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The New Open Forum: Social Media Use in Georgia Gubernatorial Elections

An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Honors in the
Department of Political Science and International Studies

By:

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Under the mentorship of Dr. Patrick Novotny

ABSTRACT

In 2018, Georgia saw one of the most contested elections in recent memory with Brian Kemp narrowly defeating Stacey Abrams. As a part of that election, social media would play a critical role in how campaigns are run. This thesis takes a look at previous literature on voter turnout and social media. This thesis asks: How did the campaigns use social media to spread their message, and in what stage of the election was social media most effective? To answer that question this thesis features a content analysis of Facebook posts and Tweets from the 2018 elections compared to posts in the 2014 elections to answer my question and to see how campaigning on social media has evolved since 2014. The results are that campaigns are more likely to post from the campaign trail and Get Out the Vote messages and during the final days of the general election campaign.

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Introduction

2018 saw one of the most closely contested and followed elections of that year's midterm cycle in the Georgia governor's race. Secretary of State Brian Kemp defeated House Minority Leader Stacey Abrams in an election that saw increased turnout over prolonged primaries and contested results. This race attracted the attention of most of the nation to see if Georgia would be a part of 2018's so-called blue wave which saw Democrats win control over the House and 23 governorships across America including flipping governorships in traditional swing states like Wisconsin and Michigan. One place where the election was kept a daily reminder was on social media. Since the 2008 election, social media sites like Twitter and Facebook went from a novelty for campaigns to a must-have for any campaign strategist. Daily and hourly posts came from the campaigns in an attempt to keep voters informed and presumably to also try to win over undecided voters.

Studies in the past decade have shown that social media sites play a crucial role in campaigns in reaching out to voters (Hagar 2016, Mergel 2012), but recently a new type of social media campaigning has emerged during the 2016 election cycle, and since that election. A new type of campaigning on social media where candidates not only react to stories in the media cycle but create stories for the media through endorsements, posting campaign ads, and announcing policy positions in a post or tweet. While social media and politics are not a new phenomenon, the candidacy of Donald Trump for President brought social media tactics into mainstream politics, and this type of campaigning would come to Georgia in 2018.

Not many studies have been conducted on campaigning in this age where social media is used by candidates not merely to react to stories in the media but to create and generate stories that are covered in other media such as broadcast television. While it is understood that in non-Presidential election years that turnout tends to be lower than in presidential election years 2018 saw turnout increase by 11% compared to 2014 (Table 10), the largest turnout ever for a gubernatorial race in Georgia (Regan-Porter 2018). This leads to many questions whether the turnout is based on the popularity of both candidates or the closeness of the race, or something else. Social media posts can affect elections so it should be asked what the campaigns are doing on social media and how it is affecting voter turnout.

In the 2018 election in Georgia, how did the campaigns use social media sites to spread their message, and in which stage of the election was the use of social media most effective? How have the campaigns evolved in using social media as a campaign tool? Did the new type of campaigning on social media where Georgia's candidates not only reacted to stories in the media cycle with social media, but created stories for the media through endorsements, posting campaign ads, and announcing policy positions have a presence in Georgia's 2018 gubernatorial race? I believe the use of social media was most effective in the primary stage of the campaigns in Georgia in 2018 when more voters were undecided about their preference for a particular candidate. Where persuasion was a factor in the use of social media in primary races in 2018, the Georgia 2018 election shows that the use of social media in the general election campaign was much less focused on the persuasion of voters and much more on stirring the Democratic and Republican Party's base-voters and updating the base with information on campaign

rallies, events, and appealing to base supporters for fundraising. In the primary season in 2018, the social media of candidates showed much more of an emphasis on candidate stands on issues and the sometimes-subtle differences between candidates in the same political party running in a primary election. In the general election races in Georgia in 2018, social media by the Democratic and Republican candidates and their parties were much less nuanced and subtle in making their case to the general electorate on platforms and policy issues – and much more straightforward, more targeted social media messaging to the base voters of the respective campaigns. Campaigns were more reliant and effective on the use of social media to spread their message to potential undecided voters in the May 2018 primary election in Georgia rather than the general election in November 2018 in which social media was used to make more focused appeals to the campaign base to keep supporting the campaign through the general election. Instead of emphasizing the party platforms and policy stands, the bulk of social media posting in the general election in Georgia emphasized targeting messages on voter registration, announcing campaign events, and fundraising more likely to appeal not to undecided voters in Georgia but reliably Democratic or Republican base voters. Campaigns' social media would also be used to keep followers informed of rallies and TV time, as well as encouraging followers to spread the campaign's key messages.

Is social media a useful medium for the persuasion of undecided or non-base voters and if so, is it more effective as a medium of persuasion in the primary elections of a campaign or the Fall general elections? Is social media a force at the state level in gubernatorial campaigns for contributing and exacerbating political polarization as it has been claimed to be in elections at the national level, especially since 2016? Answering

these questions can help us understand the impact of social media at the state level where we can hopefully see patterns play themselves out with greater detail than at the national level. When it comes to theories on voter turnout answering this question can give us a better understanding of when the message matters the most in an election cycle and what type of message can break through to potential voters. Answering these questions will also give us a clear distinction on how campaigning has evolved in this new age where there is a heavy emphasis on social media, and anyone anywhere can say on a particular election. We can also get a better understanding of polarization as social media sites have been seen as a contributor to increased political polarization answering this question can tell us how campaigns respond to polarization within society itself but also in their respective parties.

