

# Documenting the Emergence of Grassroots Politics on Facebook: the Florida Case

Ji Young Kim, Magda Giurcanu,  
& Juliana Fernandes

## *Abstract*

This study analyzed the message characteristics of U.S. high school and college students' Facebook political groups to explore how young voters produce and reproduce political content on social network sites. Grounded in communication frame analysis, a quantitative content analysis revealed that the majority of Facebook wall posts focused on politics as a game frame rather than as an issue frame,

---

*Dr. Ji Young Kim is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Communications at the University of Hawaii at Manoa. Dr. Magda Giurcanu is a Teaching Assistant Professor in the Department of Political Science at East Carolina University. Dr. Juliana Fernandes is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Strategic Communication at the University of Miami. Correspondence can be directed to [jkim22@hawaii.edu](mailto:jkim22@hawaii.edu).*

paralleling findings in traditional news media research. Additional results show that within the interactivity frame, hyperlinks and a call for offline interactions are prevalent, as well as the emotional manifestation frame. When accounted for the election type and partisanship in the context of 2008 presidential and 2010 midterm elections, Democrats dominated the discussion during presidential elections, but Republicans were more active during congressional elections. The results of this research contribute to our understanding of the use of social networking sites for political purposes. Most importantly, it adds to the scarce body of knowledge on the grassroots-style of political discourse.

**F**or more than a decade, the Internet has played a major role in political campaigning as an excellent medium for mobilization, dissemination of information, and social interaction (Postelnicu & Cozma, 2007) as well as an impetus for grassroots political participation and youth involvement (Bakker & de Vreese, 2011; Tolbert & McNeal, 2003). In the United States, electronic campaign tools became ubiquitous first during the 2004 general election cycle, when candidates' blogs, hyperlinks, and Meet-Up web services allowed for a more personalized and conversational approach in the interactions with their followers and encouraged candidates' supporters to organize themselves outside the online environment (Trammell, Williams, Postelnicu, & Landreville, 2006). The rise of the Internet made scholars argue that it became a "game changer" in the

2004 and 2008 presidential nominations helping relatively obscure candidates such as Howard Dean and Ron Paul emerge as viable contenders through online grassroots mobilization and fundraising campaigns efforts (Christenson, Smidt, & Panagopoulos, 2014).

Social networking sites (SNSs) such as Facebook entered political competitions in the 2006 election cycle giving congressional and gubernatorial candidates the ability to personalize Facebook pages and make the pages available to voters. In the beginning, the majority of congressional and gubernatorial candidates used these pages mostly to disseminate information rather than engage in two-way communication (Sweetser & Lariscy, 2008). It was during the 2008 presidential elections that Facebook made a huge splash, providing candidates with campaign tools not only to communicate and share information with constituents as in 2006 (Woolley, Limperos, & Oliver, 2010), but also to engage voters on a more personal level and promote a forum for discussion.

Despite the importance of Facebook for political campaigning, we know relatively little about the type of engagement and content of Facebook messages (Carlisle & Patton, 2013), and how *the public* itself uses this avenue for mobilization and political participation. Only a handful of studies have looked at the actual content of social media, how it is produced and framed by everyday citizens, with somewhat mixed findings. For example, Woolley et al. (2010) concluded that people used the 2008 Facebook support groups to gather rather than share information or, at most, as a “token gesture of support for a certain candidate” (p. 647). Fernandes, Giurcanu, Bowers, and Neely (2010) reached more optimistic conclusions, suggesting

that Facebook content facilitated political dialogue and civic involvement.

The role of social media in mobilizing the public into political and civic actions has been emphasized in studies of advanced democratic societies such as the U.S. (Tolbert & McNeal, 2003), Norway (Enjolras, Steen-Johnsen, & Wollebaek, 2012), Sweden (Svensson, 2014), and Australia (Xenos, Vromen, & Loader, 2014). From a social movement perspective, past research underscored the importance of social/new media in producing social capital. When individuals, especially the younger cohorts of under 35 years old use the Internet for information gathering, they are exposed to opportunities to connect with others, organize activities, recruit volunteers, all of which generate incentives for civic life engagement (Shah, Kwak, & Holbert, 2001). If some aspects of Internet use contribute to civic engagement and social capital formation, virtual public spheres also represent venues for established social movements to organize and connect at the grassroots level (Carty & Onyett, 2006). This study builds upon both perspectives on new media as a generating factor for civic involvement and as a facilitator venue of communication and sharing ideas among members of a networked activist group.

We continue the tradition of studying the role of social media as conducive to grassroots mobilization efforts in established democracies by documenting the emergence of Facebook as a useful political tool among student organizations affiliated with major U.S. parties, the Democrat Party, and the Republican Party in Florida during the 2008 and 2010 U.S. elections. The study applies frames developed in traditional and new media studies to analyze

user-generated conversations during the emergence of Facebook as a campaign tool. Our goal is to connect media frame studies to produce a new frame typology that captures both the similarities and the specifics of the two media types. In addition, if prior bottom-up studies of social media content looked exclusively at high stakes events, like the U.S. presidential elections or the Arab revolution, this study introduces an intermediate variable—high and low stakes events in the U.S. context—and seeks to understand 1) how young voters frame political elections on social media, 2) what differences, if any, there are in the social media content produced by young voters when election stakes and partisanship are accounted for.

### **Political Dialogue Frames on Social Networking Sites**

Media frames have often been used to create an “unavoidable reality of the communication process” (Nisbet, 2009, p. 1771), especially relevant when complex policy issues have to be communicated. Frames are therefore “schemes” for both presenting (media frames) and comprehending news (individual frames). From the media perspective, frames are used to define events (de Vreese, 2005) to influence public opinion (Brulle, 2010), and to shape policy making proposals (Shawki, 2010). From the individual frame perspective, frames describe how the public makes sense of events and political news (Capella & Jamieson, 1997). Our analysis builds upon both media and individual perspectives on frames in the sense that the Facebook users selectively introduce political news that are important to the networked community. Using frame analysis of user-generated Facebook wall-posts, this study explores how student support groups under-

stand, interpret, and reproduce political issues during election times. In accordance with social movement research, we investigate how the online medium facilitates collective action among the networked student groups to mobilize and influence the elections (Carty & Onyett, 2006; Shah, Kwak, & Holbert, 2001). We are however paying attention to the content of such deliberative discussions. Similar to Dahlgren (2005), we believe that understanding the deliberative nature of these bottom-up civic groups is important because such grassroots groups represent the basic premise of a democratic society in which citizens engage with each other.

