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The Impact of Social Media and Public Behavior on the Result of the U.S. Presidential Elections

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Abstract: Since COVID-19, more and more people helplessly rely on the virtual world. Today, nearly 94 percent of Americans have access to the internet, which means that there are 331.1 million internet users nationwide. In the recent society, hints and encouragement about voting are inevitably put on someone who is on social media. The information they received is extremely possible to influence their decision making on the political level. In the previous two elections in 2016 and 2020, social media seemed to play a vital role during the process. This paper investigates the inherent relationship between the result of the elections and public behaviors on social media through data comparison and case study, and also tries to figure out whether they affect each other directly or not as well. Due to the uncertainty and the ambiguousness, other factors, such as Public emotion. The occurrence of images and videos, Social media algorithms, Fact checking organizations, that may exist will also be taken into account to ensure the all-sided consideration. Overall, after many sets of data comparison shows that the social media does not directly affect the result of the presidential election, however, the outcome is the combination of each factors that were mentioned above. All in all, this study offers the voters several other aspects they have to think about when they are making such political election decisions, which force them to think deeper and wider.

Keywords: Social media, Presidential election in USA, influencing factors.

1. Introduction

With the dramatically increasing number of participants in the presidential elections, lots of scholars realize the strong power of social media, especially in 2018, when the young voters reach another peak. Based on the presidential election of America in 2016 and 2020, the investigation tries to explore the extensive effect that social media has on the U.S. presidential election. Otherwise, the causal relationship between the social media and the election result is not directly mutually induced, but numerous other factors will also be able to alter the public's minds. Therefore, apart from the data comparison, other volatile elements will be taken into account as well. Most of the existing reports about this topic merged the contents within different aspects together, but in this study, only contents related to social media will be embodied. Afterwards, when facing a mass of information that is pushed to people by the algorithms, they can know that those are already heavily filtered, and the decision they made is controlled by an invisible hand from time to time. So in this complicated 21st century, people can think deeply and act more correctly than ever before on the level of political events, such as the presidential election.

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2. Data Analysis

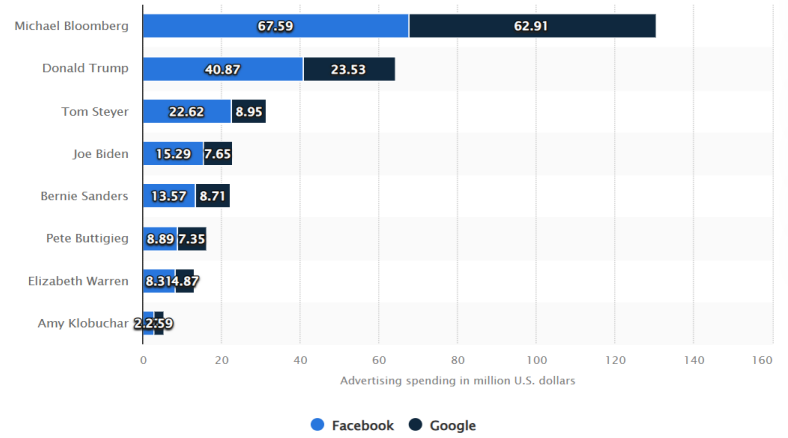

Figure 1: Political advertising spending on Facebook and Google of selected presidential candidates in the United States (2020.1-2020.5/million U.S. dollars) [1].

As shown in Figure 1, in 2020 Joe Biden won 81 million votes, which was 7 million more than Trump. With this amount of preponderance, Joe Biden became the 46th U.S. president. However, as is seen in Figure 1, Biden just ranks in the fourth place, which is not a very prevailing position. There is a huge gap with Michael Bloomberg. Nonetheless Biden also got it.

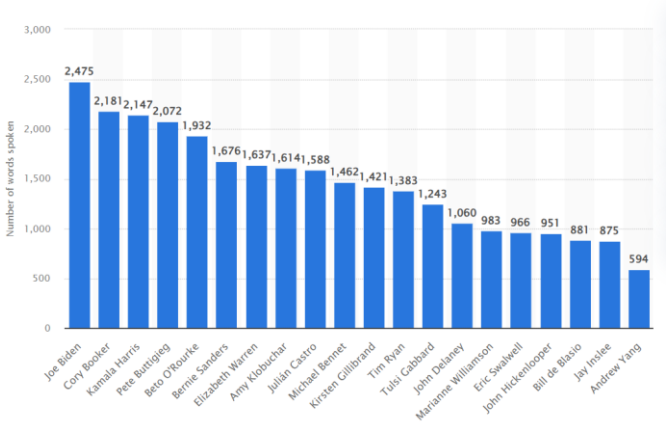

Figure 2: The Number of words spoken by Democratic Party candidates on the first televised debate of the 2020 election campaign in the United States on June 26 and 27, 2019 [2].