What is at stake in this study is attempting to understand when in a campaign their use of social media is more focused on the persuasion of undecided voters (using appeals to party platforms and policy stands) and when social media is more effective in reaching out to the already decided, base-supporters of a campaign to ensure their engagement and turnout in elections. Much of this study is going to be about timing in the use of social media – is it more effective at the persuasion of potentially undecided voters in the primary stages of a campaign using platform and policy-based appeals? Is it more effective at base-appeals to the core loyalists and supporters of candidates in the general election stages of a campaign? However, the larger implications will be in the field of policy and campaigning. Answering these questions will give future campaigns a better understanding of what message at what time during a campaign can work best in reaching out to potential voters within the broad electorate or voters from their party. It will also

show campaigns on what strategies may or may not work at different stages of a campaign when it comes to social media. This will also give campaigns tools on how to respond to certain events that could happen on a campaign, for example, endorsements, negative press coverage, etc. These strategies will be beneficial to campaigns in an age of increased social media usage and where the news cycle changes minutes rather than hours or days.

In the literature review that follows, I will begin by briefly reviewing the literature on voter turnout in gubernatorial elections in the United States. Since I am studying the gubernatorial election in Georgia in 2018, I will establish an understanding of the factors that drive voter turnout in gubernatorial elections at the state level by seeing what the existing scholarly literature has discussed on this topic. Then, I will briefly review the literature on social media and its impact on voters in political campaigns and elections. I will note that much of the scholarly literature in this literature review draws from international studies from several different countries around the world. My interests in this study began with a curiosity about how scholars with an international perspective were addressing the issues of social media in campaigns around the world, but the focus of my research as it unfolded is closely grounded in the specifics of a state-level campaign for Governor. I hope this study will bridge the international scholarship on social media in campaigns with the detailed study of a state-level campaign in the United States, with state-level studies of social media in statewide and gubernatorial campaigns still an area not yet as carefully studied by scholars of social media in campaigning for elected office. In this thesis, I will start by looking into the scholarly literature on voter turnout and behavior as well as go into previous studies on the usage of social media by

campaigns. Then I will look into theories of voter behavior to give a background to my hypothesis on what messaging works the best and in what phase social media is best used. Then I will conduct a content analysis from the candidate's official Facebook and Twitter pages to answer the questions posed.

Literature Review

In this literature review, I will start by looking at theories on voter turnout in gubernatorial elections at the state level as a way to ground my hypotheses and thesis. Then I will move on to discussing the literature when it comes to the use of social media by campaigns starting with an international perspective than focusing on U.S. elections. The literature covers a wide range of election topics including national, presidential primaries, congressional, and mayoral elections. The literature also analyzes the relationship between traditional news media and social media.

Turnout in non-Presidential Election Years

Jewell examines the causes of turnout in gubernatorial primaries. He analyzes voter turnout, type of primary, party structure, and electoral history to answer his question (Jewell 1977) Jewell finds that across the U.S. there are large variations in turnout for contested primaries. He finds that open primaries, in which anyone can vote regardless of party affiliation, high general election turnout, contested primaries, and weak party structures correlate to higher primary turnout. He also finds the dominating party in a state tends to get higher voter turnout in that party's primary (Jewel 1977). This gives us a framework of what gives higher turnout but in an age of social media and the party switch, the transition over the mid to late 20th Century in which the Republican

Party became primarily the party of social conservatives and the Democratic Party became the party of liberalism, answers could vary especially with the competitiveness and national attention seen in Georgia during the 2018 elections.

Looking at turnout in House general elections, Gilliam Jr asks about what the most important factors in driving participation in House elections in non-presidential election years are (Gilliam Jr. 1985). He looks at “Get out the vote” tactics, such as encouraging supporters to canvass and phone bank to reach potentially undecided voters and voting early, as well as competitiveness, electoral history, and sociodemographic factors. He concludes that “Get Out the Vote” tactics and race competitiveness are the most important factors in determining voter turnout (Gilliam Jr. 1985). This shows us what is important in driving turnout in a competitive race and an outlook about what type of message campaigns should be pushing in the lead-up to an election. This thesis could very well challenge that finding based on new campaign tactics in the internet age.

Looking at Senate elections, Kenney examines voter turnout in Senate Primary elections (Kenney 1986). He examines elections as well as factors such as party system, type of primary, competitiveness, and electoral history. Kenney finds that on the state level that one competitive primary is more important and closer than two competitive primaries. He cites the former “Solid South” states which used to be heavily controlled by the Democratic primary. Kenney also says that turnout relies on many factors and that the closer a primary race is the larger turnout will be (Kenney 1986). From this, a framework emerges of what to expect from a primary in a state like Georgia. While Georgia’s politics, before 2018, was dominated by the Republican Party, 2018 was the biggest challenge to this norm of competitive primaries and how voters respond.

Wright asks what the driving forces of voter turnout in primary and general runoff elections are in 10 mostly southern states including Georgia. He analyzes each state's runoff election procedure, the candidates involved in a runoff, and the time between an election and its runoff. Wright finds that turnout generally declines in runoffs, but turnout is higher in congressional elections than in gubernatorial elections due to a perceived uncompetitiveness (Wright 1989). This shows that how competitive a race is will drive voters to vote in an off-election year or month. Something Wright does not factor is national influences which played a key role in 2018 and something I look to expand upon in my thesis.

Moving slightly ahead in time to the 1990s, Nagel and McNulty come along and try to see if the traditional notions of turnout change over time. A long-held theory in election studies is that higher turnout would benefit Democrats more than Republicans. The authors ask if this theory holds up when looking at Senate and gubernatorial elections in non-presidential election years. Using quantitative analysis, the authors find that after 1964 higher turnout does not benefit one particular party over another (Nagel, McNulty 1996, 785). They find that due to Democratic Party dominance in the south before the 1980s that elections require further analysis. This traditional notion of higher turnout benefiting Democrats would emerge in 2018 as Georgia Democrats believed that record turnout numbers would help them win the election and while the purpose of the thesis is not to test that theory, my research will either uphold this view or side with Nagel and McNulty.

