

Wave-Riding and Hashtag-Jumping: Twitter, Minority 'Third Parties' and the 2012 US Elections

Abstract

With the description of the 2012 election as the “most tweeted” political event in US history in mind, considering the relative media invisibility of so-called “third party” presidential candidates in the US election process, and utilizing an understanding of re-tweeting as conversational practice, the purpose of this paper is to examine the use of Twitter by the main “third party” US presidential candidates in the run-up to the 2012 presidential election in order to better understand (1) the volume of tweets produced by the candidates; (2) the level of interaction by followers in the form of re-tweeting; and, (3), the subject/content of the tweets most re-tweeted by followers. The ultimate goal of the paper is to generate a broader picture of how Twitter was utilized by minority party candidates, as well as identifying the issues which led followers (and their respective followers) to engage in the “conversational” act of re-tweeting.

Keywords

twitter; election; third parties; politics

Introduction

Utilizing the boyd et al. (2010) understanding of re-tweeting as conversational practice, the purpose of this paper is to examine the use of Twitter by the four main “third party” US presidential candidates in the run-up to the 2012 presidential election in order to understand (1) the volume of tweets produced by the candidates; (2) the level of interaction by followers in the form of re-tweeting candidate/party tweets; and, (3), the subject and content of the tweets most re-tweeted by followers of the respective parties. The ultimate goal of the paper is to generate a broader picture of how Twitter was utilized by minority party candidates, as well as identifying the issues which led followers (and their respective followers) to engage in the “conversational” act of re-tweeting.

Previous Literature

The rise of Twitter and other forms of social media as factors in election campaigns in the US and globally, although relatively recent phenomena, have been well-documented in academic research (e.g. Strandberg 2013; Baxter & Marcella 2012; Larsson & Moe 2011; Hong & Nadler 2012; Dylko, *et al* 2011; Gasser & Gerlach 2012). Grusell and Nord (2012) have noted that Twitter is a particularly interesting media form to examine in relation to political campaigns due to the relative newness of the tool, and the fact that the brevity of the messaging system (with a maximum of 140 characters) raises questions regarding both the possibilities and efficacy of Twitter as a vehicle for political mobilization and support (p. 49). The use of online media for the purposes of engaging, “those...marginalized from the existing political system” was the cornerstone of what was known as a “mobilization thesis” whereby the aforementioned marginalized groups could, via online participation become “drawn into public life and civic communities” (Norris 2001, p. 218; cited in Strandberg 2013).

The expansion of Twitter discussions is, of course, at the heart of this study, and the use of re-tweets by Twitter users is, other than the sending out of an original message, a vital component of such expansions. The notion of the cultivation of a “conversational ecology” via re-tweets is a particularly useful concept for understanding the lines between political participation and conversation discussed by Hoffman (2011). As boyd *et al* (2010), re-tweeting is more than just simple information distribution, but also more complex social engagement whereby the re-tweet is, “a form of information diffusion and...a means of participating in a diffuse conversation” as well as an act “to validate and engage with others;” thus, “regardless of why users embrace re-tweeting, through broadcasting messages, they become part of a broader conversation” (p. 10). In addition to the question of how to conceive of the re-tweet (in communicative and participatory terms), a final issue worth addressing is

why and what people re-tweet. Meraz and Papacharissi (2013), citing Cha, *et al* (2010) noted that re-tweets are often driven by the perceived content value of the tweet (rather than, for example, the person who sent the tweet), while Hansen et al. (2011) have described the factors that play into the decision-making process behind re-tweets, noting that, “it may depend on both on the type of content and whether the communication is intended for a broader audience or for a more closed community of friends.’ Ultimately, however, the Hansen, et al. discovered that, in general, negative sentiment tended to reduce the number of re-tweets, but not, interestingly, when in conjunction with news.

Method

Tweets posted to the Twitter accounts of three of the “third party’ US presidential candidates: Gary Johnson (Libertarian), Jill Stein (Green) and Rocky Anderson (Justice), as well as the official feed of one party (Constitution) were harvested for the two weeks leading up to the election: between October 23 and November 6, 2012. The first step was to accumulate all of the tweets. From the four accounts: a total of 559 tweets. For each candidate, tweets originating from the candidate/party were then checked for the number of “Re-Tweets’. From this, a rank-order of the most “Re-Tweeted’ and “Favorite’ tweets emerged, and, from this meta list, the most popular tweets were subsequently categorized and analyzed. The second step in the analysis was to look at the top 10 tweets for each candidate based on a combined number of Re-Tweets, and to conduct a content analysis of those tweets to identify the topic and scope of the tweets. The purpose of this second phase of the analysis is to gauge which topics generated the most interest amongst followers, with “interest’ defined as the motivation to forward the message to followers. As seen in the results, depending upon the person/party who sent them out, there can be a wide variation in the number of RT and Favorites that tweets generate.

Results

The most striking result to emerge from the initial examination of the tweets from the four third-party candidates was the extent to which Jill Stein of the Green Party dominated in terms of volume of tweets sent out. Her 23 tweet-per-day average was four times that of Libertarian Gary Johnson, and six times higher than both Rocky Anderson (Justice) and the Constitution Party. An interesting result of the study was that, for the two “main’ third-party candidates (Johnson and Stein), October 23 and 24 proved to be pivotal days in that they were the days immediately following the third presidential debate (October 22, 2012) and what was known as the “First Free and Equal Elections Foundation’ debate (October 23) featuring the four main third-party candidates. In other words, the candidates piggy-backed not only their own third party debates, thus generating significant volumes of re-tweets, but also the third debate between Obama and Romney. In the subsequent analysis of the Top 10 tweets from each candidate, three broad themes emerged: (1) military, security and human rights, (2) the failure of the two-party system, and (3), corporate power. In this analysis and discussion of the results presented above, I consider these themes and topics that attracted re-tweets from fellow Twitter users, as well as the tactics used by the candidates themselves for linking their political messages to broader themes and agendas.

Discussion/Conclusions

As smaller political parties in the US struggle to garner even minimal mainstream media coverage, the well-documented flood of tweets surrounding the third presidential election debate (the first two were not covered in the scope of this study) provided an excellent opportunity for minority party candidates to jump on top of that tweet wave, and to weave their respective political messages into the broader political discourse. In some cases, Obama and Romney were attacked for what they did say; but, interestingly, some of the highest levels of re-tweets came when third-party candidates played off of the main presidential debates – by, for example, using the #debate and #election2012 hashtags – by addressing a topic from those same debate, but injecting what was unsaid. In these cases, Johnson and Stein reminded their followers of the innocent civilians killed by drone strikes in Pakistan and Afghanistan. By hashtagging #Obama, #debate and #election2012, the candidates essentially utilized

the popularity of broad Twitter conversations as a spring board for specific policy critique and suggestions. Thus, “wave riding” already significant twitter flows proved to be successful in a number of cases.

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