### **Types of Political Campaign Frames**

There are two approaches to content analyzing frames in the news: inductive and deductive. The inductive approach aims to capture the array of all possible frames. Groshek and Al-Rawi (2013) analyzed the social media content for most commonly used keywords, terms and phrases. One advantage of this approach is that no predetermined categories are imposed on the text, but the attempt of covering everything oversimplifies the final output. For instance, Groshek and Al-Rawi (2013) analyzed more than one million social media posts and reduced these big data to about ten keywords such as “vote,” “people,” “years,” or “country,” which tell us little on the actual frames used to differently portray Barack Obama and Mitt Romney on Facebook and Twitter. While still a valuable approach, our study aims to go beyond this oversimplification of content and get a more nuanced understanding of the characteristics of social media content.

We move next to identify the frames already outlined as dominant in traditional media studies. The goal is to adapt the frame typology identified in traditional media to new media context. In one of the most comprehensive studies on media frames, Strömbäck and Kaid (2008) point out the traditional media's tendency in established democracies to "meta-frame" politics as a game rather than as issues, in the sense that individual politicians are portrayed as focusing on competing for power instead of discussing policy issues. It is further explained in the study that traditional media's tendency to apply—the game meta-frame—is observed, regardless of country and the level of commercialization of media (Strömbäck & Kaid, 2008). Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) further developed the concept of meta-framing of politics as game versus issues and suggested that in fact these meta-frames are consist for different sub-frames. As such, the meta-frame of politics as a game can be divided into sub-frames of horse race, where the focus is on winners and losers, news management frame, governing frame, and political strategy frame (Strömbäck & van Aelst, 2010).

The commercialization of media, the need to sell news, and the logic of audiovisual media (particularly TV) have been pointed out as main reasons for this increased focus on the human aspect and individuals in traditional news media content (Strömbäck & van Aelst, 2010). While social media lacks this impetus of commercialization, given the free access, the incentive to capture the attention of as many followers as possible is still present in this environment, leading to a tendency toward message personalization already confirmed in social media research. For instance, Trammell et al. (2006) analyzed the Internet pres-

ence on blogs and campaign websites of ten Democratic candidates in the 2004 primary election and uncovered important differences between blogs and candidates' websites. Blogs displayed a personal and conversational style in communicating with voters and promoted the perception of involvement of followers particularly through the comment feature. Candidates' websites, on the other hand, looked very similar in terms of overall page structure, color choice, graphics, and icons used. Most importantly, candidates themselves rarely wrote blog posts or spoke to the website visitors through these websites (Trammell et al., 2006).

Moreover, social media studies that looked precisely at the characteristics of user-generated content emphasized the tendency of personalizing discussions about candidates' characteristics rather than engaging in issue positions. For instance, Postelnicu and Cozma (2007) content analyzed candidates' MySpace profiles for the 2006 U.S. midterm elections and found that information posted related to personal and professional information about the candidates. The user-generated content addressed to candidates was personal in nature, while the user-generated content addressed to other supporters tended to discuss political issues. Sweetser and Lariscy (2008) analyzed Facebook wall posts of the 2006 congressional candidates and found that the conversation was rather shallow (i.e., simple supportive mentions toward candidates), with only 9% of the posts focusing on substantive policy information. Gerodimos and Justinussen (2014) analyzed Obama's official Facebook page during the 2012 presidential election campaign and found that personality was one of the two most popular frames, in addition to the call for action.



## Meta-frames on Facebook

Adopting from prior scholarship, this study used meta-frames to analyze Facebook posts—every original post written by the members of the groups (i.e., Strömbäck & Dimitrova, 2006). Issue (i.e., when the messages focus on political issues or policies) and game (i.e., views politics/elections as a strategic game) were the two most frequently used meta-frames in election contexts (Strömbäck & Dimitrova, 2006). Game meta-frames are further categorized into two sub-frames of *political strategies* and *personalization*. Political strategies refer to the horserace (winning or losing), the visibility strategy (advertising effort to make the campaign visible), and the governing strategy (current government job approval/evaluation). Personalization encompasses messages that bring an emotional angle to the presentation of the event and focus on the images of candidates or their personal stories.

Furthermore, given the very specific nature of these messages, which refer to Facebook wall interactions of students participating in support groups for political candidates, the interactivity meta-frame was added to address the interactive nature of online and offline activities. According to McMillan's (2002) conceptual work on interactivity, "user-to-user" interactivity happens when users are asked to volunteer or are invited to an event, while "user-to-system" or "user-to-document" interactivity happens when users are able to comment on the document or to control access to the content (i.e., hyperlink). In this study, *offline interactivity* was defined as content that invites for interaction outside Facebook, such as invitations to participate in debates, rallies, speeches, and group meetings. Our understanding of offline interactivity is

similar to the call for action frame in other social media studies (Gerodimos & Justinussen, 2014). In addition, the *online interactivity* measures the “user-to-system” interactivity and refers to comments and likes in our study. Finally, *hyperlinks* were coded separately as an example of the ability to control access to content. Hyperlinks have been considered an important interactive tool giving users control over content and encouraging users to get external information to promote more discussion on the site (Foot Schneider, Dougherty, Xenos, & Larsen, 2003). For instance, Williams, Trammell, Postelnicu, Landreville, and Martin (2005) found that interactive features were greatly utilized on Kerry’s and Bush’s sites during the 2004 general election cycle. These interactive features included hyperlinks, comments, or provided information for users to mobilize together. Fernandes et al. (2010) further confirmed hyperlinks as a prominent interactive feature among college students Facebook groups during the 2008 election cycle.