Social Media and Campaigns

Starting in Europe, Vergani looks at two grassroots movements in Italy and seeks to understand how social media plays a part in organizing grassroots movements (Vergani 2014). He asks: Does digital media form new sets of relationships between grassroots campaigners and organizers? Vergani also asks: What is the relation between activists and higher-level political actors in the case study? Vergani uses a case study of two social movements in Italy. First the “Tell Your Milano” movement during the mayoral elections in 2009, and the “Purple People” movement calling for the resignation of then Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi. Vergani concludes that a “grassroots orchestra” when political authorities are heavily involved over a short period, like the mayoral campaign, can be successful (Vergani 2014). While I do not intend to study pure grassroots activism there is often a coming together of posts where candidates encourage grassroots activism. My thesis will see if this strategy is beneficial in a state-level election.

In trying to understand the relationship between media and social media, Kruikemeier, Gattermann, and Vliegthart look into the relationship between coverage time on traditional media versus social media in the 2012 Dutch elections (Kruikemeier, Gattermann, Vliegthart 2018). The authors ask: To what extent does candidate visibility in the traditional media influence visibility in social media and vice versa? The authors analyzed newspaper stories and compared that to engagement on Facebook and Twitter using models to track visibility and considering the individual characteristics of the candidate. The authors find that newspaper coverage of candidates leads in turn to

greater visibility on social media platforms but found a limited impact of social media leading to greater coverage. The authors also found that candidates with more extremist views are more likely to get attention in newspapers (and thus social media) because of their views (Kruikemeier, Gattermann, Vliegenthart 2018). This research pre-dates the era of Trump in which combating negative press was more common, so this thesis could challenge those findings.

Patrut analyzes the use of Facebook in a moderately sized town in Romania to see if the use of Facebook can help a candidate get elected (Patrut 2016). Patrut asks three research questions: Was Facebook used by the candidates to increase their number of possible electors? Was Facebook used as a tool for interactive outreach with users? What kind of material do candidates post on Facebook during the election campaign? To answer those questions, Patrut graphs the number of followers at the beginning and end of the campaign, plus user engagement and content posted. She compares this with results to see if it had an impact on results. Patrut finds that not only did the candidate that won had the most followers but the biggest increase in followers during the campaign. Patrut also finds that the winning candidate had the most interactions on the campaign and that the most uploaded content was photos or videos of the candidates (Patrut 2016). This is an interesting case study and at least shows a correlation between social media interaction and victory even if in a relatively small setting abroad. My thesis will expand upon this by taking this from a local level election to a state-wide campaign and see if these findings hold up.

Moving closer to the U.S., Hagar asks three main questions surrounding the use of social media in local elections in Canada. First, to what extent do candidates use social

media as a part of their campaigns? Second, what is the level of interaction between voters and candidates? (Hagar 2014). Lastly, does the use of social media contribute to a candidate's success? Hagar uses a content analysis of candidate's Twitter feeds, Facebook pages, and YouTube videos and rates interaction on a 1-5 scale across different measuring systems. These systems differentiate between generic posts, attack posts, and length between posts. Hagar finds that most interactions between candidates and voters happened on Facebook which was mostly likes and messages of support. Despite the positive correlation between Facebook posts, likes on said posts, and votes for candidates challenging the incumbent Hagar finds that the use of social media did not significantly impact electoral results (Hagar 2014). This article brings some interesting data on local elections and social media even if its data is from 2010 and my thesis will see if these findings are upheld in 2018 where social media is a more common campaign tool but there is less interaction.

Moving now to American presidential politics, Weeks, Kim, Hahn, Diehl, and Kwak look at the increasingly negative attitudes towards media coverage to see if there's a connection to social media followers in the 2016 U.S. presidential general election (Weeks, Kim, Hahn, Dahl 2019). The authors ask: is anxiety toward the candidate individuals oppose related to hostile media perceptions? The authors used YouGov survey data to ask potential voters in the 2016 presidential election about their media habits. From there the authors would use a five-point scale to model voters' thoughts on media perceptions and social media use. The authors find that anxiety toward the opposed candidate is not related to media perceptions, and that following a candidate is indirectly linked to perceptions of media hostility but no indirect relation through anxiety about the

opposed candidate. The authors in their analysis also find that following a candidate on Twitter is greatly related to enthusiasm for a candidate rather than anger at the opposed candidate unlike Facebook following which is about even (Weeks, Kim, Hahn, Dahl 2019). This article brings some good analysis on potential voters in a highly contested general election, although I'd be interested in knowing more about how candidates beat through perceptions of hostility and if these conclusions also apply in state elections.

In a qualitative study of the 2016 primaries, Penny looks at both the official Bernie Sanders campaign as well as unofficial supporter pages (Penny 2017). He asks what the relationship is between the official campaign in unofficial channels by interviewing people who worked on said pages. Penny finds that controlled interactivity on both the official campaign page, through Q and A's and linking followers with campaign events and activities, worked best. Penny finds that working with the unofficial People for Bernie account had positive results when they worked with their message (Penny 2017). A study like this can give us more insight into what could work for other campaigns but could a strategy as the Bernie campaigns work on a regional or state level in a non-presidential year is left open and where I hope to expand the research.

Looking, more broadly at what influences user engagement on social media, Mariani, Price, and Gumbs ask what motivates users to engage with political posts on social media (Mariani, Price, Gumbs 2019). The authors look at a variety of sociodemographic characteristics, like age, gender, race, etc., but they are most interested in trust, one's party affiliation, and if negative or attack tactics result in more engagement. The authors survey a wide variety of respondents on their views on social media habits. The authors find that trust plays a crucial role in engagement on social

media and that negativity does not affect user engagement one way or the other (Mariani, Price, Gumbs 2019). This study will be interesting to see if that conclusion holds up especially since the campaigns were filled with a lot of negativity from both sides, and to ask how a campaign would address perceived negativity on social media.

Moving further down to look at Congressional elections, Bode, Hanna, Yang, and Shah look to map networks of hashtag engagements from the 2010 Midterm elections (Bode, Hanna, Yang 2015). They find that simple left-right dichotomies are inadequate for discussing Twitter because of the use of certain tactics like “hashjacking” where one side “hijacks” an opponent’s hashtag by spamming criticism or complaints to make a candidate look bad (Bode, Hanna, Yang, Shah 2015). This is interesting as in a close, nationally watched election, such as in 2018, many people could spam comments and reactions when discussing a controversial aspect of a candidate.