The purpose of the televised debate is to give the grassroots group bigger voice and more opportunities for them to know each candidate well and all-sided through a variety of platforms. Also it provides them with a medium to have discussion about current issues. And every time the formal presidential election is approaching, many grassroots organizers within different types such as community, electoral and labor usually undertake various exercise, they register people to vote and put them into polls [3]. So with the close connection between the government and the warm-hearted volunteers, the grassroots group can also play a significant role in the elections.

At the same time, most of the information source of the grassroots is from television. So the impression of each candidate they have from the TV may affect their choices. Figure 2 shows the words spoken by the Democratic Party candidates during the first televised debate, and in this rank, Biden is in the most leading position. In other words, the primary impression given to the public may affect their attitudes toward candidate's ability or even their choice positively.

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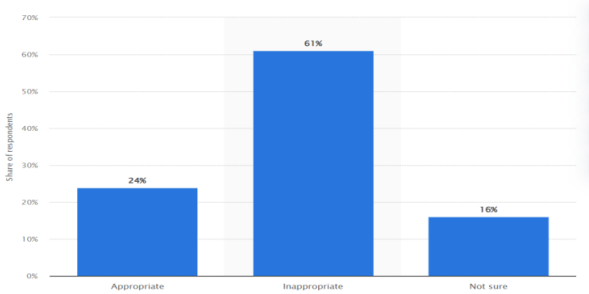

Figure 3: The share of adults in the United States considering Donald Trump's use of Twitter as president appropriate or inappropriate as of August 2018 [4].

Obviously, Figure 3 shows public's attitude toward Trump's use of Twitter, but in a further degree, that also contain people's emotions and bearing toward the social media.

In 2018, Twitter became the main medium that Trump used to communicate and transfer information with the general public and the government. In that year, he sent more than 3400 tweets for an average of 10 tweets per day.

In his tweets he criticized lots of leaders of other countries, and excoriated their policies as well. As a result of Trump's radical words, the lawmakers, global alliances and stock markets of U.S. were affected. And some of the explosive and erratic tweets such as "I too have a Nuclear Button", "We have defeated ISIS in Syria", "Sanctions are coming" etc, really made a wave in the U.S. [5].

Overall, Trump's misconduct enraged the public, so there were 61% of people who thought his diction not proper enough. That can one of the reason that he failed to be chosen in that session.

3. Other Factors

3.1. Public Emotion

Figure 4 depicts the distribution of emotions of both Trump and Biden's supporters. Trump's supporters' tweets show a lot of Joy, Trust and Anticipation for Trump, while accompanied by lots of Fear with Biden.

By comparison, Biden's supporters' tweets show a huge amount of genuine Trust and Anticipation with Biden, but also lots Anger and Disgust toward Trump. That really forms a big contrast between two different groups. Therefore, the most important thing is that the polarization between two candidates' supporters might affect public inclination, as if they saw those contents online without confirmation by themselves. The public can easily flow to one side easily, just because of those memorable words or empathetic emotions.

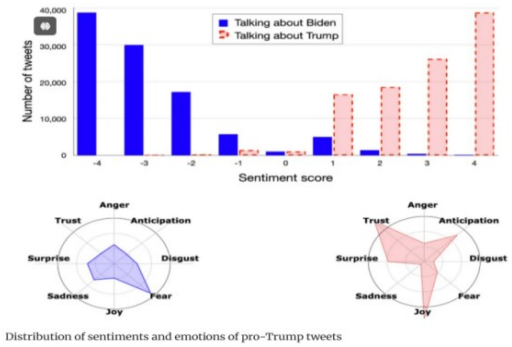

Figure 4: Distribution of sentiments and emotions of both pro-Biden and pro-Trump tweets in 2020 [6].