Besides capturing the meta-frames and sub-frames of user-generated content on social media, the tone of these conversations is also an important aspect of social media content. The tone of the conversation refers to whether affective attributes of the message are positive, neutral, or negative. Previous research on affective attributes emphasized a selection process that users go through when posting news items on online support forums. Iyengar and Hahn (2009) found that despite the diversity of news items the individuals have access to, they still limit their exposure to items found agreeable and deliberately avoid exposure to disagreeable information. Wojcieszak and Mutz (2009), using a representative sample of chatroom and

**Table 1**  
*Meta-frames on Facebook*

<b>Meta-frames</b>	<b>Sub-frames</b>
<b>Issue</b>	Employment, taxes, trade, recession, Wall Street, economy, business, government budget, social security, healthcare, foreign affairs, energy/environment, military, education, and campaign
<b>Game</b> Political strategies	—Horserace —Visibility strategies (1: candidate, 2: student group) —Government evaluation
Personalization	—Human interest —Emotional manifestation
<b>Interactivity</b>	Offline interaction Online interaction Hyperlink

message board users, confirmed this selection process to only agreeable news. The study found that the online forums do not promote cross-cutting issues, with participants preferring to bring issues that only reinforce their ideological orientations. We consider all these aspects of meta-frames, sub-frames, and interactivity to develop a new frame typology (see Table 1), that will shed light on the way youth engage online in political campaigns, frame political debates, and reproduce campaign tactics based on practices that have been dominant in traditional news media.

### **Research Design**

We use Florida as our case study to discuss the nature of young student voters' conversations during the emer-

gence of Facebook as an important campaign tool. In comparative terms, Florida was selected as one of the most important states in the presidential, congressional, and gubernatorial races in 2008 and 2010 due to its unique combination of competitiveness and size, as the fourth most populous state with 27 electoral votes. Florida constitutes a microcosm of the entire nation with a large percentage of retired residents and foreign immigrants on the one hand and with an ethnic and racial composition similar to the national average on the other (MacManus, 2005).

Politically, a fifth of the total electorate is registered as Independents, but at least three distinct partisan-geographical areas can be identified: heavy Republican population in the North, an evenly divided population in the center, and a Democratic leaning population in South Florida. This combination of size, shifting demographics, and partisan affiliations made Florida one of the most crucial swing states in the 2008 presidential race (Padgett, 2008). The 2010 midterm congressional elections continued this trend of a highly competitive state (Fowler & Ridout, 2010): The three-way Senate competition between Marco Rubio (Republican), Kendrick Meek (Democrat), and former Republican governor Charlie Crist (Independent), and the gubernatorial contest between Alex Sink (Democrat) and Rick Scott (Republican). The amount of advertising spent in Florida made this state the second-most expensive gubernatorial race, the fourth-most expensive Senate race, and Florida District 22 the fifth-most expensive district at the national level (Fowler & Ridout, 2010).

Because our research design includes two types of elections and two partisan affiliations, it allows us to investigate the extent to which these differences affect the online groups' message frames and campaign strategies. Prior research emphasized the importance of short-term characteristics, such as the flow of information and overall enthusiasm for high stakes elections as factors generating mobilization during election times (Campbell, 1960; Tufte, 1975). Given the separated power system in the U.S. where presidential elections decide the head of the executive branch, the mobilization and enthusiasm this type of election gathers offline should be followed online on Facebook. Therefore, the way content is framed during presidential elections may differ from the way content is framed during midterm elections.

With respect to partisanship effects, prior research showed that both Republicans and Democrats used the Internet and social media for similar purposes (Gainous & Wagner, 2011). However, the 2008 Obama campaign on Facebook stood out as an innovative political tool, unequaled at the time on the Republican side (CIRCLE, 2008). Considering Florida as an important large swing state, this study proposes that the overall enthusiasm generated by the Obama 2008 Facebook campaign to be reflected in the Florida Facebook groups as well. The novelty of Facebook as a useful campaign tool was rapidly picked up by Republican candidates, but the enthusiasm generated by Barack Obama, particularly among young student voters in 2008, may affect the overall distribution of frames in the Democratic camp relative to the Republican posts. Therefore, by exploring the frames across election type and partisanship, it is expected that the different na-

ture of elections will significantly affect the distribution of frames across elections, while partisanship should have less effect on the distribution of frames used. It is important to underscore that if differences in content across different partisan groups are found in the data, these differences should be highly dependent on the specificities of the 2008 Obama campaign (novelty and enthusiastic crowds) and not related to partisanship affiliation per se.

The discussion above of framing characteristics, interactivity, and tone of social media content as well as election types and partisanship affiliation allows us to draw the following propositions:

**H1:** The game meta-frame of politics will be more common than the issue meta-frame of politics in the political dialogue on the student groups' Facebook pages.

**H2:** The interactivity frame will be one of the most common frames in the political dialogue on the student groups' Facebook pages.

**H3:** The tone of the messages on the student groups' Facebook pages will be more positive or neutral than negative.

Further, using Florida as a case to explore the student voters' information use on Facebook, this study analyzed messages collected from the student support groups both for the 2008 presidential and 2010 midterm elections. Hence, our final hypothesis proposed that the use of meta-frames in the messages is different between these two election contexts.

**H4:** The use of meta-frames in the messages on the student group's Facebook pages is proportionally different across presidential and congressional election contexts.

## **Method**

### **Sampling**

This study uses a quantitative content analysis of the original wall posts (messages) from the student groups' Facebook pages. As active social media users, the college student sample is an appropriate target population given that this research is focused on the emergence of Facebook as a political tool when young student voters were decisive voters (Pew Research Center, 2012). Students have been used as the primary sample in 30.6% of 219 social media studies published in top peer-reviewed journals in advertising, communication, marketing, and public relations from 1997 to 2010, followed by only 5% of social media studies to have used the general public as a sample (Khang, Ki, & Ye, 2012).