Another study on congressional elections by Evans, Cordova, and Sipole looks to find a candidate’s “style” on Twitter by directly analyzing content posted as well as who is more likely to post (Evans, Cordova, Sipole 2014). They find that women candidates, as well as incumbents, are more likely to be active on Twitter compared to challengers, men, and third-party candidates. They also find that the type of content most often posted is campaign posts followed by posts about the issues and media clips (Evans, Cordova, Sipole 2014). This study also gives a good breakdown of the types of tweets that are used in my methodology. This thesis will see how this study’s findings apply to a state-level election.

Lastly, the literature takes a brief look at how incumbents use social media while in office. Straus, Glassman, Shogan, and Navarro ask why a member of Congress might

use Twitter as a tool for communication with constituents using models based on the member's party affiliation and congressional district demographics. The authors find that the more ideological members of both parties are more likely to use Twitter and members from urban areas tend to use Twitter more often than rural areas (Straus, Glassman, Shogan, Navarro 2013). This study gives a background on which politicians are more likely to use social media and see it as an effective tool. My thesis will try to apply these findings to the elections in Georgia.

Mergel takes a different approach conducting interviews with congressional staff to ask why a member might use Twitter (Mergel 2012). She finds that Twitter is mostly used as a method to inform constituents of policy and media appearances and that there's little discussion between the members of congress and the constituent (Mergel 2012). I don't expect this thesis to challenge this finding even as some candidates like Trump have shared posts from seemingly grassroots supporters, but this tactic has not caught on with other politicians.

The literature itself is partially dated as it takes a while for newer research to be published but there are still interesting findings that can be expanded upon. Ideas like social media driven by traditional media (Weeks, Kim, Hahn, Diehl, Kwak 2019), relations between the campaign with outside actors (Penny 2017), and style on Twitter (Evans, Cordova, Sipole 2014) will be expanded upon in my thesis. While a lot has been written about presidential election cycles and congressional elections there is very little on state elections after 2016. Since 2016, social media is viewed as an effective campaign tool in keeping supporters engaged and controlling the media cycle; especially in a closely contested race like the 2018 Georgia gubernatorial election. These ideas will be

expanded on in my thesis and will bring some new findings to the current literature on social media and elections.

Theory

From the literature, we get a wide variety of sources that show social media is an effective tool for campaigns, but now comes the question of how this can be applied to the level of state elections in a governor's election. To reiterate I ask: In the 2018 election in Georgia, how did the campaigns use social media sites to spread their message, and in which stage of the 2018 Georgia gubernatorial election, the primary elections, and primary runoffs in May and July or the general elections in November, was the use of social media most effective by Georgia's Democratic and Republican campaigns? My thesis, which I will build upon in this theory section, is that the use of social media sites was most effective in the primary stage of the 2018 campaign in Georgia when more voters are undecided about their preference of a particular candidate. Campaigns were more reliant and effective on the use of social media in Georgia in 2018 in May 2018's primaries and the July 2018 primary runoffs to spread their policy/platform-focused message to potential voters in the primary election rather than the general election in November in which social media was used to appeal to the campaign base-voters to keep the strongest supporters of the campaign to keep supporting the campaign through the general election.

To start there must be a discussion of what influences the voters to turn out for elections in non-presidential election years. While social media can be used as a helpful tool if turnout is minimal then there are very few voters to reach out to. Ultimately there

must be turnout or significant interest in an election for social media to play a significant role. While there are examples of social media playing a role in local elections (Patrut 2016), the examples are limited because of the lack of interest, particularly in medium-sized or small towns. There is also evidence that shows that in congressional elections, which tend to be in areas smaller than states and have a wide range of populations, the use of social media can be effective (Evans, Cordova, Sipole 2014). Even in primaries and runoffs, there is evidence of less interest than in general elections. Even while social media helps one get elected, it is nothing without the presence of voter interest in a given election.

Historically gubernatorial elections in non-presidential election years have been viewed as low-interest races, especially in states like Georgia where, for the most part, one party has dominated state politics historically, first in the Democratic era of the so-called Solid South of much of the 20th century and then, since the 1990s, with the largely one-party Republican dominance in the South. The literature in previous years reflects this view and argues that party primaries matter more, and thus get a higher turnout than the gubernatorial election itself (Jewell 1977). Jewell explains that there is variation in what low turnout is from state to state depending on state election laws (Jewell 1977, 236). While states and municipalities have moved elections to presidential years, Georgia's gubernatorial elections are still held in midterm years. To define whether turnout is higher or lower I will use a similar technique to Jewell by comparing and contrasting turnout numbers in the 2018 Georgia gubernatorial elections to turnout numbers in previous gubernatorial elections.

Ultimately whether or not social media is effective in elections depends on whether or not voter interest is high in a particular election because of the competitiveness of a race. While a race might generate interest because of a particular candidate if an area historically votes for one party it is unlikely that the interest would impact the election outcome. While Georgia has been a state that leans Republican in recent years there is a belief that the state could be a potential swing state. With the incumbent governor, Nathan Deal, completing his 2nd term-limited term, this led to competitive primaries in both parties as Republicans would want to hold the governorship, and Democrats without an incumbent would have their best chance to flip the state. This led to higher interest than in previous gubernatorial elections especially with the nomination of Stacey Abrams, who had the opportunity to become the first African American woman elected governor of any state. This and the allegations of voter suppression leveled against the Georgia Republican Party and its nominee Brian Kemp led to increased national attention and interest. This all means that social media could be used as an effective tool by campaigns to focus on their message and try to drive away noise made by outside actors. By effective, I want to know if social media can engage potential voters to consider voting for a candidate.

This leads me to my hypotheses:

H1: If interest in the election is high then social media will be an effective tool for campaigns in getting voters to turnout.

