Taking an In-depth Look at Political Parties on Facebook: What they are Saying, How they are Saying it, and How Party Members Respond

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Abstract

This study identifies the various communication tools and content styles political parties use to reach their Facebook constituency, examines the degree to which they are used, and evaluates the effectiveness of their engagement. Three means of analysis are used: number and frequency of posts by the party, types of posts being made, and responses to the posts by the public. This work thus provides a baseline for discussion on the question of how political parties can and have capitalized on online social media networks in order to effect political engagement, participation, and mobilization.

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Due to an increase in information availability, people do not have to depend on political parties, as they once did, for information on party platform, candidates, or current campaigns (Aldrich, 1995; Hershey, 2011). Technology and communication advances also provide for extra tools in a political organization's communication toolbox, allowing for political parties to potentially reach a wider audience more easily and efficiently than in the past. In order to maintain or even potentially increase their relationship with voters in a digital age, political parties are adapting to changes in technology by embracing social media.

The Internet has become a staple for political communication, and today all state and most of the larger county political parties in the United States maintain a web presence. As part of the communication technology change over the last decade, online social networking websites are becoming an important source of political information (Johnson & Kaye, 2014; Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 2012). With over 2 billion monthly worldwide users and about two-thirds of the American public having a Facebook account, social networking websites allow for communication of political information to a wide variety of people in an economic and efficient manner (Constine, 2017; Pew Research, 2016; Saleem, 2010; Wolfe, 2013). Political parties are taking advantage of this opportunity to communicate with their members, but it is not clear how they are using social media websites and to what degree this type of communication is engaging their party members or other interested persons. The term "party member" is used loosely throughout the paper to describe anyone subscribing to a particu-

lar county political party's Facebook page or group. It can also be interpreted as a party identifier as many party organizations in the United States do not require an actual membership.

This study explores the ways by which political parties are using Facebook and discusses implications of this usage. More specifically, this study argues that style and content of the message matter, and that effectiveness should be measured by looking at important nuances beyond post counts including number and frequency of postings, context of posts, and responses. These aspects in conjunction allow for an evaluation of the extent to which Facebook and social media more generally, can be successfully used as a communication tool for political parties and potentially political organizations more broadly.

Background

Political communication in general has a well-documented history of embracing new technologies and adapting to the needs and desires of politically interested persons. During the 1920s, there was the widespread introduction of radio receivers and regular radio broadcasts in the United States. By 1929, use of the radio for political purposes was becoming commonplace, perhaps most famously with New York Governor Roosevelt's "fireside chats," which he instituted in the early 1930s and continued until 1944 as president. In the 1940s and 1950s, radio debates by political candidates became increasingly common. As people started turning to television in the 1950s for their entertainment and news, political communication followed suit. By 1960, television had begun to take on a role in political communication with the presidential de-

bate between Kennedy and Nixon, and both candidates used television advertising for their campaigns. Television and radio continue to be an outlet for political communication, but since the 1990s, the Internet has been a growing source for political information (Pew Research Center, 2010; Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 2012). Political parties have been making use of the Internet since the mid-1990s and the Internet "has been more swiftly integrated by parties than many previous technologies" (Ward, Gibson, & Nixon, 2003, p. 32).

The Internet provides both a means of political communication as well as engagement of the American public. The effect of the Internet on participation is hardly a new subject to examine, but it is one with many questions still left unanswered (Best & Krueger, 2005; Bimber, 1998; Gibson, Lusoli, & Ward, 2005; Johnson & Kaye, 2003; Tolbert & McNeal, 2003). The number of people with access to the Internet is greater than ever as computers become part of our daily lives and the economic thresholds of computer ownership and online access continue to decrease (Pew Research Center, 2010). Additionally, research has shown that candidate websites can increase civic engagement (Park & Perry, 2009). However, there is little information on how political parties in the United States are using social media or the Internet more generally to affect participation, despite the vast amount of work exploring European Party use of the Internet and Web 2.0 technology (Jackson & Lilleker, 2009; Kalnes, 2009a; Lappas, Kleftodimos & Yannas, 2010; Lilleker, Pack & Jackson, 2010; Mascheroni & Minucci, 2010; Spyridou & Veglias, 2011). "The Internet is now the most important international medium of communication and infor-

mation exchange, embedded in interactions between citizens, firms, governments and NGOs, and bringing with it new practices, norms and structures" (Berkeley Electronic Press, 2011). This shift has major implications for public policy as well as the field of political science as a discipline. However, the Internet is a vast field, and the next step in technology is Web 2.0, or social media. Loosely defined, Web 2.0 refers to Internet applications that facilitate collaboration though information sharing or some form of interoperability between users in a social media dialogue. These applications include blogs, wikis, video sharing sites (such as YouTube and Vimeo), and social networking sites (such as Facebook, Google+ and Twitter). Social media based engagement and participation is a growing part of the political science literature, but relatively understudied as compared to the study of the impact of the Internet as a whole.

For the last few years political blogs and microblogging tools like Twitter have received the most attention, which has led to the generation of literature that provides a starting point to understanding the importance of Web 2.0 tools to politics and political science. However, blogs are a more personalized medium better suited to individual campaigns than political parties. This may demonstrate that research, at least in the United States, is moving away from political organizational use of the Internet and back to individual use despite evidence that parties have been increasingly innovative in their uses of Internet communication technology (Lofgren & Smith, 2003). Research on blogs helped legitimize political Web 2.0 research more broadly as studies have shown that blogs mobilize opinions, can set the agenda for political elites such as journal-

ists and politicians, and provide citizens with a new means for knowledge gathering and political participation (Farrell & Drezner, 2008; Woodly, 2008). The general consensus was that "blogs are changing politics" and that sentiment can and should be carried on to other social media technologies (Drezner & Farrell, 2008, p. 1; Farrell & Drezner, 2008). Political organizations do not appear to blog; rather they are making use of other forms of Web 2.0 technology, specifically websites like Facebook.