Facebook posts were publicly available and archived using a retrospective manual data collection method (Villegas, 2016) two weeks after the elections closed. This method encompasses collecting data retroactively, instead of real-time data collection. For the 2008 presidential election, the most active student Facebook groups were selected for the two finalists, Barack Obama and John McCain. This sampling method yielded 'UF Students for Obama' and 'Gators for McCain' Facebook groups. For the 2010 midterm elections, eleven Facebook groups were identified and posts were collected from all groups for all finalists in the Senate, House, and gubernatorial races at all universities in Florida. This method yielded the following groups in the Senate race: 'Gators for Marco Rubio,' 'Students for Marco Rubio (Nova Southeastern University),' 'UF Supports Kendrick Meek for Florida,' and 'Wildcats for Kendrick Meek' (Bethune-Cookman Univer-

sity). Three Facebook groups were identified for the House races: ‘Noles for Southerland (Florida State University),’ ‘Students for Ron Klein (Florida Atlantic University),’ and ‘High School Students for Joe Garcia.’ Finally, ‘UF Students for Alex Sink’ and ‘Students for Rick Scott’ were selected for gubernatorial races. As mentioned in the research design section, we are interested in assessing how partisanship and election type affect students’ online civic participation. Given that the U.S. is a two-party system with minor candidates unlikely to be present during midterm elections and, even if present, unlikely to win these elections, we are restricting our student group selection only to candidates with clear chances of winning, i.e. Democrat and Republican finalists in both types of elections.

### **Coding Procedure**

A detailed coding book containing the content category explanations was created based on previous research (Fernandes et al., 2010; Foot et al., 2003; Gerondimos & Justinussen 2014; Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000; Ström-*bäck* & van Aelst, 2010). Two of the authors served as coders and the unit of analysis was a single wall post—original written messages on Facebook posted by the users. Intercoder reliability was tested on 10% of the sample and the results yielded a range of agreement of .61 to 1 (Scott’s Pi) and 79 to 100 using the percent of agreement scores. The tone and strategy frame variables had somewhat low reliability scores (.61) and interpretation of findings related to these variables should be taken with caution (Neuendorf, 2002).



## Coding Categories

Messages were coded for the presence or absence of the following meta-frames (issue, game, and interactivity) and tone. Based on prior studies (Strömbäck & van Aelst, 2010), a Facebook wall post is coded as an issue meta-frame if it mentions a specific issue position. Then, if the wall post mentioned an issue, a predefined list was used to specify the types of issues the message was referring to (employment, taxes, trade, recession, Wall Street, economy, business, government budget, social security, health-care, foreign affairs, energy/environment, military, education, and campaign).

The game meta-frame includes three political strategies and two personalized sub-frames. First, political strategy sub-frames were coded as: (1) horserace (who is winning or losing), (2) visibility strategies (endorsements, advertising, activity reports, or social media tactics through which the group and/or the candidate the group supports can gain visibility), and (3) governing frame (comments on current government's performance). When visibility strategies were used, we then coded: (1) whether strategies focused on the political candidates and parties and (2) whether strategies focused on students' Facebook supporting group activities. If a wall post mentioned what a candidate/party was doing, who endorsed candidates, or candidates' political advertising messages, the post was coded as candidate/party-centered strategies. On the other hand, if a post asked online users to join the Facebook group, to share pictures/banners, or to recommend the group to other friends, the post was coded as supporting group-centered strategies. The personalized sub-frames were coded as: (1) human interest (focus on candidates' personal

characteristics or qualifications) and (2) emotional manifestation (focus on emotions).

In addition to the issue and game meta-frames, this study seeks to gauge the interactive nature of these student supporting groups, both online and offline. The interactivity meta-frame comprised of three sub-frames: (1) offline interactivity refers to wall posts promoting offline political or social interaction such as invitations to watch a debate, participate in an event as a group, (2) online interactivity was coded when wall posts have comments and likes (coders recorded the number of comments and likes for each wall post), and (3) hyperlinks were coded for presence or absence. Most importantly, we do not reduce the wall posts to only one meta-frame or sub-frame and we use a “check all that apply” strategy. We obtain this way an encompassing distribution of meta-frames and sub-frames across party affiliation and election type without reducing our data in any way. Finally, the tone of a wall post was coded as (1) positive, (2) negative, or (3) neutral.

## Results

Of 471 wall posts, 315 were related to the presidential race and only 156 were related to the congressional elections. Democrats were better represented than Republicans, with 310 wall posts relative to 161, respectively. As expected, Democrats dominated the wall posts in Florida during the presidential election with 274 posts versus only 41 among the Republican groups. However, by the 2010 midterm election the situation reversed. Republicans were much more present on Facebook student groups with 120 posts versus only 36 for Democrats. About 78% of wall posts came from members or followers of the groups (male:

**Table 2**

*Meta-frames and Sub-frames across Elections and Parties  
(2008 and 2010)*

Frames	Race Type			Party Affiliation	
	Total N=471	Pres. N=315	Congr. N=156	Dem. N=310	Rep. N=161
<i>Issue</i>					
<i>Meta-frame</i>					
Policy/issues	9% (42)	11% (34)	5% (8)	10% (31)	7% (11)
<i>Game</i>					
<i>Meta-frame</i>					
<i>Strategies</i>					
Government Evaluation	2% (10)	2% (7)	2% (3)	2% (7)	2% (3)
Visibility Strategy	64% (303)	65% (204)	63% (99)	69% (212)	57% (91)
Horserace	12% (58)	15% (48)	6% (10)	15% (48)	6% (10)
<i>Personalization</i>					
Human interest	10% (46)	10% (30)	10% (16)	9% (27)	12% (19)
Emotional manifestation	32% (152)	40% (127)	16% (25)	39% (119)	21% (33)
<i>Interactivity</i>					
<i>Meta-frame</i>					
Offline Interaction	19% (88)	20% (64)	15% (24)	21% (66)	14% (22)
Online Interaction	4% (21)	0% (0)	13% (21)	1% (5)	10% (16)
Hyperlink	40% (185)	30% (95)	60% (90)	31% (97)	55% (88)

*Note:* Meta-frames and sub-frames are coded on a presence/absence basis and therefore the categories are not mutually exclusive. As a consequence, the sum of all percentages per column can be greater than 100%.

**Table 3**

*Visibility Strategy Sub-frame across Elections and Parties (2008 and 2010)*

	Race Type			Party Affiliation	
	Total	Pres.	Congr.	Dem.	Rep.
Visibility Strategies	N=303	N=204	N=99	N=212	N=91
<b><i>Candidate-oriented</i></b>	34% (102)	33% (68)	34% (34)	36% (75)	30% (27)
<b><i>Group-oriented</i></b>	76% (229)	71% (145)	85% (84)	71% (150)	87% (79)

*Note:* The two possible outcomes, candidate or group categories are not mutually exclusive. As a consequence, the sum of all percentages per column can be greater than 100%.