H2: The most effective message will be about a candidate's platform during the primary elections.

Methodology

To answer the research question and test my hypotheses this thesis used an analysis of social media posts from the 2018 and 2014 elections in Georgia. I choose the 2014 and 2018 Georgia gubernatorial elections are because it is relatively recent enough that findings from this research will have consequences for how future campaigns use social media. Another reason is that information from 2014 and 2018 is readily accessible and social media posts from 2014 and 2018 are easier to find than posts from 2010 or earlier.

I looked at individual posts, on Twitter and Facebook the two most popular social media sites. For the 2018 election, I analyzed posts by the Brian Kemp and Stacey Abrams official pages as well as from primary challengers Stacey Evans, in the Democratic Primary, and Casey Cagle, in the Republican primary, official candidate Facebook and Twitter pages to get a sense of competition in the primary elections. I analyzed all posts, from a week before the May 22, 2018 primary, the July 24, 2018, primary runoff, the week after the July 24, 2018 runoff to get a feel for the transition to the general election, and a week before the November 6, 2018, general election. This gives me a sense of how the campaigns transitioned between stages of the election and will show how or if the key message of the campaign changed over time.

To answer the questions about how much campaigning has changed over time and the effects of the 2016 elections I have also done a content analysis of posts from the previous Georgia elections in 2014. While not as close as the election in 2018 it was still competitive and looks at an election right before the changes the 2016 elections brought. I have done a similar analysis for this race analyzing Facebook posts and Tweets from the

incumbent governor Nathan Deal, his general election opponent Jason Carter, and mayor of Dalton, David Pennington who challenged Deal in the primary election. This analysis looks at posts a week before the May 20, 2014, primary, a week after the May 20, 2014, primary to get a feel for the transition to the general campaign, and a week before the November 4, 2014, general election.

For the analysis, I have divided the content into nine different categories. Attack or Response (column I), where a candidate criticizes another candidate or responds to a critique, Get Out the Vote (GOTV) or Volunteer (column II), where a candidate encourages followers to volunteer or encourage voting, Platform or Credibility (column III), where a candidate emphasizes previous experience or what they want to do as governor, Primary (column IV) or general election focused posts (column V), Endorsements (column VI) where a candidate shows off endorsements from state or outside figures, Party Unity (column VII) where a candidate encourages unity to win the election, Campaigning or TV time (column VIII) where a candidate shows a clip of a media appearance, or pictures or video from a campaign stop, Announcements (column IX) where a candidate announces an upcoming rally or media appearance, and total posts over the timeframe (column X). This is similar to the setup used by Evans, Cordova, and Sipole for analyzing tweets from congressional candidates (Evans, Cordova, Sipole 2014).

These data sources are considered primary sources as they come from the candidate themselves or a high-ranking campaign member with the unit of analysis being on the individual. This tries to answer my second hypothesis about the content of posts. The independent variable is the interest in the election and the dependent variable is the

use of social media. While social media analysis is a dependable source of data one problem is that it can be liked and shared by anyone anywhere or deleted in instances of controversy. As seen in instances like 2016 foreign actors can pose as domestic groups to spread misinformation about an election. For this study, I stuck to posts that remain on Facebook or Twitter. I also stuck to official campaign pages and as control, I also looked at voter turnout numbers compared to previous gubernatorial elections and primaries to gauge whether interest translated to turnout or if increased interest was a product of national news media.

Analysis

The data I have collected is from the candidate's official Facebook and Twitter pages. Throughout the analysis I found the most common type of post to be of the candidate on the campaign trail and posts encouraging supporters to get out the vote (GOTV) and volunteer for the campaign. This was true across the different platforms with campaigns frequenting Twitter more than Facebook. This could be due to Twitter's increased popularity among campaigns in the wake of Donald Trump's successful run for President in 2016, and because of the character limit which means campaigns have to send more tweets to get across their message compared to Facebook which does not have a character limit.

Starting with the May 2014 primary election (Table 7), both primaries were uncompetitive. In the Democratic Primary, Jason Carter ran unopposed which reflects his social media activity which was relatively quiet aside from the occasional post calling out Governor Deal's perceived corruption or supporting other Democratic candidates.

Meanwhile in the Republican primary, Governor Deal did face opposition from the then-mayor of Dalton, David Pennington. On Pennington's Twitter account he posted more frequently than Governor Deal or Carter, whether it be criticizing Governor Deal's record, or talking about his platform, or encouraging supporters to go vote. In the end Governor Deal, being a popular incumbent, was able to fend off the challenge easily. In his few posts, he encouraged supporters to vote and campaigned with other Republicans running in other primary elections.

Continuing into the 2014 general election campaign, the Carter campaign believed they could win but, in the end, Governor Deal managed to win re-election by around eight points. As for the campaigns on social media (Tables 8-9), most posts by campaign posts from the road, whether it be meeting with citizens or holding rallies with other candidates and elected officials. The Carter campaign still encouraged supporters to volunteer and get out the vote, but this push wasn't enough to win the election or force a runoff. Meanwhile Governor Deal was able to use campaign posts and use endorsements from newspapers and other state elected officials to help them to victory. Overall, despite the lack of competitiveness in the primaries and general election, the 2014 election cycle shows that campaigns were likely to post from the campaign trail and encourage supporters to get out the vote, rather than talk about their platform or go on the attack.

Moving ahead to the May 2018 primaries (Tables 1-2), the Democratic primary was less competitive than the Republican primary, as Stacey Abrams was the favorite to win the nomination. As such, her campaign posted less about her primary and instead about her campaign platform, endorsements from groups from Georgia, and supporting other Democrats in their primaries. Abrams' opponent Stacey Evans faced an uphill

battle and thus posted mostly about getting out the vote opportunities for her followers, but she still came up short against Abrams who easily won the nomination. The Republican primary had at least five competitive candidates, but the two favorites were Lieutenant Governor Casey Cagle and Secretary of State Brian Kemp. From the beginning, Kemp went on offense encouraging supporters to volunteer for the campaign and posting from the campaign trail. Meanwhile, Cagle ran a more nuanced campaign posting about his record as Lieutenant Governor. In the end, as no one got 50% of the vote the election went to a runoff.

