

The Internet and the 2016 Presidential Campaign

Edited by
Jody C Baumgartner and
Terri L. Towner

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Consistent and Cautious

Online Congressional Campaigning in the Context of the 2016 Presidential Election

James N. Druckman, Martin J. Kifer, and Michael Parkin

Every election cycle provides an opportunity for campaigns to reassess their use of the Internet. As technologies advance and the political environment shifts, campaigns can reconsider their likely visitors and target audiences, the information they post online, and the tools they use to deliver their message—will they cling to proven online strategies, modify their approach, or move to new innovations? Congressional campaigns might also think about whether their websites will engage with the national political discourse by mentioning the policies and comments of presidential candidates. The ever-changing political and technological environment gives campaigns a chance to continually rethink their approach to web campaigning.¹

In a recent study, however, we found that U.S. congressional campaigns were fairly consistent in how they viewed and used their websites and other online technologies in the four elections between 2008 and 2014.² Survey data shows that most campaign insiders saw their websites as digital hubs, ideal for presenting the campaign's overall message but less than ideal for communicating directly with voters. Meanwhile, incumbency was a consistent determinant of website goals and online negativity. In short, despite the changing political and technological context between 2008 and 2014, there was little change in how House and Senate campaigns viewed and used the Internet.

What effect did the 2016 presidential election have on congressional campaign insiders? Did it cause them to finally rethink their approach to online campaigning? The 2016 election was unique in certain ways, giving it the potential to upend established behavior. To begin with, 2016 featured two historic candidates running in a political environment that was unprecedented in its levels of bitter partisanship and discord. Congressional campaigns had to decide whether they would engage with the battle between Donald Trump, a Washington outsider whose unpredictability put him in a contentious relationship with Republican leaders, and Hillary Clinton, a seasoned politician and the first woman to

capture a major party presidential nomination. Congressional campaigns also had to decide how they would appeal to voters in a context in which gender, civility, and partisanship all played critical roles. An October 2016 Pew survey found “considerable evidence of the bitterness unleashed by the presidential campaign,”³ while another October 2016 Pew report found that many “view the tone of the political discussions on social media as uniquely angry and disrespectful—although a sizeable share feels that these discussions simply reflect the broader political climate.”⁴ This highly charged political environment may have made it difficult for congressional campaigns to enter the broader discussion because an online mention of either presidential candidate could alienate potential supporters. Still, certain candidates, particularly female candidates, might have found it especially difficult to avoid referencing the presidential race given the gender dynamics at play.⁵ Ultimately, congressional campaign insiders had to decide on the extent to which they were willing to nationalize their online appeals.

The 2016 election also provided a context for potential technological change in congressional campaigning on the web. Candidates and elected officials have long used social media,⁶ and some have argued that they reached a near saturation point around 2012.⁷ However, the 2016 campaign featured extensive press coverage of social media use by presidential candidates, with some reports suggesting that 2016 was “the year that social media changed everything.”⁸ There were numerous stories about the innovative ways that presidential candidates from Bernie Sanders (#feelthebern) to Donald Trump (“tweetstorms”) harnessed social media to generate attention and voter enthusiasm, while an article in *The Hill* noted that although “campaigns have used social media in past elections . . . in recent months, it has threatened to overtake traditional news outlets, paid advertising and the campaign stump as the top venue for candidates to rally voters, hit their rivals—and even make news.”⁹ This context of social media hype and innovation at the presidential level could have spurred change among congressional campaign insiders. Would 2016 finally be the year that social media supplanted standard websites as the primary tool for communicating the campaigns’ overall message? Would House and Senate campaigns use the web to target supporters in new ways given the emphasis on social media and “the backdrop of intense partisan division and animosity”?¹⁰ It seems possible that 2016, because of incivility, polarization, and social media hype, could have led congressional campaigners to see their online strategies in a new light.

While there were certainly incentives for congressional campaigns to rethink and broaden their approach in 2016, these incentives were competing with a number of well-established factors that have driven online decisions for some time. Specifically, congressional campaigners have to

balance the incentives for change against practical political motivations such as the desire to win support from undecided voters and the ability to communicate broad messages. This leaves us with the question: Did the unique aspects of the 2016 presidential election upend congressional campaign strategies such that they viewed and used their websites differently than in the past while also engaging with the presidential candidates?