45%, female: 33%), while about 21% were made by users impersonating the actual candidates or group administrators.

The first hypothesis proposed that the game meta-frame would be more common than the issue meta-frame of politics on Facebook wall posts. As Table 2 shows, the game meta-frame substantially overpasses the issue meta-frame, the latter ranging between 5 to 11% across different elections and parties, supporting H1. The few issues mentioned were Wall Street, taxes, military spending, and healthcare. With respect to sub-frames frequently used, the frequencies listed in Table 2 illustrate that the visibility strategy comes on top (64% of all wall posts), followed by hyperlinks (40%), and emotional manifestations (32%). These percentages vary substantially when disaggregating the data based on election and party types, but the three sub-frames remain the most popular.

Given the importance of the visibility strategy sub-frame across all Facebook groups, this frame was further divided into candidate/party-centered and group-centered strategies. As seen in Table 3, 76% of the visibility strategy wall posts can be classified as Facebook group-centered posts; while only 34% of wall posts addressed candidate or party related strategies that would promote knowledge about candidate's activities, party rallies, and issues.

Our second hypothesis proposed that interactivity features would dominate political content on Facebook walls. We further distinguished interactivity between online and offline types, in addition to hyperlinks. Our study illustrates that the preferred interactivity frame is hyperlinks (40%), followed by offline (19%), and online interactivity (4%), supporting H2.

With respect to tone of wall posts, this study hypothesized that most posts would have a positive or neutral tone and that, as support groups, negative attitudes would be minimal. Percentages and frequencies listed in Table 4-A confirm that only 5% of the total posts have a negative tone. The wall posts are mostly positive (41%) or neutral (54%), supporting H3.

Next, the dynamics of the most important frames across types of elections and partisan affiliation was analyzed to test if the use of meta-frame and sub-frames on Facebook walls is different across presidential and congressional election contexts. Game meta-frames are dominant compared to issue meta-frames across type of election (presidential or congressional), and the visibility strategy is the most frequently used sub-frame across elections (Table 2). There are differences in the emotional manifes-

**Table 4A***Tone of Wall Posts in Florida (2008 and 2010)**Tone of Wall Posts across Parties and Elections*

Tone	Race Type			Party Affiliation	
	Total N=471	Pres. N=315	Congr. N=156	Dem. N=310	Rep. N=161
Positive	41% (194)	45% (142)	33% (52)	45% (139)	34% (55)
Negative	5% (24)	6% (19)	3% (5)	5% (15)	6% (9)
Neutral	54% (253)	49% (154)	63% (99)	50% (156)	60% (97)
			$\chi^2(df.2) = 9.2553$ $p = .01$	$\chi^2(df.2) = 4.9939$ $p = .08$	

**Table 4B***Tone of Wall Posts across Parties by Elections*

Tone	Presidential		Congressional	
	Dem. N=274	Rep. N=41	Dem. N=36	Rep. N=120
Positive	47% (129)	32% (13)	28% (10)	35% (42)
Negative	5% (14)	12% (5)	3% (1)	3% (4)
Neutral	48% (131)	56% (23)	70% (25)	62% (74)
		$\chi^2(df.2) = 5.3392$ $p = .06$	$\chi^2(df.2) = 0.7240$ $p = .07$	

tation frame, with presidential elections displaying higher percentages (40%) than congressional elections (16%).

Concerning partisan comparisons, the emotional manifestation frame dominated the Democrat Facebook groups (39% vs. 21% of Republican groups), while the Republican groups emphasized the interactivity aspects of Facebook via the hyperlink sub-frame (55% vs. 31% of Democrat groups) (Table 2).

**Table 5A**

*Differences in the Distribution of Frames in Florida Elections (2008-2010); Differences of Frames across Elections and Parties*

	Pres. N=315	Congr. N=156	Est. Diff.	Dem. N=310	Rep. N=161	Est. Diff.
Issue	11% (34)	5% (8)	6%*	10% (31)	7% (11)	3%
At least One Game	83% (260)	82% (128)	1%	85% (263)	78% (125)	6%
At least One Strategy	71% (225)	68% (106)	3%	75% (232)	61% (99)	14% **
At least One Per- sonalization	42% (133)	22% (34)	20%*	40% (125)	26% (42)	14% **
At least One Interactivity	48% (150)	69% (107)	21% ***	49% (153)	65% (104)	16% ***

*Note:* The table lists percentages and frequencies in parentheses. P-values correspond to a two-tailed difference of proportions test. When the sample size is small (i.e., cell values are smaller than 5), Fisher's exact test has been used to determine the association in the data. P-values are reported as follows: \*\*\* if p-value < .001; \*\* if p-value < .01; \* if p-value < .05.

Further analysis was run to uncover differences in frame distribution across elections and parties. The comparisons of proportions reported in Table 5-A of the meta-frames 'issue', 'at least one game', and 'at least one interactivity' and the game sub-frames of 'at least one strategy' and 'at least one personalization' illustrate that differences are statistically significant for 3 out of 5 comparisons across types of elections. The proportions of issue and personalization frames of wall posts during the presidential election are statistically significantly larger than the proportions of these wall posts frames during the congres-

**Table 5B**  
*Differences of Frames across Parties by Elections*

	Presidential			Congressional		
	Dem. N=274	Rep. N=41	Est. Diff.	Dem. N=36	Rep. N=120	Est. Diff.
Issue	11% (30)	10% (4)	1%	3% (1)	6% (7)	3%
At least One Game	84% (231)	71% (29)	13% *	89% (32)	80% (96)	9%
At least One Strategy	74% (204)	51% (21)	53% ***	78% (28)	65% (78)	13%
At least One Per- sonalization	44% (121)	29% (12)	15%	11% (4)	25% (30)	14%
At least One Interactivity	49% (134)	39% (16)	10%	53% (19)	73% (88)	20% *

*Note:* The table lists percentages and frequencies in parentheses. P-values correspond to a two-tailed difference of proportions test. When the sample size is small (i.e., cell values are smaller than 5), Fisher's exact test has been used to determine the association in the data. P-values are reported as follows: \*\*\* if p-value < .001; \*\* if p-value < .01; \* if p-value < .05.

sional elections. Conversely, the proportion of wall posts that classify under the interactivity frame is statistically significantly larger for congressional elections than for presidential elections.