The use of sites such as Facebook have also been gaining in credibility as many media outlets, large companies, and political elites are making use of the technology. Social media sites therefore provide an increasingly important source for political information, especially among users who may not get such information from other sources (Johnson & Kaye, 2014). Given the public's increasing reliance on social media as a source of political communication, it is important to understand how this medium is being used.

Much of the research of political communication via social media in the United States appears to be focused on individual engagement on social networking websites, rather than organizational use of the communication technology. For example, users of these sites are writing comments, joining interest groups, and discussing politics in ways that were previously not measurable, and that the effect of such individual "cyber participation" appears to be significant in regard to predicting turnout (Steinberg, 2015). In addition, research shows that the use of social networking sites by politicians and campaigns is increasing (Williams & Gulati, 2012). However, there is virtually no information about how political organizations are using

social networking websites or what the effects of organizational action are on individual political behavior.

Understanding how political parties use social media is a critical missing piece of the political communication puzzle. Political parties have played an important role over the years in regards to political communication (Aldrich, 1995; Gibson, Cotter, Bibby, & Huckshorn, 1983; Gibson, Cotter, Bibby, & Huckshorn, 1985; Hershey, 2011). In short, parties speak and people listen. This concept is not new to political science; Campbell and colleagues describe political parties as suppliers "of cues by which the individual may evaluate the element of politics" (Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960, p. 128).

The importance of party cues is still evident today, especially for people who lack other political information sources (Aldrich, 1995; Arceneaux, 2008; Kam, 2005; Snyder & Ting, 2002). Political parties recognize their opportunity to reach a large number of people at relatively low cost though social media and are actively making use of tools like Facebook. These actions of political engagement between people and party organizations can lead the public toward other forms of civic participation (Klofstad, 2007; Kobayashi, Ikeda & Miyata, 2006; Steinberg, 2015). Despite previous works examining political parties' use of the Internet more broadly, (Gibson, Nixon & Ward, 2003) and political party use of social media in Europe referenced previously, not much is known about how political parties in the United States are making use of this communication technology.

This study seeks to pick up where previous literature leaves as the field is wide open to speculation on how American political parties are using online social network-

ing tools like Facebook, Google+, LinkedIn, MySpace, Twitter, etc. Early research, especially in regard to countries with multi-party systems, involved collecting the number of fans/likes various political parties have on Facebook (Kalnes, 2009a; Palaschuk, 2011; Spyridou & Veglias, 2011; Shonaghosh, 2009; Stojanovski, 2010). Even when more detailed information such as number of responses to posts are collected, there is little context behind what leads to this engagement (Lappas, Kleftodimos & Yannas, 2010). Sometimes, this is intermixed with personal commentary from those using these statistics for political blogging (Crocker, 2011; Mulley, 2011), but this type of information tells us little about how the tools are used or what they are being used for.

A second line of research focuses on studying the "why or why not" a political party should become engaged with social media. This research in regards to American political parties is relatively unscientific and revolves around trying to explain why a party is or is not using social media in its political endeavors using commentary or interviews (Lynch & Hogan, 2011; Smith, 2009). Better assessments exist of European political parties regarding this question (Jackson & Lilleker, 2009; Kalnes, 2009a; Mascheroni & Minucci, 2010). While it might be useful to know why a party is choosing to engage in social media technology as part of its communication strategy, it is more important to know how the parties are doing it, and what if any response they are receiving in order to determine if the strategies are effective.

A third line of research uses political candidates as proxies for parties (Deragon, 2010; Kalnes, 2009b; Staves, 2011). However, as individual political candidates choose

to engage in social media technology, candidates seem to be a weak proxy for understanding party activity. These works are really meta-analyses of individual users or of party leaders, and therefore are different from true party use or party communication.

This research takes a more systematic look at how political parties use Facebook. Specifically, it examines county-level political organizations' use social media beyond the previous literature which is limited to the occasional report or news article (Cournoyer, 2001; Marketing Tom Media, 2010; Maung, 2010). First, this study examines the means by which an organization gets engaged. Second, the number and frequency of postings made by political parties are assessed. Third, the types and styles of posts made are analyzed. Fourth, responses to the posts are evaluated. This combination of information provides a more detailed understanding of how Facebook is being used by political parties than previous research while providing a framework for ways to examine social media usage more broadly.

Hypotheses

The overall intent of this study is to show the value of looking beyond post counts when examining social media use by political parties or other political organizations. Therefore, the general hypothesis being tested is that data beyond post counts will provide more insight into the effectiveness of social media usage by political parties. Five concepts will be examined in doing this. First, differences in use of Facebook itself could represent the different ways by which a political party could view the usefulness of social media as a resource. Second, the conclusion that Dem-

ocratic Party organizations make better use of social media based on the 2008 election cycle will be re-tested in light of more recent data (Quily, 2008). Third, given that political party members are already supportive of their respective sides, organizational and mobilization messages would be the most useful and thus are expected to be in the greatest abundance (Aldrich, 1995). Fourth, following the theory and results set out in previous research of more general forms of e-participation and online engagement, increased communication by political parties on Facebook should lead to greater engagement, i.e. more responses, by members of the group (Macintosh & Tambouris, 2009; Panagopoulos, 2009). Fifth, certain types of postings will lead to greater engagement, since they will invite more responses than others based upon communication style or the subject matter being discussed (Gibson et al., 2003). More specifically, it is expected that postings pertaining to partisan politics would elicit the highest degrees of "likes" and comments because people identify with these messages and have a desire to discuss political issues. Meanwhile, organizational and information posts, which are arguably of more value to the party members, would likely generate less responses. Taken together, these pieces will allow for an evaluation of the value of more nuanced data as opposed to post counts.

