consultant firms for advertisements, Capuano also paid for print ads within local newspapers, such as the *Dorchester Reporter* (\$480) and *The Bay State Banner* (\$500) (Capuano for Congress Committee 2018). Pressley paid Google for online advertisements in several instances (Committee to Elect Ayanna Pressley 2018), while Capuano did not directly pay either Google or Facebook for online ads. While this does not discount the fact that their paid consultant groups *may* have bought online ads on their behalf, it shows different priorities on both the insurgent and incumbent campaigns in terms of where they should focus their advertisement money. In Kentucky, Amy McGrath and Jim Gray both explicitly bought Facebook advertisements, rather than presumably purchasing Facebook ads through a consultant group, though McGrath outspent Gray in online advertisements by over \$130 (Amy McGrath for Congress 2018; Jim Gray for Congress 2018).

## 6. Results

As predicted, and following prior literature (McGregor and Mourão 2016; Wagner et al. 2017; Yarchi and Samuel-Azran 2018), every insurgent candidate massively outpaced their establishment opponents in raw follower count. Logically, a larger audience for a candidate's

message would naturally lead to more engagement and more word-of-mouth spread of content and ideas, which in turn leads to more engagement. However, while significant potential for a greater amount of engagement exists simply through logical deduction, a larger following does not automatically guarantee greater engagement. Further data is required to determine the viability of H1 and H2.

Surprisingly, only Pressley and Cortez engaged their users (and by extension, potential voters) in any significant way. McGrath and Gray both similarly engaged their base, and though McGrath was more participatory than Gray, it was not by any significant margin. Additionally, Pressley and Cortez were the only two candidates of the six to share any personal information on Twitter. No candidate shared personal posts on Facebook, which perhaps speaks, again, to the particular culture of these sites. While I can only speculate here, perhaps Facebook is used more formally, where Twitter is more casual, and thus more accepting—and encouraging, perhaps—of personal, yet casual information. While not strictly related, the fact that only two candidates out of six chose to share personal information, and on Twitter rather than Facebook, could indicate that this perception of Facebook formality and Twitter casualness carried over to the politicians themselves. The fact that Amy McGrath, an insurgent, did not personalize any of her posts was surprising, and her lack of personalization—and comparative lack of interactivity with potential voters and other social media users—weakens both

hypotheses, but does not necessarily disprove them. Indeed, while weakened, H1 is overall supported because each insurgent candidate did have a more personalized and interactive feed than those of their opponents, albeit not on a significant scale for Case 3, KY-6.

Figures 3A and 3B are an aggregation of all six candidates' social media outputs and their respective engagement numbers on both Facebook and Twitter during the four months leading up to and including election day. Following Wagner et al. (2017)'s findings, the women candidates were more prolific with their social media output than the male candidates; following Yarchi and Samuel-Azran (2018) and McGregor and Mourão (2016), the women candidates were engaging across both social media platforms than the men. As the insurgents were both more participatory and personalized than their opponents, and these insurgents all had greater levels of engagement, H2 is supported.

Interestingly, Capuano and Crowley's engagement with their voter bases was worse on Facebook, despite Facebook's user base skewing toward an older audience (Statista 2018). Though content analysis was not the goal of this study, observation of the examined posts revealed a trend in focusing on current domestic politics across both Facebook and Twitter feeds, while the insurgents' feeds had a more diverse set of focuses. Of Capuano's eleven viral Facebook posts, six were about current events within the Trump administration, such as the family separation at the U.S.-Mexico border, the special counsel led by Robert Mueller, and the Helsinki meeting

between Presidents Trump and Putin. The other five were campaign updates; three of those five campaign updates were in direct response to the current events and actions of the Trump administration. By contrast, Pressley's Facebook feed included 13 policy posts, 24 campaign update posts, 6 posts about current events, 5 personalization posts (defined as posts that revealed information about Pressley's personal life, such as a photo of herself and her family). Note that some of Pressley's posts dealt with multiple subject matters, as did Capuano's—e.g., one of Pressley's viral posts was about policy inspired by Colin Kaepernick, and one of her campaign updates, focused on GOTV for an election day push, was personalized.

Crowley only had two viral tweets, both of which were concession tweets congratulating his opponent and which collectively garnered over 79,100 likes and 11,100 retweets. Because he only had two viral tweets, I did not do a thorough content analysis of his posts; however, I noticed a trend among his posts' subject matter: there were several tweets containing anti-Trump content. By contrast, Cortez had a more diverse array of subject matter. Her posts included support of progressive candidates and a progressive platform, campaign updates announcing additional merchandise, criticism of the establishment Democratic party and Crowley, and policies.