Our analyses of proportion differences of meta-frames and sub-frames across parties reveal some differences where 3 out of all 5 comparisons are statistically significant at different levels (see Table 5-A). As shown in a previous analysis, Democrat posts focused more on emotional manifestations than the Republican posts did, yielding the personalization frame as one of the largest proportional



difference across parties (40% for Democrats; 26% for Republicans). The Republican groups are more interactive online than the Democrat groups, with more Republican members commenting and like-ing wall posts than Democrats. Democrats focus more on horserace and strategies than Republicans.

These ideological differences are surprising and possibly generated by the enthusiasm of the 2008 Obama campaign. To remove this effect, comparisons across different partisan affiliations were run while controlling for election type. When simultaneously controlling for type of election and party affiliation (Table 5-B), the differences noticed across partisanship disappear in large part. Only during the presidential elections statistically significant differences across parties emerge, with Democrat groups displaying larger proportions of 'at least one game,' 'at least one strategy,' and 'at least one personalization' frames than Republican groups. In the congressional elections, however, the only difference detected consisted of higher interactivity for the Republican (73%) than for the Democrat groups (53%).

Finally, in regard to the tone across elections (Table 4-A), presidential races are significantly different than congressional races ( $\chi^2= 9.25, p=.01$ ). In the presidential race, posts are more evenly distributed between positive (46%) and neutral (49%) tones, as opposed to the congressional race, where the emphasis is on neutral tone (63%). When looking across parties (Table 4-A), the tone differences are not statistically significant between Democrats (neutral, 50%; positive, 45%) and Republican (neutral, 60%; positive, 34%) ( $\chi^2= 4.99, p=.08$ ). The results remain the same when removing the effect of election type ( $\chi^2 =5.33, p=.06$ )

(Table 4-B). In the congressional race, both Democrat and Republican groups emphasized the same tone, less positive and more neutral ( $\chi^2 = 0.72, p = .07$ ).

## Discussion

Despite the increased importance of social network sites in a campaign environment, little research has been done to investigate the bottom-up style of political conversations on online environments. Even though youth political participation was a staple in the 2008 presidential election, in part because of Barack Obama and his use of social media, more empirical studies are needed to understand how student voters talk about politics online. To fill in the gap, this study used a frame analysis to investigate how college student support groups use Facebook as a medium for promoting political engagement while considering different types of elections and partisan affiliations. Corroborating findings from traditional media framing studies (i.e., Strömbäck & Kaid, 2008), our results show that student political groups focused much more on politics as a game than debating policy issues. In particular, visibility strategies (i.e., endorsements, advertising, and other group and/or candidate promotional tactics) were commonly discussed across types of elections and party affiliation. Even though this study did not conduct a direct comparison with traditional news media, our analyses illustrate that meta-frames and sub-frames from traditional media studies of advanced democracies can be applied to social media contexts, furthering our proposal of a frame typology.

In contrast to traditional media, our results found that Facebook posts had a minimal number of horserace

sub-frames, which has been one of the most frequent message frames on the traditional news media (i.e., Strömbäck & van Aelst, 2010). Instead, Facebook messages portrayed more emotional manifestations as well as interactivity frames, with hyperlinks as one of the dominant sub-frames suggesting that Facebook student group users direct other users to get additional information related to the campaign. Furthermore, our findings show that most of the political dialogue on these Facebook walls fall under the rubric of strategies including promotional messages of campaign events, political ads, donations, and candidate appearances in the area. When these strategies were further divided into two categories, the results suggested that the proportion of group related posts was larger than the proportion of candidate/party posts. By further dividing these strategies, we were able to reveal two of the very core elements of supporting groups on social networks: interactivity and connectedness.

Particularly, our findings suggest that the main role of these student-generated Facebook groups seems to mobilize their members into more participation toward the group related activities rather than political awareness about candidate or party strategies. Despite having the potential of offering substantive information on policy issues, where the presence of hyperlinks and videos could generate interesting debates, the conversations on Facebook pages refrain from addressing policy issues. This tells us that communicating with peers is an important factor for student groups to participate in the political discussion online. On Facebook, social interactions were usually found among friends who already know each other offline (Pempek et al., 2009). From an individual perspective, it

seems that students are interested in acquiring information but without directly engaging in presenting their opinions on issues. From a group perspective, the actual debates, if present, seem to take place offline, given a reasonable amount of invitations to offline group meetings compared to online interaction. As a result, these political supporting groups play a significant role in encouraging users to interact with each other for political purposes at face-to-face events.

The results also show that most of the messages were either neutral or positive, with very minimal negative references as these groups were likeminded individuals supporting a mutual candidate. Bekafigo et al. (2015) also stated that users' messages on social network sites (i.e., Facebook or Twitter) are overwhelmingly positive, while negative campaigning has been a popular strategy on the traditional media. In this current study, instead of uncivil debates, most of the content on these supporting groups was also related to fact-based information or positive mentions about the supporting candidate or election.

In addition to analyzing user-generated content on grassroots political groups on Facebook, this study explored the political campaign frames across different election contexts (presidential and congressional) and between two political parties (Democrat and Republican). Particularly, in regard to partisanship, Democrats dominated the discussion during presidential elections, but Republicans were more active during congressional elections. The findings revealed that the student audiences followed online the enthusiasm generated by the presidential elections offline, while partisanship played little to no role in generating frame differences across the two groups. Presidential

elections are more enthusiastic and emotionally charged events than congressional ones, which can be attested by a greater proportion of the emotional manifestation sub-frame for presidential elections. In the context of a low-stakes election, Facebook student political groups are used to encourage both offline and online participation and spread information via hyperlinks. Finally, our results indicate that Democrats used the emotional manifestation sub-frame more than Republicans, yielding a more passionate campaign on the Democrat side. The overall enthusiasm driven by Barack Obama's appeal to the student groups in 2008 was captured in the Florida Facebook groups as well.