In the July 2018 primary runoff (Tables 3-4), both campaigns kept their strategies from the primary, Cagle posted about his record and credibility as Lieutenant Governor and Kemp posted from the campaign trail and praised his campaign volunteers. In the end, what would make the difference was outside actors as President Trump endorsed Brian Kemp via a tweet (Example 4) and held a rally in support of Kemp. This would be the difference in the runoff election, as the Kemp team kept up the Get Out the Vote messages while showing off the endorsement and posted photos and videos from the rally. The Cagle team did their best to respond, changing strategies by encouraging Get Out the Vote volunteering and attacking perceived corruption during Kemp's tenure as Secretary of State. However, in a Republican primary dominated by Trump-style populism, the Cagle team could not recover, and Kemp won the runoff by a significant margin.

Immediate at the start of the 2018 general campaign (Table 5), the Kemp campaign switched gears by attacking Stacey Abrams as a radical whose ideas were unpopular with Georgians while still thanking his volunteers and encouraging them to do

more to win the general election. During this time, the Abrams campaign focused on dispelling those notions and shifted to posting more about her platform and promises. As the November 2018 election progressed into its final week (Table 6), the campaigns continued to push supporters to volunteer, vote early, and encourage others to vote. The Abrams campaign focused heavily on this and not as much on posts from the campaign trail, unlike the Kemp campaign (example 1). The Kemp campaigned also regularly attacked Abrams' record and support of positions that were called out as socialistic and unpopular, and the Abrams campaign responded by detailing her actual policy positions. In the end, Brian Kemp won by 55,000 votes and narrowly avoided a general election runoff which would have been held in December 2018 had it been necessary, something that was needed for the state Secretary of State's November 2018 race.

Most of the candidates posted mainly photos or videos from the campaign trail or encouraging supporters to volunteer and get out the vote. This is true between 2014 and 2018 across the primaries, primary runoffs, and general elections. While coming into this I thought that platform messages in the primary would be the most frequent type of post and the most important to victory. However, when looking at the May 2018 Republican primary and runoff the campaign of Casey Cagle used this strategy. While they did come in first in the primary, they still went to a runoff in which they were soundly defeated by the Brian Kemp campaign. Looking at the November 2018 general election, when Stacey Abrams campaign tried to respond to the attacks by focusing more on her platform (example 2), she still ended up losing the general election. This suggests that attacks, whether coming from social media or more traditional campaign mediums, tend to unnerve rival campaigns and cause a change in message. Does this mean that platform-

driven campaigns are the least successful type of campaign to run on a statewide election? While my hypothesis (H2) was incorrect in this case, I think more research can be done to see whether or not a platform-driven social media campaign works in other statewide elections. What is clear is that the strategies of campaigns that made it to the November general elections revolved around getting out the vote.

Looking at this from the view of the reach of Tweets (Table 11), not only are the numbers from 2018 a lot higher than in 2014. We see that Democratic candidates generally get more likes and retweets than Republicans do and that the most amount of likes and retweets come during the final week of the campaign. Does this mean that the general stage is the most important stage of the campaign for social media? Possibly but looking at likes and retweets is only one measure of analysis. The tweets that tend to get the most liked and retweeted tend to have an outside influence. Whether it be a prominent endorsement, people from outside of Georgia retweeting election day information, or a controversial post that draws in clicks and responses. For example, the most-liked tweet from Brian Kemp's 2018 general election campaign is a tweet criticizing Stacey Abrams as a radical for not condemning the support of alleged Black Panther radicals (example 3). While the post did garner over 4000 likes it also got significant criticism in the replies and quote tweets from Stacey Abrams supporters. The data shows that posts tend to get the most likes and retweets in the general cycle of the election. This suggests that my hypothesis (H1) is incorrect due to the candidate with less engagement winning, but there are ways to explain the data.

When looking at the number of voters in Georgia (Table 10) it paints an interesting picture. While turnout in primaries and runoffs remains fairly consistent over

time there was a major jump in the number of voters in the 2018 general election compared to previous years which saw minor increases between election years. This shows an increase in voters voting and registering to vote. While the campaigns would not have access to this data until after the election, the data suggests that an electoral strategy of encouraging people to vote and register to vote would be most advantageous in an election with high interest. What this means is that a strategy of convincing first-time voters to vote and try to win over moderates and independents, but rather than platform posts the most frequent types of posts are campaign and Get Out the Vote. What this suggests is that while it matters in the primary stage to win over the base of the party; it also matters to keep that base engaged during the general election stage.

The jump in voters also correlates with the number of posts across all stages between 2014 and 2018. This could be explained by the fact that the 2014 general election was relatively uncompetitive due to the incumbent's advantage which suggests that an incumbent officeholder is more likely to win an election than a non-incumbent or challenger. This plus an open Senate seat, caused by the retirement of Saxby Chambliss, meant that the parties were more focused on trying to win the Senate seat and less on the governorship, which saw incumbent advantage play out in Governor Deal's favor. Whereas in 2018, Governor Deal was forced to retire after two terms and there was no Senate or Presidential election, meaning the parties could focus their campaign efforts solely on the gubernatorial election. More research is needed in more statewide elections and across traditional battleground states (Michigan, Ohio, Pennsylvania) to see whether this holds up.