Data and Coding

While there are multiple mediums for examination of political party social media use, Facebook is the most commonly used social media platform in the United States; Facebook averages four times the monthly users and thus provides a larger reach than Twitter (Yarow,

2013). Due to the vastness of data on Facebook and the complexities involved in collection, the data for this study are limited to the Harris County and Fort Bend County (both in Texas) Democratic and Republican Parties. Facebook data, unlike Twitter, is complex to gather, often not presented in a straightforward manner, and cannot be gathered using data mining software based upon Facebook's Terms of Service. Therefore, this study is limited to these four cases.

Using two pairs of cases provide the opportunity to examine differences across party lines as well as look as potential differences within a party. This allows for a focus on differences in the political environment cross-county as well as cross-party, in addition to any individual party organization differences. Cross-county differences are attributable to ways in which the party organization is run as opposed to differences in members of the party or in the political environment of the counties. Cross-party differences could be due to general political party social media strategy or individual party organization differences.

These particular counties are good cases to examine as they are large and well-funded political organizations compared to other county parties and the 2010 election within Texas was a particularly active year as it was the closest a Democrat has come to serving in statewide office in Texas since 1994. Using cases within the same state and in similar geographies allows for control of potential differences parties have due to state level political culture, therefore members of the same party in each of the two counties can be expected to act in a similar fashion. While the population or physical size of the two counties is not equal, they are both large by both accounts. The differ-

ences that do exist allow for an examination of county versus party effects that would not be due to political culture alone. In regards to comparison of parties across counties, all four cases are relatively well organized county level political organizations as they maintain physical offices and regular office hours. However, the Harris County parties are better funded and use more paid staff as opposed to a higher reliance on volunteers. Furthermore, the 2010 election was the first time that these (or any) county parties made extensive use of Facebook and thus provides us with a good baseline for future research. Therefore, social media usage should be more developed and more utilized in this sample than a comparison of general county level political party social media use; the data should be more applicable to studies of future patterns of usage. Although the use of only two counties may lead to a lack of generalizability, this study is not attempting to claim that all parties use social media in the same way but rather are just being used as cases to show the value of nuanced examinations of political party communication.

In order to evaluate Facebook usage by these political parties, all postings made through their official Facebook presence from January 1, 2010 to December 31, 2010 were gathered and analyzed. This led to an overall count of 503 posts across the four party organizations. Each posting was coded in two ways, 1) the communication tool used, i.e. the type of post based on Facebook posting options, and 2) the content style of the message. Facebook allows political parties to post general statements, links to other websites, photos, videos, and Facebook events. This information is sometimes difficult to quantify, since a single post could be both a statement and a photo or a link to

another website about an event, but it is valuable to understand the complexities of Facebook usage and to explore the types of tools each political party is taking advantage of on the website. In this study, when more than one tool was used in the same post, it was coded based on an order of precedence of video, photo, event, link, or note/post. This was done based on the rarity of the use of each tool and should provide a better estimate of multimedia and tool diversity usage.

Each posting was also coded into the following categories to explore the content style each organization is engaging in: general party information, general election information, event information, and political message. Data is coded as "party," "election," "event," and "partisan" in respect to these various categories, and both raw and coded data are available upon request. These four categories extend and attempt to clarify previously identified function categories of Internet use as either an administrative, organizational or campaign tool (Ward, Gibson & Nixon, 2003). General party information is any post about the party as an organization which is not politically motivated; an example would be announcements about a party member being on TV. General election information is any post about the 2010 election cycle that involves information about the election itself such as where to vote, reminders to vote or date of elections; these posts do not discuss issues or political positions. Event information is any post that is about a party event or political event, such as a reminder about a meeting or rally. Such messages at times appear to overlap with general party information and in such cases overlaps were coded as event information as this style of post is of greater use to a party member. Polit-

ical messages are posts that specifically mention a political issue or have a partisan message, such as a post about legislative action or a post that presents a point of view on an issue and thus are also referred to as partisan messages. In this study, style overlaps only occurred in regards to the combination of political messages along with other forms of postings. These posts were coded as partisan political messages as the effect of the partisan overtone could not be ignored, and including it made the information biased for consumption by the general public. For example, "The Republican Tea Party will do anything to suppress our Democratic voters. Don't be fooled. Vote straight ticket Democrat. Warn your friends. Early voting ends tomorrow at 7pm. Make sure to turn out your friends." was coded as a partisan political message given the overtone of the message despite that it also contained election information.

Each of these styles of messages can provide different value to the organization and are compared with the previously identified function groups of administrative, campaign, and organizational tools. Posts containing party information are a means to build inclusiveness of members of the group to the party, administrative or organizational in nature. Posts in regard to election cycle and general election information can serve as mobilization drives to ensure that those likely to vote for the party actually will do so. Posts for upcoming events show the use of social media as an organizational tool. Posts with political messages or partisan issues show the use of social media as a means for providing information or rallying the base, a campaign or organizational tool. Political parties can thus use a specific style of message to obtain a particular effect — be it informing, mobilizing, organizing, or rallying.

Methodology

In order to evaluate the effectiveness of Facebook usage more nuanced data is required than post counts. The following steps explain the various levels the data collected were analyzed. Researchers first considered a party organization's initial decisions on how to use Facebook, moved into information about counts and frequencies, then explored types and style of posts, and conducted an examination of responses to posts.