Similar to prior scholarship, this study also allows us to consider younger citizens, usually under 35 years old, as the major "cohort" group for social mobilization and political engagement. This generation builds network through social media, acts collectively, and organizes real-world events using online communications tools (i.e., McCarthy-Latimer & Kendrick, Jr., 2016; Schuster, 2013).

Taken together, the findings of this study contribute to the field in at least two ways. First, it applies theoretical concepts found in traditional framing research to a social media context. As a result of this application, a frame typology was devised to investigate in detail how grassroots-style Facebook groups shape their conversations about elections. In this regard, we believe that this typology could serve as a helpful tool for scholars seeking to understand how framing works in a social media context, and more specifically, how bottom-up conversations develop among student groups. Second, these findings illuminate a path to better understand how grassroots-style Facebook

groups frame their conversations about elections. More importantly, it pinpoints what issues or candidates' strategies are more relevant to these individuals, how interactivity plays a role within the groups, as well as how they communicate and mobilize together in favor of (or against) a political candidate. Nonetheless, because social media has become an integral part of candidates' political strategy, understanding how these bottom-up dialogues take place can be a useful strategy to reach out supporters. For example, our findings added evidence that communicating with peers or offline friends is an important factor of social media interaction. Hence, campaign practitioners still need to extend offline events and meetings to encourage student voters' online political engagement.

## **Conclusions and Future Research**

Contributing to our understanding of how student voters frame political discussions on Facebook support groups, this study proposed a frame typology that captured traditional media characteristics as well as the novelty and engagement of social media content in societies where high access to technologies, media freedom, and freedom of expression are pervasive characteristics. Our empirical investigation of the social media usage patterns among young students highlights the relevance of traditional media framing in the social media context and reveals that politics as a game frame is pervasive and transcends the traditional news media scope. Furthermore, our results suggest that the interactivity meta-frame, dominant in social media research, needs to be added as an important framing category. Particularly, the majority of posts contain hyperlinks or call for offline interactions.

As with any research endeavor, this study is not free of limitations. First, compared to other meta-frames, emotion (tone) category only moderately satisfied intercoder reliability test. Future research should reproduce content analysis using more rigorous reliability tests to add to our understanding of emotional aspect of information processing. Second, it only examined student Facebook groups in Florida. While important due to its size, demographic complexities, unclear partisan allegiances, and impressive financial resources, nationwide data collection needs to be gathered to more confidently generalize the findings related to student voters' social media behavior during presidential and midterm elections. Enthusiastic presidential campaigns were followed here by lackluster midterm elections confirming that offline behavior travels online in a swing state. Even though college-age students are the appropriate target population for social media (Facebook) research topics, researchers cannot guarantee that all posts are authentic messages created by the young student members. Future studies should expand these investigations into other age groups to ascertain whether social media content characteristics of student voters differ from content produced by mid-aged or senior citizens.

Finally, this study investigated only user-generated content from Facebook at the moment when Facebook itself emerged as an important political tool. While Facebook might be one of the most important social media to date, other types of social media such as Twitter, Instagram and YouTube have increased their role in subsequent elections. From this perspective, it would be interesting to investigate the applicability of our frame typology to content from other social media sources than Face-

book. As such, future studies may include comparisons across multiple social media channels. In addition, an interesting avenue of research would be to explore the evolution of grassroots social media groups across time to ascertain whether the surge during presidential elections is followed by decline at midterm competitions regardless of partisan preferences.

### Acknowledgements

-All three authors contributed equally to the manuscript.  
 -Project received \$2,500 NSF grant from the University of Florida (I-Cubed Program) for data collection. Magda Giurcanu acknowledges the support received from the Charles University Research Development Schemes, P17 - Sciences of Society, Politics, and Media under the Challenge of the Times during the late writing stages of the paper.

### References

- Bakker, T., & de Vreese, C. H. (2011). Good news for the future? Young people, internet use, and political participation. *Communication Research, 38*(4), 451-470.
- Bekafigo, M. A., & Pingley, A. C. (2015). Tweeting negative: Determinants of negative campaigning in the 2011 gubernatorial elections. *International Journal of E-Politics, 6*(1), 30-41.
- Brulle, R. J. (2010). From environmental campaigns to advancing the public dialog: Environmental communication for civic engagement. *Environmental Communication: A Journal of Nature and Culture, 4*(1), 82-98.
- Campbell, A. (1960). Surge and decline: A study of electoral change. *The Public Opinion Quarterly, 24* (3), 397-418.



- Cappella, J. N., & Jamieson, K. H. (1997). *Spiral of cynicism: The press and the public good*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Carlisle, J. E., & Patton, R. C. (2013). Is social media changing how we understand political engagement? An analysis of Facebook and the 2008 presidential election. *Political Research Quarterly*, 66(4), 883–895.
- Carty, V., & Onyett, J. (2006). Protest, cyberactivism and new social movements: The reemergence of the peace movement post 9/11. *Social Movement Studies*, 5(3), 229-249.
- CIRCLE (November 2008). Turnout by education, race and gender and other 2008 youth voting statistics. Retrieved from [www.civicyouth.org/?p=324](http://www.civicyouth.org/?p=324).
- Christenson, D., Smidt, C., & Panagopoulos, C. (2014) Deus ex Machina: Candidate Web Presence and the Presidential Nomination Campaign. *Political Research Quarterly*, 6(1), 108-122.
- Dahlgren, P. (2005). The Internet, Public Spheres, and Political Communication: Dispersion and Deliberation. *Political Communication*, 22, 147-162.
- de Vreese, C. H. (2005). News framing: Theory and typology. *Information Design Journal + Document Design*, 13(1), 48-59.
- Enjolras, B., Steen-Johnsen, K., & Wollebaek, D. (2012). Social media and mobilization to offline demonstrations: Transcending participatory divides? *New Media & Society*, 15 (6), 890-908.
- Fernandes, J., Giurcanu, M., Bowers, K. W., & Neely, J. C. (2010). The writing on the wall: A content analysis of college students' Facebook groups for the 2008 presidential election. *Mass Communication & Society*, 13(5), 653-675.
- Foot, K., Schneider, S. M., Dougherty, M., Xenos, M., & Larsen, E. (2003). Analyzing linking practices: Candidate sites in the 2002 US electoral web sphere. *Journal of Computer-*