Another possible factor could be the campaign style of then-President Donald Trump. In 2016, President Trump was able to take advantage of the growing platform of Twitter to communicate to supporters more directly what was on his mind and in effect dominate discussions in the media cycle. He used this to his advantage and won the 2016 presidential election. Meanwhile, Republican candidates, including Brian Kemp, picked up Trump's style positioning himself as a no-nonsense conservative not afraid to call out perceived media bias and corrupt tactics. This put him in a better position than Cagle who positioned himself as a more ideological conservative in the style of Governor Deal. Ultimately, President Trump endorsed Kemp in the primary runoff leading to his resounding primary runoff victory. This also elicited a response from Democrats as they picked up on Twitter to engage with their base, and across all stages received more likes and retweets. Ultimately President Trump and Kemp are similar as they both close general elections. While both were successful in winning their elections, I wonder if both candidates had softened their approaches and taken a more pragmatic or soft-spoken route if they could've increased their margins of victory. President Trump kept his strategy for his 2020 re-election campaign, in the wake of the Coronavirus pandemic, and was defeated by former Vice President Joe Biden. Governor Kemp could very well be forced into different campaign tactics as he faces Republican primary challengers in 2022, though the signing of the controversial election reform bill in March 2021 is an early indication of a more confrontational campaign path for the Kemp campaign reminiscent of 2018.

While it is difficult to tell whether or not a social media post is enough to win an election what this data suggests is that social media is a valuable tool in winning

elections. Whether it be courting the base, retweeting endorsements from prominent figures, or encouraging people to vote and tell others social media is now a significant campaign tool. While a social media post might not be one's deciding factor in deciding whom to vote for, it will get the base to volunteer which could affect one's decision on whom to vote. That and external influences from national politics seemed to be the driving factor in campaigns' social media strategies. More research will be needed to see whether this holds up in other battleground states. What is clear from the data is that in a perceived competitive election, gubernatorial campaigns will rely on driving out their base to volunteer and vote.

Conclusion

This thesis has presented a context analysis of Facebook and Twitter posts in the 2014 and 2018 Georgia gubernatorial elections across the election cycle. What this shows is that despite the increase in overall competitiveness and changes in the national political scene the best strategy was to post Get Out the Vote information or encouraging supporters to volunteer for the campaign. The data also shows is that the most frequent time for posting is in the days before the general election. While one tweet or post might not be the difference in deciding an election outcome this does not mean social media is worthless to campaigns.

What the data shows us that a social media strategy of encouraging base supporters to support a campaign is better than trying to win over undecided voters. Sites like Facebook and Twitter are viewed as battlegrounds of the already polarized, so trying to appeal to undecided voters in a general election through these sites would not be a

good strategy. Instead, energy should be placed in encouraging party-base supporters to act, as it is their donations and volunteering that make a bigger impact in an election. This data also suggests that the old view of higher turnout benefitting Democrats is not exactly true. This also adds much-needed research in the field of state-level elections which are often under-looked and have far more implications for national politics and day-to-day life than Presidential and Congressional elections.

This data, however, is limited in that it comes from one competitive state, in which the winning party remained the same. A similar study in a more traditional battleground state (like Michigan, Pennsylvania, or Wisconsin) would benefit to see if the results are similar. This data can also be updated as Georgia experienced two tightly contested Senate elections in 2020 that resulted in two general election runoffs, or for 2022 as Governor Kemp faces an uphill re-election battle from within his party and a potential rematch with Stacey Abrams. If I had more time for this study, I might want to work with the U.S. Library of Congress to see if there were any deleted posts I could include in my data. Another angle to pursue further research would be to interview individuals from the campaign who worked on social media. This could give us more direct information about national influence, the influence of money, or what worked and did not. As national politics changes in the wake of the Trump presidency, there will be plenty of discussion on the role of social media in politics and how it affects campaigns from the highest levels of government to small towns and counties. Whatever comes next there will be plenty to discuss and more questions to be asked as social media becomes the new normal for campaigns in national, state, and local politics.

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Appendix

Table 1: 2018 Primary Twitter Analysis

	<i>I</i>	<i>II</i>	<i>III</i>	<i>IV</i>	<i>V</i>	<i>VI</i>	<i>VII</i>	<i>VIII</i>	<i>IX</i>	<i>X</i>
<i>Abrams</i>	1	15	18	18	27	7	0	2	0	45
<i>Cagle</i>	2	4	8	25	8	5	0	11	5	33
<i>Evans</i>	0	40	12	55	9	0	0	10	2	64
<i>Kemp</i>	1	13`	13	30	13	1	0	15	0	43

I: Attack

II: GOTV

III: Platform

IV: Primary

V: General

VI: Endorsements

VII: Party Unity

VIII: Campaigning

IX: Announcements

X: Total Posts

Table 2: 2018 Primary Facebook

	<i>I</i>	<i>II</i>	<i>III</i>	<i>IV</i>	<i>V</i>	<i>VI</i>	<i>VII</i>	<i>VIII</i>	<i>IX</i>	<i>X</i>
<i>Abrams</i>	1	6	3	21	1	9	0	0	3	22
<i>Cagle</i>	0	2	4	3	3	0	0	0	0	6
<i>Evans</i>	0	34	5	54	6	2	0	18	1	60
<i>Kemp</i>	0	8	1	20	1	0	0	11	1	21

Table 3: 2018 Runoff Twitter

	<i>I</i>	<i>II</i>	<i>III</i>	<i>IV</i>	<i>V</i>	<i>VI</i>	<i>VII</i>	<i>VIII</i>	<i>IX</i>	<i>X</i>
<i>Abrams</i>	0	7	4	0	18	1	2	4	0	18
<i>Cagle</i>	8	18	22	61	20	3	1	26	3	81
<i>Kemp</i>	4	41	26	121	30	24	0	41	14	151

Table 4: 2018 Runoff Facebook

	<i>I</i>	<i>II</i>	<i>III</i>	<i>IV</i>	<i>V</i>	<i>VI</i>	<i>VII</i>	<i>VIII</i>	<i>IX</i>	<i>X</i>
<i>Abrams</i>	0	2	4	0	7	0	0	1	0	7
<i>Cagle</i>	0	0	3	2	3	0	0	2	0	5
<i>Kemp</i>	0	6	0	18	0	3	0	9	0	18