Starting with a comparison of how the organizations engaged with Facebook provides insight into understanding of the available options as well as the degree to which the party organizations embrace a tradeoff between control, equality of voice, and ease of access to information. The creation of a group on Facebook allows for individuals to have more equal voice, while creation of a page allows the organization to maintain both an official voice though posts made by page administrators in the name of the organizations rather than by individuals. Each structure provides different degrees of information control as a page allows control in how information is displayed to the public as a whole while the group structure allows for the organization to control which Facebook users can and cannot see its posts based upon privacy settings where users must first be approved to be in the group.

Next, counts are conducted of the number of posts made by each group. These counts are charted over time to look for trends. Following this, using the classification systems outlined previously, posts are examined based upon the Facebook tool used to make the post and the communication style of the post. Comparisons are made across party and county lines in regards to both of these factors.

Finally, the degree of feedback that political party posts solicit is evaluated. Feedback is measured through a count of "likes" and "comments" left by users. Many posts on Facebook do not receive feedback, and when they do, the feedback could be relevant or irrelevant to the post it is attached to. The intentions of the person leaving the feedback cannot be predicted, as opposed to basic assumptions of the party's intentions as outlined previously. However, analysis of the feedback provides a metric for engagement, for it clearly shows that the message was received and responded to. "Likes" imply that the specific message from the party is appealing to those it is communicating with, while "comments" provide a metric for discourse or discussion.

Results and Discussion

Method of Engagement

The first choice an organization has when it decides to use Facebook is the type of presence it wishes to have. This choice will determine how the organization can interact with the public as well as how members can engage with the organization and each other. The Harris County Democratic Party, the Harris County Republican Party, and the Fort Bend County Democratic Party all maintain a "page" that is the official Facebook presence of the organization; its official postings are easily identifiable. Meanwhile, the Fort Bend County Republican Party maintains a "group" as its official Facebook presence. In groups, posts made by the administrators are considered official for the purpose of this comparison. The official postings made of Facebook "pages" are also made by administrators just made under the name of the group rather than the individ-

uals. At some point the Fort Bend Republican Party will likely move from using a "group" to using a "page" because many other "groups" on Facebook that represent official organizations have been making this transition.

A "page" provides a wider reach as anyone can follow along with what's happening and all the posts are public. A "group" limits the reach to those the party wishes to allow into the group and the posts are only visible to the members. The choice to use a "group" as compared to a "page" provides more privacy regarding internal party communication and limits involvement in discussions and information sharing to a particular set of people. If effectiveness is measured as reach, then the use of a "page" would be a more effective methodology. However, if characteristics such as equal voice among members and creating a dialog are more important, the "group" allows for a greater variety of engagement.

Post Counts

As outlined previously, prior research has focused on post counts and other types of count data to argue for effectiveness of social media usage. Looking at post counts alone does provide an important base line to later compare against considering other metrics. The total post counts for the four party organizations over the course of 2010 are as follows: Harris County Republicans–27; Harris County Democrats–313; Fort Bend Republicans–101; and Fort Bend Democrats–62. Based on this one might be tempted to rank Harris County Democrats and then Fort Bend Republicans as the most effective Facebook political communicators of the four parties. The following analysis which takes into account the other factors discussed previously

will demonstrate how pure count data lacks as a metric for measuring effective Facebook use.

Post Frequency and Trends

In order to examine trends, post count numbers are calculated per month. The average post counts per active month are as follows: Harris County Republicans–2.25; Harris County Democrats–26.01; Fort Bend Republicans–8.42; and Fort Bend Democrats–15.5. The pages of the Harris County Republicans, Harris County Democrats and Fort Bend Republicans were started prior to January 1, 2010; however, the page of the Fort Bend Democrats was not started until August 23, 2010. Based on these numbers, the two Democratic parties are making more overall use of Facebook communication. This is in line with party based expectations given that Democrats have historically made more use of social media (Smith, 2011).

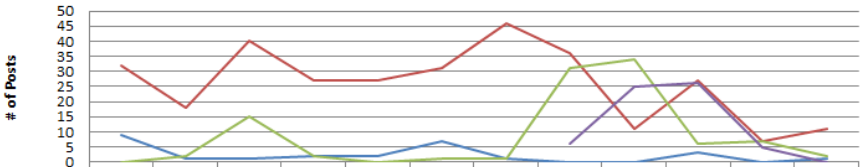
Comparing frequencies of posts throughout the year allows us to see if expected trends are being actualized and provides for a different way to consider effectiveness as posts at particular times of the year/election season may be of more or less value than others. Figure 1 shows the number of posts the parties made each month of 2010. Theory would suggest that the number of posts will surge during the time leading up to the election given that postings on election information would only happen during these periods and that other forms of information, such as event organizing or posturing on political issues, would be more useful to information consumers and serve to rally the base into action at a critical time, similar to a “get out the vote” effort.

Using the monthly averages for a base line, the

Harris County Republicans began the year with 9 posts in January, their highest number of postings of the year, with a second above average month in June, followed by decreases the rest of the year. On the contrary, the Fort Bend Republicans began 2010 with few postings, had surges in March, August, and September; followed by decreases. The Harris County Democrats seem to be the steadiest actor throughout 2010, until November and December, when there is a sharp drop in posts. The Fort Bend Democrats postings began in August and have a high post count in the months running up to the 2010 midterm election, with postings dropping immediately following the election.

Two of the four parties show the expected increase in posts before the election and three of the four demonstrate the expected reduction in the number of posts after the election. What is more interesting is when organizations are not following this expected trend. The Harris County Republican Party actually posted less than they normally do during this important time running up to the election. This could be due to a lack of effective use or perhaps due to a commitment of resources elsewhere. The Harris County Democratic Party on the other hand had a higher sustained level of postings throughout the year so that while they did not show an expected increase in the time immediately before the election their post counts were still higher than the other party organizations during this time.