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3.2. Fact Checking Organizations

There is an organization called FactCheck, whose work covers a wide range of things, such as checking the authenticity of the contents delivered by those presidential candidates in the televised debate, etc.

For example, in the Harris-Trump debate, Trump mentioned that some local pets were eaten by the immigrants in Springfield; however, the local police just said there was no creditable report.

And Harris referred that Trump had left the U.S. with the worst unemployment since the Great Depression, but when Biden took the place in 2021, the unemployment rate was around 6.4% lower than ever before after 1930s [7].

So if these rumors are debunked, the reliability of presidential candidates will definitely go down, and these organizations try to reveal the facts behind the shiny story, to let every citizen have the right to know the tricks and means those presidential candidates used to change their minds and make a more precise decision. And there are still other websites doing the identical things, which are called the PolitiFact.

3.3. The Occurrence of Images or Videos

Some of the visual communication research has shown that the images of the political candidates are able to convey their emotions, actions realism and credibility [8]. Normally, in a face-to-face situation, people can see the gestures and facial expressions of the interlocutor, that bring them a certain extent of engagement, so they have the empathy more easily.



Figure 5: Former president Donald Trump raising his fist to the crowd at his campaign rally in Butler, Pennsylvania, on Saturday [9].

Figure 5 was taken by Evan Vucci on July 13th 2024 (American time). The former U.S. president Donald Trump took the stage in Butler, Pennsylvania, greeted with his supporters and then started his speech. And before long, he unfortunately experienced an assassination attempt, and he said, “Over my left shoulder. I heard some pops, and I knew right away it was gunfire.” Until Saturday in the week of things happening, the picture with the full flag taken by Evan Vucci has been used for 2,327 times by AP Media customers. At the same time, another British journalist, Piers Morgan, also wonder if this picture will bring Trump back to the White House on X [10]. Which means an iconic picture is able to change people’s minds and attitudes toward any candidates, while at the same time the televised debating candidate’s facial expression can decide the audiences are engaged or not.

And pictures also got very strong power in other fields of politics. For instance, an article mentioned that pictures have greater power than contexts on mobilizing, just because they trigger far more strong emotions and push people to do so. Also in that study, their team tries to find out the relationship between pictures and public mobilizing by models. In the case of the Shutdown A14 BLM protest on Twitter, the data shows the tweets with images and videos are more likely to be

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retweeted, and those tweets are also more likely to be seen by people who do not have previous experiences about protests [11].

3.4. Social Media Algorithms

A social media algorithm is a complex set of rules and calculations used by social media platforms to prioritize the content that users see in their feeds. That is the definition of social media algorithms. If people try to capture some key word from this definition, it must be: calculation, prioritize and feeds. Firstly, a huge amount of calculation means that the contents people see on the social media feed page are chosen by an invisible hand, the system feeds people depending on what kind of posts we used to check and catch our interest accurately.

According to a study, the algorithms on social media could foster echo chambers of like-minded people and polarization. Because algorithms can foster group emotions by spreading the shared sense of individual, and that could evoke some protests and radical behaviors, which means that social media algorithms not only feed users with the desired contexts, but also promote emotion between people by gathering many groups of people with the same minds and opinions [12].

4. Conclusion

With more and more people paying attention to such political events, especially the U.S. presidential election. The daily topics on social media are increasingly politicized on an entertainment level, everyone can open their social media and watch short videos about the presidential election candidates and devote their own likes without hesitation, and they even do not know they already jumped into a trap that has been set. Sometimes the general public has no access to many true facts; they can only trace in the mist with those information that was heavily filtered by algorithms or modules. Therefore, next time if people stay themselves in a political events, or have to make hard decisions, they will know the ruses of those so called statesmen and think extensively by using the tools available such as the fact-checking website mentioned and do some personal analysis on each topics. In this investigation, according to several sets of data comparison that the mass of supporters on social media does not directly affect the result, but the result did affect by many other factors indirectly, in some way, like the algorithms of social media, the occurrence of images and videos, fact-checking organizations and public emotion dominance. Overall, due to the complexity of the social media, people are unable to know the relationships between those factors and the result with only limited data and cases, as there are numerous of factors involved. However, in the future, that can be done through quantitative or qualitative research, that can figure out which cause which, and how to make the most precise choice with practical methods.

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