Table 5: 2018 Post-Runoff

	<i>I</i>	<i>II</i>	<i>III</i>	<i>V</i>	<i>VI</i>	<i>VII</i>	<i>VIII</i>	<i>IX</i>	<i>X</i>
<i>Abrams F</i>	1	3	5	12	0	0	2	1	12
<i>Abrams T</i>	1	2	15	18	0	0	0	1	18
<i>Kemp F</i>	1	2	0	4	0	0	1	0	4
<i>Kemp T</i>	8	26	6	56	4	11	6	0	56

Table 6: 2018 General

	<i>I</i>	<i>II</i>	<i>III</i>	<i>V</i>	<i>VI</i>	<i>VII</i>	<i>VIII</i>	<i>IX</i>	<i>X</i>
<i>Abrams F</i>	0	28	6	45	0	0	11	0	45
<i>Abrams T</i>	1	60	19	98	1	1	15	1	98
<i>Kemp F</i>	6	17	1	46	2	0	18	2	46
<i>Kemp T</i>	13	78	10	206	6	0	93	6	206

Table 7: 2014 Primary

	<i>I</i>	<i>II</i>	<i>III</i>	<i>IV</i>	<i>V</i>	<i>VI</i>	<i>VII</i>	<i>VIII</i>	<i>IX</i>	<i>X</i>
<i>Carter F</i>	1	2	1	4	3	1	0	1	1	7
<i>Carter T</i>	0	1	1	2	2	1	0	1	0	4
<i>Deal F</i>	0	3	1	7	0	1	0	1	1	7
<i>Deal T</i>	0	3	0	5	0	0	0	2	0	5
<i>Pennington T</i>	8	20	36	73	1	0	0	10	0	74

Table 8: 2014 Post-Primary

	<i>I</i>	<i>II</i>	<i>III</i>	<i>V</i>	<i>VI</i>	<i>VII</i>	<i>VIII</i>	<i>IX</i>	<i>X</i>
<i>Carter F</i>	1	0	0	4	0	0	3	0	4
<i>Carter T</i>	1	0	0	6	0	0	3	2	6
<i>Deal F</i>	0	1	1	4	0	0	2	0	4
<i>Deal T</i>	0	1	1	2	0	0	0	0	2

Table 9: 2014 General

	<i>I</i>	<i>II</i>	<i>III</i>	<i>V</i>	<i>VI</i>	<i>VII</i>	<i>VIII</i>	<i>IX</i>	<i>X</i>
<i>Carter F</i>	0	7	1	16	0	0	7	1	16
<i>Carter T</i>	3	28	1	69	1	0	36	0	69
<i>Deal F</i>	1	8	2	19	4	0	3	1	19
<i>Deal T</i>	0	3	3	43	6	0	31	0	43

Table 10: Total Votes in Georgia Gubernatorial Elections (Georgia Secretary of State 2020)

	Primaries	Runoffs	General	Percent Turnout in General
2018	1,162,530	588,307 (1)	3,939,328	61.44%
2014	900,461	N/A	2,550,216	50.03%
2010	1,075,966	579,551 (1)	2,576,161	N/A
2006	901,371	N/A	2,122,185	N/A
2002	946,355	N/A	2,025,861	N/A
1998	905,383	267,386 (1)	1,792,808	N/A

Table 11: Most Liked and Retweeted Posts in Both Elections

	<i>Number of Likes</i>	<i>Number of Retweets</i>	<i>Type of Post</i>
<i>2014 Primary</i>	<i>42</i>	<i>50</i>	<i>Campaign</i>
<i>2014 General</i>	<i>138</i>	<i>106</i>	<i>Campaign</i>
<i>2018 Primary</i>	<i>5,600</i>	<i>2,100</i>	<i>Get Out the Vote</i>
<i>2018 Runoff</i>	<i>882</i>	<i>320</i>	<i>Campaign</i>
<i>2018 General</i>	<i>66,600</i>	<i>27,700</i>	<i>Get Out the Vote</i>

Example 1: A typical Campaign tweet from the Kemp campaign



Example 2: What a typical platform tweet looks like from the Abrams campaign



Stacey Abrams ✓ @s... · Nov 4, 2018 ...

As Dem Leader, I led the fight for Medicaid expansion and opposed efforts to privatize public schools. When HOPE was threatened, I helped save it—then worked with Gov. Deal to pass criminal justice reform. I am ready to lead Georgia forward as [#GAGov](#).



Meet Stacey | Stacey Abrams for Governor
staceyabrams.com

78 738 1.5K

The image is a screenshot of a tweet from Stacey Abrams, a verified account, dated November 4, 2018. The tweet text describes her political achievements and her readiness to lead Georgia as Governor. Below the text is a video thumbnail showing Stacey Abrams sitting at a desk, smiling, with a sign that says 'STACEY ABRAMS GOVERNOR'. The video title is 'Meet Stacey | Stacey Abrams for Governor' and it includes a link to 'staceyabrams.com'. At the bottom of the tweet, there are icons for replies (78), retweets (738), likes (1.5K), and a share icon.

Example 3: An attack tweet from the Kemp campaign accusing Abrams of having ties to militant organizations

Brian Kemp ✓ @Brian... · Nov 4, 2018 ...

How radical is my opponent? Look at who is backing her. The New Black Panther Party is "a racist...antisemitic organization whose leaders have encouraged violence against whites, Jews, & law enforcement" RT if you agree that Abrams & the Black Panthers are **TOO EXTREME** for GA!

2.1K 5.5K 4.7K

Example 4: President Trump's Twitter endorsement of Brian Kemp which propelled him to victory in the 2018 Republican Primary Runoff



Donald J. Trump 

@realDonaldTrump

Follow



Brian Kemp is running for Governor of the great state of Georgia. The Primary is on Tuesday. Brian is tough on crime, strong on the border and illegal immigration. He loves our Military and our Vets and protects our Second Amendment. I give him my full and total endorsement.

3:25 PM - 18 Jul 2018