Using this data and focusing on comparing the post counts immediately preceding the election, during October, the same time frame in which other means of communication are generally increased to get out the vote, the two Democratic Party organizations would be considered



	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
HCRP	9	1	1	2	2	7	1	0	0	3	0	1
HCDP	32	18	40	27	27	31	46	36	11	27	7	11
FBRP	0	2	15	2	0	1	1	31	34	6	7	2
FBDP								6	25	26	5	0

Figure 1. Posts per month, collected for 2010.

the most effective. An argument could be made that the Fort Bend Democrats are also being the most efficient based on when they are choosing to focus their posts. Alternatively, one could argue that their lack of sustained communication may have negative repercussions and therefore is not the best course of action. Regardless, by looking at frequency and trends, the idea of "effective usage" can be explored in various ways leading to differing outcomes.

Post Type by Facebook Tool

The type and style of posts provides insight into how well each organization is making use of the diversity of options Facebook provides and the ability to communicate a wide variety of information. Table 1 presents information on the frequencies of use of each type of tool by each party organization. Both Republican organizations made extensive use of hyperlinks, rather than other Facebook tools. By contrast, both Democratic parties used a wider array of available tools, especially the use of photos in over 10% of their posts and relied less on hyperlinks and more on notes and posts, i.e., putting content directly onto Facebook. The similarities in tool use patterns among

Table 1
Facebook Tool Use by Party Organization

	HCRP		HCDP		FBRP		FBDP	
Notes/ Posts	1	4%	135	43%	2	2%	17	27%
Links	25	89%	79	25%	88	87%	21	34%
Photos	0	0%	40	13%	0	0%	8	13%
Video	0	0%	4	1%	8	8%	1	2%
Events	2	7%	55	18%	3	3%	15	24%
TOTAL	28		313		101		62	

the Democrats and Republicans suggest that a common guide was used for each party or possibly the party organizations of one county mimicked the other.

The use of newer and fancier tools, such as video, photos and events may be indicative of a better understanding of how to take advantage of social media to get the most value out of a post. If a picture is indeed worth 1,000 words, the two Democratic Party organizations are communicating even more value to their members regardless of post counts or frequencies alone. Additionally, the event tool provides built-in reminders about an event as opposed to making a post or providing a link to an event, which again would imply a degree of communication depth not captured by post count data. At the very least these more advanced tools should be weighted more heavily in considering post counts.

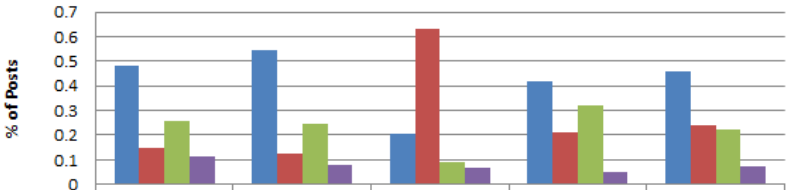
Post Style by Content

Figures 2 examines posts by message style; over

45% of all posts pertained to party information, including messages about party members and general party messages, such as opening a new office, mentions of parties activates, and links to party resources. These messages keep the Facebook base aware of the party's activities and build group inclusiveness by involving those who could not be present at an event or who were not previously aware of party activities.

In this figure, the distribution of posts looks similar for three of the four groups, with the Fort Bend Republicans being the outlier. The posts of the Harris County Republicans, Harris County Democrats, and Fort Bend Democrats consist of party communication 40-55% of the time, with posts about events about 25-30% of the time, and partisan posts about 13-20% of the time. Combining party and event posts, about 75% of the posts of the Harris County Republicans, Harris County Democrats, and Fort Bend Democrats are on upcoming events, previous events, or other party activities, information that leads to better organization and inclusiveness.

Partisan political communication and general election information make up the other 25% of the posts for Harris County Republicans, Harris County Democrats and Fort Bend Democrats. However, over 63% of Fort Bend Republican Party's posts are politically partisan communications and contain conservative commentary. This is a stark difference in how the Fort Bend Republican Party is using Facebook as compared to the other three groups. Looking at the partisan political posts offers another cross-county comparison. Both Harris County parties have fewer partisan posts as a percentage of overall posts, suggesting that their audiences may be less polarized than the Fort



	HCRP	HCDP	FBRP	FBDP	Overall
Party	0.481481481	0.546325879	0.207920792	0.419354839	0.459244533
Partisan	0.148148148	0.127795527	0.633663366	0.209677419	0.24055666
Event	0.259259259	0.24600639	0.089108911	0.322580645	0.224652087
Election	0.111111111	0.079872204	0.069306931	0.048387097	0.07554672

Figure 2. Post percent by content style

Bend County political party audiences. Another possibility is that both parties in Harris County are more concerned with appealing to a median voter. Both of these explanations mirror the historical differences in voting patterns among the two counties general election margins in Harris County are often small, while in Fort Bend County it is the primary elections that tend to have smaller margins.