Similarly to Crowley, Jim Gray of Kentucky had no viral tweets, but I observed a trend among the content of his tweets. Gray focused on campaign supporters and GOTV efforts,

criticism of the perceived Washington elite, and not much else. On the other hand, Amy McGrath's tweets had a more diverse subject matter: examples of her 15 viral tweets include a pledge not to take NRA money; GOTV efforts; criticism of Republicans, Representative Andy Barr (the Republican incumbent of KY-6), and Jim Gray; and two tweets celebrating her victory on the night of May 22. Though the data is sparse and any connection between content analysis and engagement requires further research, these results do implicate that a diverse social media feed is better for the candidate, rather than focusing on a single topic for a majority of tweets, e.g., criticism of President Trump.

These results, including campaign expenditure data, indicate a greater shift in how campaigns, particularly insurgents, target their audiences. Ocasio-Cortez, Pressley, and McGrath's focus on Facebook and Google advertisements may have been targeted towards a younger base that is frequently online. The largest age group of Facebook users is 25-34, with 58 million members, which would be a prime age group for Democratic candidates for voter turnout. On the other hand, Facebook users over 35 number over 124 million, more than double that of the 25-34 age group (Statista 2018). Capuano and Crowley especially both outspent their opponents in paying outside consulting groups for social media advertisements, so one can only assume that Pressley and Ocasio-Cortez's social media ads were more effective.

One can also presume that the people who actually take into account the ads they see in

their local newspapers, or hear on the radio, are older. Crowley and Capuano sought and purchased more traditional ways of voter outreach—newspapers and outside political consultant groups—more frequently than their insurgent opponents, which indicates that these candidates remained focused on the “status quo” of advertisements through traditional media, as opposed to social media. However, there is a greater cultural shift in how Americans enter or stay within the political sphere. Over 45% of Twitter’s users are Millennials (Statista Survey 2018), with Instagram being an even more popular among teenagers and younger voting-age people (Verto Analytics 2018). In addition to Twitter and Facebook accounts, all three insurgent candidates have Instagram accounts, and none of their establishment candidates have a presence on that particular platform. Thus, the insurgents automatically have more engagement on that platform than their opponents. As Millennials and Gen Z overtake Gen X and Baby Boomers in voting population percentage share, candidates can no longer depend on traditional media for outreach—they must turn instead to social media to get their message out to voters more effectively.

## **7. Conclusion**

Following the findings of McGregor and Mourão (2016) and Yarchi and Samuel-Azran (2018), all three female insurgent candidates were more engaging than their male opponents. Being female and progressive were two points of commonality, however, it would be difficult to determine the extent of these variables’ influences on voters and social media users. It

is much easier to draw inferences based on Hypotheses 1 and 2, which focus on candidate engagement with social media users and personalization, than dubiously measurable factors like a candidate’s gender or position on the political spectrum. The results of study, though overall considered to be weak support for H1 and H2 at best, perhaps reinforce the earlier discussed shift in American politics, that of the relationship between politician and constituent.

With 65% of all Americans using social media (Perrin 2015) in some capacity, and with social media supplanting broadcast and cable television in news, communication, and importance, social media has undoubtedly become a fixture in Americans’ daily and political lives. Just over a decade ago, constituents were separated from their politicians, and the only real reprimand was at the voting booth. However, the rise of social media allows for a more interactive relationship between politicians and their constituents. There now seems to be a frustration among Americans with the relatability and accountability of their politicians. The popularity of these insurgent candidates, all of whom were, to varying degrees, more personalized and interactive with social media users, may speak to this potential cultural shift, because it is precisely the candidate’s interactivity that reconnects the American voter to the candidate—and, in so doing, meets a perhaps understated desire for authenticity. For candidates to ignore the importance of social media’s impact on politics is to risk losing elections against a media-savvy opponent.

Future research that seeks to build upon the foundation of this study and those that preceded it should do several things. Firstly, and perhaps most importantly, is to focus on content analysis. Which posts were most popular, and why? What spoke the most to the audience of this particular post? Is it consistent with the rest of the candidate's most popular posts? Answering any, or all, of these questions may lead to valuable insight as to how a candidate is tailoring his or her message to potential voters, how voters are receiving that message, and most importantly how voters/social media users are responding to that message. Secondly, researchers should attempt to construct a profile of the politicians' followers and see if these followers share any

overarching commonalities. I acknowledge this may be difficult, especially with more popular accounts that could easily have hundreds of thousands of followers, with no way of determining which followers are genuine, versus bots, versus trolls, etc. Thirdly, though no less important than the other two, researchers should attempt to diversify and branch out their studies as much as possible. Categories to diversify would include gender (i.e., female-female, male-male, and female-male races) and party, among others. Diversification would not only achieve more varied results, but could also account for variables that were not considered within this study.



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