- Mediated Communication*, 8(4), doi: 10.1111/j.1083-6101.2003
- Fowler, E. F., & Ridout, T. N. (2010). Advertising trends in 2010. *The Forum*, 8(4). doi: 10.2202/1540-8884.1411
- Gainous, J., & Wagner, K. M. (2011). *Rebooting American politics: The internet revolution*. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Gerodimos, R., & Justinussen, J. (2014). Obama's 2012 Facebook campaign: Political communication in the age of the like button. *Journal of Information, Technology, & Politics*, 12(2), 113-132.
- Groshek, J., & Al-Rawi, A. (2013). Public sentiment and critical framing in social media content during the 2012 US presidential campaign. *Social Science Computer Review*, 31(5), 563-576.
- Iyengar, S., & Hahn, K. S. (2009). Red media, blue media: Evidence of ideological selectivity in media use. *Journal of Communication*, 59(1), 19-39
- Khang, H., Ki, E., & Ye, L. (2012). Social media research in advertising, communication, marketing, and public relations, 1997-2010. *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly*, 89, 279-298.
- McCarthy-Latimer, C., & Kendrick, Jr., J. R. (2016). How communication technologies function as platforms and pathways to civic and political engagement: An agenda for research and public policy. *International Journal of Civic Engagement and Social Change*, 3(1), 23.
- MacManus, S. A. (2005). Florida: The south's premier battleground state. *American Review of Politics*, 26(Summer), 155-184.
- McMillan, S. J. (2002). Exploring models of interactivity from multiple research traditions: Users, documents, and systems. In L. Lievrouw & S. Livingston (Eds.), *Handbook of New Media* (162-182). London: Sage.

- Neuendorf, K. A. (2002). *The content analysis guidebook*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Nisbet, M. C. (2009). Framing science: A new paradigm in public engagement. In L. Kahlor & P. Stout (Eds.), *New Agendas in Science Communication* (40-67). New York, NY: Taylor & Francis.
- Padgett, T. (October 8, 2008). Young voters could be the deciding factor in Florida. *TIME*. Retrieved from [www.time.com/time/politics/article/0,8599,1848020,00.html](http://www.time.com/time/politics/article/0,8599,1848020,00.html)
- Pempek, T. A., Yermolayeva, V. A., & Calvert, S. L. (2009). College students' social networking experiences on Facebook. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology, 30*(3), 227-238.
- Pew Research Center. (2012). Young voters supported Obama less, but may have mattered more. Retrieved from [www.people-press.org/2012/11/26/young-voters-supported-obama-less-but-may-have-mattered-more/](http://www.people-press.org/2012/11/26/young-voters-supported-obama-less-but-may-have-mattered-more/)
- Postelnicu, M., & Cozma, R. (2007). *Social network politics: A content analysis of MySpace profiles of political candidates from the 2006 U.S. mid-terms*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the National Communication Association, Chicago, IL.
- Schuster, J. (2013). Invisible feminists? Social media and young women's political participation. *Political Science, 65*(1), 8-24.
- Semetko, H. A., & Valkenburg, P. M. (2000). Framing European politics: A content analysis of press and television news. *Journal of Communication, 50*(2), 93-109.
- Shah, D. V., Kwak, N., & Holbery, R. L. (2001). "Connecting" and "disconnecting" with civic life: Patterns of Internet use and the production of social capital. *Political Communication, 18*, 141-162.
- Shawki, N. (2010). Issue frames and the political outcomes of transnational campaigns: A comparison of the Jubilee

- 2000 movement and the currency transaction tax campaign. *Global Society*, 24(2), 203-230.
- Strömbäck, J., & Dimitrova, D. V. (2006). Political and media systems matter: A comparison of election news coverage in Sweden and the United States. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 11, 131.
- Strömbäck, J., & Kaid, L. L. (2008). *The handbook of election news coverage around the world*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Strömbäck, J., & van Aelst, P. (2010). Exploring some antecedents of the media's framing of election news: A comparison of Swedish and Belgian election news. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 15(1), 41-59.
- Svensson, J. (2014). Political participation on social media platforms in Sweden today: Connective individualism, expressive issue engagement and disciplined updating. *International Journal of Media & Cultural Politics*, 10, 347-354.
- Sweetser, K. D., & Lariscy, R. W. (2008). Candidates make good friends: An analysis of candidates' uses of Facebook. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 2(3), 175-198.
- Tolbert, C., & McNeal, R. (2003). Unraveling the effects of the internet on political participation? *Political Research Quarterly*, 56(2), 175-185.
- Trammell, K., Williams, A. P., Postelnicu, M., & Landreville, K. (2006). Evolution of online campaigning: Increasing interactivity in candidate web sites and blogs through text and technical features. *Mass Communication & Society*, 9(1), 21-44.
- Tufte, E. (1975). Determinants of the outcome of midterm congressional elections. *The American Political Science Review*, 69(3), 812-826.
- Villegas, E. B. (2016). Facebook and its disappearing posts: Data collection approaches on fan-pages for social scientists. *The Journal of Social Media in Society*, 5(1), 160-188.

- Williams, A. P., Trammell, K. D., Postelnicu, M., Landreville, K., & Martin, J. (2005). Blogging and hyperlinking: Use of the web to enhance viability during 2004 U.S. campaign. *Journalism Studies*, 6(2), 177-186.
- Wojcieszak, M. E., & Mutz, D. C. (2009). Online groups and political discourse: Do online discussion spaces facilitate exposure to political disagreement? *Journal of Communication*, 59(1), 40-56.
- Woolley, J. K., Limperos, A. M., & Oliver, M. B. (2010). The 2008 presidential election, 2.0: A content analysis of user-generated political Facebook groups. *Mass Communication & Society*, 13(5), 631-652.
- Xenos, M., Vromen, A., & Loader, B. D. (2014). The great equalizer? Patterns of social media use and youth political engagement in three advanced democracies. *Information, Communication & Society*, 17, 151-167.