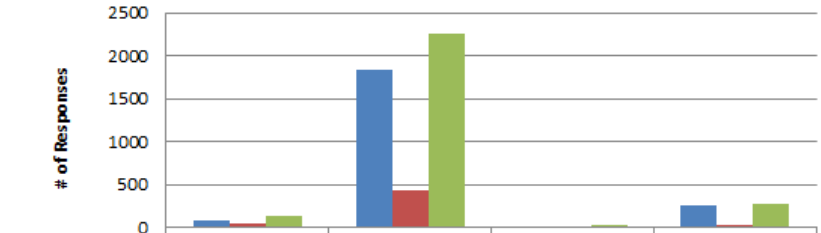
The amount of general election information the parties posted ranges from 5% to 11% and can be classified as general interest/useful information or as part of a "Get out the Vote" (GOTV) campaign. The Harris County Republican party appears to be more focused on such efforts than the other parties; 11% of posts relate to election information. However, the timing of the Fort Bend Democratic Party postings, regardless of their actual classification, appears to be part of a GOTV campaign. Some posts provide a GOTV message wrapped in party or partisan information. For example, when Fort Bend Democrats posted "FBDP Richmond HQ is packed with volunteers. Get out and vote," this is coded as party information although it relates to the party's GOTV campaign. Election infor-

mation is higher for both Harris County parties as opposed to the Fort Bend parties, possibly because the political make up of Harris County being closer to equal, Democrats versus Republicans, and thus both parties were concerned with "Get out the Vote" type efforts. Based on election turnout for countywide races, Harris County maintained an average of a 53/45 split leaning Republican for the last 10 years. Some may consider social media to be a tool specifically for GOTV efforts, if so evaluation of this combination of style and timing of posts may be an appropriate metric for arguing about effective social media usage.

Responses to Posts

To truly test for effectiveness there needs to be a dependent variable to examine. Responses by those who view the posts serve as a measurement of engagement between the members and the party as well as potentially among the members themselves. An individual respondent can respond to the initial post by clicking "like" or though making a more substantive comment. The value of the "like" metric is that it provides guidance to the party organization on which messages appeal to its members. When individuals respond by making a "comment," they are making more of an effort to communicate, which implies a greater degree of engagement beyond "liking" or just reading the post.

The Harris County Republican Party received a total of 131 responses, the Harris County Democratic Party received 2,263 responses, the Fort Bend Republican Party received 23 responses, and the Fort Bend Democratic Party received 276 responses, as noted in Figure 3.

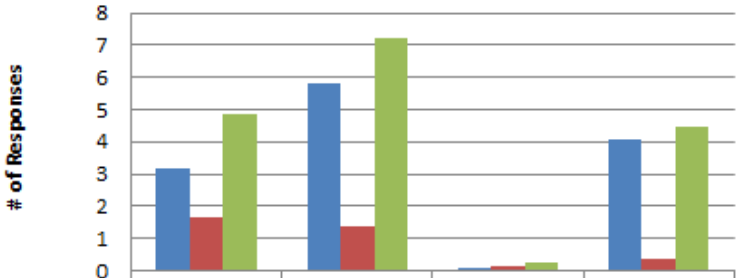


	HCRP	HCDP	FBRP	FBDP
Likes	86	1827	7	254
Comments	45	436	16	22
Total Responses	131	2263	23	276

Figure 3. Responses to Party Posts

Given that each party has a different number of members, these values are not easily comparable. However, in both counties, the Democratic parties received more responses than the Republican parties. Moreover, the Fort Bend Democrats had half as many total postings as the Fort Bend Republicans, yet received ten times more responses. This is despite that there are more Republicans than Democrats in Fort Bend based upon prior year's election outcomes. Based upon county election returns, Fort Bend County maintained an average of a 60/40 split leaning Republican for the last ten years (Texas Secretary of State, n. d.). This implies that Democrats are either more active on social media in general or are more likely to respond to posts made by their party.

If one were to look at raw number of responses, the conclusion might be drawn that the Harris County Democrats were best engaging their members. However, it may be more worthwhile to look at a degree of response per post rather than overall response rates. This reduces the effect a post being an outlier, having an extremely high number of responses, and provides a more generalizable



	HCRP	HCDP	FBRP	FBDP
Likes/Post	3.19	5.84	0.07	4.1
Comments/Post	1.66	1.39	0.16	0.35
Responses/Posts	4.85	7.23	0.23	4.45

Figure 4. Average responses per party post.

and overall level of engagement metric. In Figure 3, the results show that the Fort Bend Republican Party's posts are once again not conforming to the pattern seen among the other organizations. The other three parties average 4-7 total responses per post, while the Fort Bend Republicans average less than .25 responses per post. This may be because the Fort Bend Republican Party is reaching a smaller audience or only those members who are highly active within the party, as opposed to engaging its Facebook base in its entirety. This smaller reach may also be due to the choice of the party organization to maintain a group rather than a more open page set-up. The lack of responses indicate that either very few people are paying attention to what the party is communicating, or they are not motivated to respond.

Additionally, this could be a signal that method the Fort Bend Republican Party has chosen to use is falling short, compared to the efforts of the other groups, even though they are using an extensive amount of partisan po-

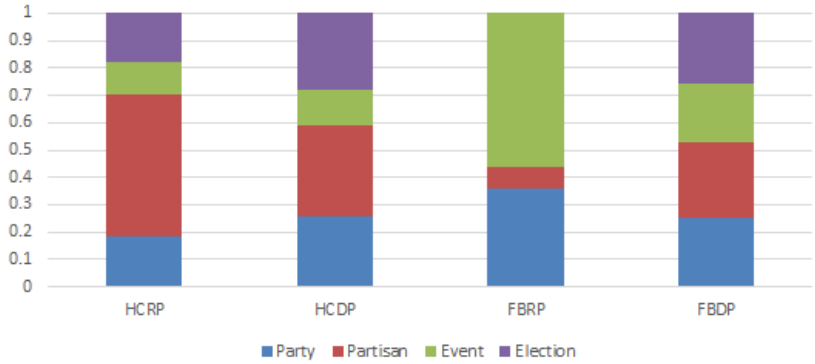


Figure 5. Proportion of average likes by post style.

litical messaging. When looking at average numbers of response per post the Harris County Democratic Party is still in the lead, but is only about twice as many responses as opposed to ten times as many responses when looking at total number of responses.

An even more nuanced way to analyze response type is in regard to the post style. This allows for a determination of what content types appeal to the party members and what content types elicit the most discussion or engagement. Table 2 shows the average numbers of responses for each type of post style by party. Here it is seen that partisan style posts elicit the highest degree of response almost across the board. This implies that a high level of partisan style posting provides the most engagement by party members.

Figure 5 shows the proportion of the average number of likes per post by style type for each organization. The use of proportion data allows for both a comparison between parties and counties as well as within each organ-

Table 2
Average Responses per Post by Style and Party Organization

	Likes				Comments				Responses			
	HR	HD	FR	FD	HR	HD	FR	FD	HR	HD	FR	FD
Party	2.69	6.35	0.14	4.23	0.62	1.39	0.24	0.38	3.31	7.74	0.38	4.62
Partisan	7.75	8.18	0.03	4.62	5.50	2.38	0.08	0.23	13.25	10.55	0.11	4.85
Event	1.71	3.16	0.22	3.55	1.14	0.83	0.44	0.45	2.86	3.99	0.67	4.00
Election	2.67	6.88	0.00	4.33	2.67	1.56	0.29	0.00	5.33	8.44	0.29	4.33

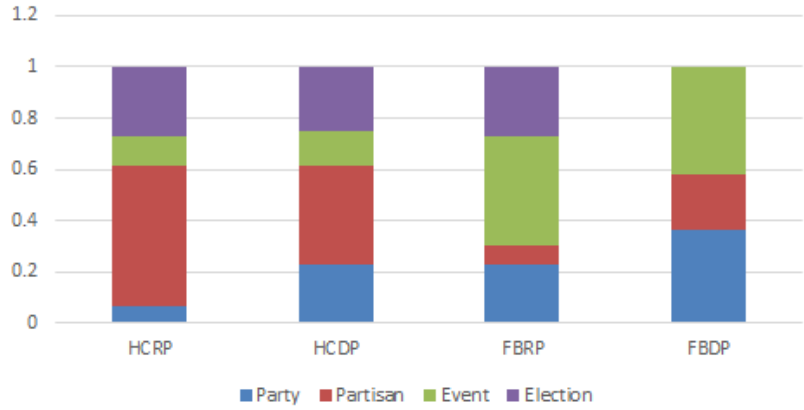


Figure 6. Proportion of average comments by post style.

ization. Respondents "like" and comment on different content styles of posts at different frequencies depending on which organization they are a part of. The partisan style posts appear to get the highest proportion of likes for three of the four parties; in line with expectations that individuals who relate to partisan information will click "like" to signify their agreement with it. However, ANOVA testing reveal that the proportions are only statistically different at the $p<.05$ level for the two Harris County parties. This implies that number of "like" responses is not dependent on style type for the two Democratic parties as feedback levels are more or less equal regardless of content.

Figure 6 shows that partisan style posts also received a higher proportion of comments than posts of other types for the two Harris County parties. The differences in comments in response to style are slightly more pronounced as compared to "like" responses. Based on ANOVA testing, respondents to the posts of the Harris County Republican Party were significantly more likely to com-

ment on partisan posts than other style posts, and respondents to the posts of the Fort Bend Democratic Party were significantly less likely to comments on election posts as compared with other content styles at the $p<.05$ level. This implies that despite the visual differences in Figure 6, due to the low sample size, it cannot be concluded that the number of comments is dependent on content style for the other two parties.

An issue of note is upon closer examination of the responses to the Fort Bend Democratic Party posts it can be seen that on numerous occasions the same three people responded multiple times, always just clicking "like" to the posts. Further investigation revealed that these three people were a party staffer, campaign manager, and politician, all connected to the Fort Bend Democratic Party. On average, at least two of the three, and sometimes all three answered "like" to any given post the Fort Bend Democratic Party made. Removing them would leave the average response graph looking more like those of the Harris County Republican Party and with a "like" to "comments" ratio similar to that of the Harris County Democratic Party of about 4:1. This type of response inflation is a major problem when evaluating the value or degree of engagement the parties are actually getting. Response inflation can happen in one of two ways. The first involves the party leaving a message that is a post to a previously left response. The party may also leave a response as additional information in regard to the original post. The second involves the people who manage the party's page and who may respond to posts from viewers. The first type of inflation is easily controlled for, but the second type cannot be controlled for, as there was no way to identify everyone

managing the party's page. Given the confounding issues, neither type of response inflation was controlled for here; instead, raw feedback numbers were presented in this analysis. It would be difficult to ascertain whether one party's counts were inflated by the first or the second method. There is no reason to assume one party was inflating more than another. Therefore, leaving all forms of inflation was considered to be a better choice rather than trying to control for one type while ignoring the other. Looking at response rates provides as many new questions as it does potential answers in regards to effective social media usage. This cursory look provides enough evidence to suggest that response data is worthy of examination in conjunction with post counts, frequency, trends, types and style. However, it is not clear how exactly it can or should be evaluated.

Conclusion

Previous research primarily focused on gathering post counts, this analysis demonstrates the value of a deeper analysis to reveal richer information about political communication between a political party and its Facebook base. These case studies provided for information and guidance in regard to future studies of political parties' use of social media communication. From this study we can see that post counts alone are an underwhelming metric to understand the nuances of communication given the potential differences in context and they only provide a rough estimate of the amount of communication due to differences in tool usage.

Parties can engage with social media in different ways based on their ideals and goals, this decision itself

may be worth unpacking as it can influence post counts as posts within groups can be counted in different ways. Even once post counts are confirmed, posts are not normally distributed over the course of the year. Instead, there are seasonal fluctuations. For example, post counts often go up immediately preceding an election when the information would presumably be of more value to consumers of messages. In addition, if average post counts per month or even per day are not considered, usage may be misjudged, based upon either the length of time the party has had a Facebook presence or planned dormancy to save resources when messages may not be as valuable or useful. Future research should consider these trends when attempting to measure the effectiveness of social media usage both for political parties and other organizations why may follow other seasonal trends.

Once type of posts are considered it can be seen that parties use various Facebook tools to get their messages across, but still rely on simple postings and links to the own websites or other text based websites to provide information rather than making use of multimedia technology such as photos and videos. However, some party organizations are making more use of available communication tools than others. These differences appear to be between parties rather than between counties, with Democratic parties making more use of Facebook to better engage with its members.

Political parties also vary in their content style. Generally, the focus is on party information followed by event information, styles that would be most valuable in organizing the party during electoral months. However, one party seemed focused on politically partisan style post-

ings. These differences appear to be based more upon the political environment than the partisan choice of the party organization. The data also imply that content style impacts response rates. However, there is no evidence to suggest that political parties are aware of these cues and changing their tactics accordingly.

This study also demonstrates that the choice of style and tool by which party organizations choose to communicate can lead to differing levels of response. High post counts may not matter once the communication being received and movement toward engagement are considered. From this data we see that some parties seem to be garnering more engagement than others regarding response counts and that such engagement is not necessarily correlated with post counts. Meanwhile, the quality as well as the value of the engagement is still open for examination.

There is no question that this study is limited in cases and thus may not be as representative as may be desired. Instead it should be thought of as an important pilot study whereby new ways to look at political party communication through social media have been identified and the importance of these more nuanced examinations evidenced. Rather than focusing on count data, this study has identified a systematic means for coding political party Facebook posts by content typology and style of post. Additionally the study has shown that content and post style matter in regards to engaging the public. This sets a stage for future research using broader data sets once more efficient means of data collection are possible.

Implications for Future Research

Research into this emerging field continues, and

political party use of Facebook can be explored at multiple levels (country, state, county) as well as internationally. An investigation of county level data provides a look at the critical local level of American politics that is often understudied. A study of more counties will allow for further exploration of some of the issues uncovered here, such as the lack of differences between the counties rather than between the parties. However, research at the state level will likely allow for a better exploration of comments and interactions between those who have chosen to associate with the party's Facebook page, given a larger number of participants. Additionally, future research can examine the use of other social media tools, such as Twitter, to see if these same findings hold true. In the meantime, this study has laid a groundwork that can be used for comparison and a framework for coding messages.

Examining social media with more detail as advocated for in this study can elicit new questions about best practices for political party social media use. For example, in this data set both Democratic groups tended to repeatedly list the same upcoming event for multiple days in a row. While this may be an effective means for bringing the event to a viewer's attention, it also leads to higher post counts, even though no new information is communicated. It is not clear if such repeat messages help or hinder party efforts to get people to attend events, but would be an interesting question for future research. For this analysis, repeated posts were treated the same as a unique post, but, for further analysis, an argument could be made for discounting repeated posts. Additionally, it is not clear if party members experience some form of information fatigue from repeated posts and how this may influence re-

sponses or affect general information processing.

A different style of Facebook communication can be explored by analyzing the Fort Bend Republican Party's use of partisan posts, which the data show are much higher as a percent of posts than the other three organizations. Their partisan posts were significantly higher statistically at the $p<.001$ level. This use could be an attempt to rally the Facebook base but could also be a demonstration of the party's misunderstanding of the value of this type of social media tool. Since members of the Facebook base very likely already hold similar political opinions, a party may get more value out of organizational and inclusiveness type posts if they provide party information or event information than if they depend on partisan postings. However, the partisan messages may rally members of the Facebook base to become more involved with the party and its activities by appealing to their feelings on issues.

Given that partisan posts are more likely to generate responses, are political parties aware of this and intentionally tailoring their posts to elicit responses? The data imply that they are not. The two parties which received significantly higher average likes per post for partisan content posted the least amount of partisan content. Meanwhile, the Fort Bend Republican Party posted mostly partisan content messages but received almost no feedback. There are multiple possible reasons for these findings. Party leaders may be aware that all of these content styles are important and provide a mix of information regardless of how party members respond. For example, despite high responses to partisan style content, party leaders may recognize that members are more likely to need event information to participate in party activities and

election information to find their voting locations or to be reminded to vote more than they need to be rallied by more partisan posts. Party leaders may misconstrue the information they think their party members want because they have not analyzed the responses. The number and behavior of party members currently following the party on Facebook may not be representative of the party at large, which is how party leaders are tailoring their message.

While response counts provide some insight into potential effectiveness, they do not describe the content or quality of responses. Party organization can in theory observe the cues of respondents and in turn provide more of the style of posts that receive the highest degree of response, but this may not always be in the best interest of those receiving the information. An important next step of key interest would be a longitudinal study to see if and how political parties change their strategy vis-a-vis the responses they receive and the trends of other parties. However, it may actually be more important to know more about the respondents and their subsequent actions rather than just more about the responses themselves in order to determine effective communication practices. Regardless, it is very difficult to come to any firm conclusions about the effectiveness of the parties' Facebook communications beyond response counts.

Another future direction for this line of research is to better understand party goals regarding the use of online social media and to use the data to determine if these goals are being met. Through cooperation with the parties themselves, it may be possible to identify the goals of various social media strategies or even to develop small

experiments that can be conducted though Facebook to better understand the effects of post frequencies and communication styles. As more information is gathered, this line of research will become increasingly valuable for political scientists to understand how political parties are adapting to new forms of communication, and for practitioners to learn best practices to maximize political engagement and communication effectiveness.

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