We start in the next section by describing our survey and data. We then present our results in two main sections. The first focuses on how respondents viewed and used the web in 2016, compared to previous years. This includes an analysis of target audiences, likely visitors, and the website’s relative effectiveness compared to other forms of communication. This section also includes results on website goals and whether the site was used to go negative against the opponent. The second results section focuses on the tendency of congressional campaign websites to mention the presidential candidates. We conclude with a brief discussion of our findings.

2016 CAMPAIGN SURVEY DATA

Between 2008 and 2014, we conducted four surveys of those involved with the creation and maintenance of online congressional campaigns. Each survey captured basic information about the candidate, the race, and how respondents viewed and used the Internet.¹¹ We replicated this survey in 2016 with additional questions about online references to the presidential candidates.¹²

As in past years, we used Project Vote Smart to create a list of all major party general election congressional candidates. We then searched each candidate’s website for contact information, such as the names, emails, and phone numbers of possible respondents (e.g., Campaign Manager, Communications Director). In mid-September, we sent an email request either to the specific contact or to the campaign more generally asking for someone “involved in the construction and/or maintenance of the [campaign] website” to complete a brief, confidential survey via an online link or email. We repeated our request up to three more times either by email or phone (when available), including a final request in the days immediately following the election.

We sent our requests to the 830 campaigns for which we had a workable email address ($n = 772$) or online inquiry form ($n = 58$). We received 118 responses, leading to an overall response rate of 14.2%, which is not far off the typical range for these types of web surveys.¹³ In our analysis, the Ns are slightly smaller due to item non-response.

To confirm that we had contacted appropriate individuals, we posed an initial screening question asking respondents to indicate the extent to which they were informed about how the content of the site was determined, on a seven-point scale, with higher scores indicating more knowledge. The average response was 6.57 (standard deviation = 1.00, $n = 115$) with 76.52% of respondents rating themselves at the top of our scale (i.e., “very informed”).

Respondents were then asked about the campaign for which they worked. This included questions about race competitiveness and the candidate’s office level (House or Senate), party, gender, and incumbency status. Our sample reflects the actual population of 2016 congressional campaigns fairly well in terms of race competitiveness (toss-up: 15.52% sample / 6.81% population), office level (Senate: 11.02% sample / 7.67% population), party (Democratic: 55.56% sample / 50.16% population), candidate gender (male: 80.17% sample / 79.03% population), and incumbency status (challengers: 52.99% sample / 41.60% population).¹⁴ While there are some discrepancies between our sample and the population, the modes are the same in all categories except candidate status, where we have a slightly higher number of responses from challenger campaigns. Nevertheless, we have plenty of responses from incumbent campaigns ($n = 44$), sufficient variation between incumbent and non-incumbent campaigns, and no clear basis to believe that respondents from incumbent campaigns systematically differ from those who did not respond.

Our survey asked respondents to indicate their perception of how often an average member of several groups (e.g., undecided voters, supporters, journalists) visited the site, on a seven-point scale, with higher scores indicating more frequent visits. Respondents used a similar scale to rate the priority of these same groups in terms of each being a target audience of the website, with higher scores indicating higher priority. We also asked respondents to assess, again with a seven-point scale, how they thought campaign websites compared to other communications (e.g., direct mailings, television ads, candidate speeches) in terms of “capturing the campaign’s overall strategy,” how websites compared to email and social media in terms of communicating directly with voters, and to rate the importance of various goals for their site (e.g., persuading undecided voters, increasing awareness of issue positions, fundraising). Respondents also noted whether their sites included any negative mentions of their opponent, and whether the site referenced either Hillary Clinton or Donald Trump.

It is important to reiterate that all responses were given on the promise of complete anonymity, so we have no way to know exactly which campaigns responded. This means that we are unable to match individual survey results to other measures such as actual website contact, fundrais-

ing data, or district partisanship. We believe a survey of those involved in campaign website design and maintenance has particular advantages over relying on content analysis data of the websites.¹⁵ Specifically, it allows us to isolate the expressed motivation of campaign insiders. Moreover, repeating the survey conducted in earlier years (2008–2014) allows us to assess how their motivations might have changed in 2016.

VIEWS AND USES OF CONGRESSIONAL CAMPAIGN WEBSITES IN 2016

In this section, we analyze how campaign personnel view *and* use their campaign websites. We address each topic—views and uses—in turn. For each, we compare the stable trends we uncovered from 2008 through 2014 to data from 2016 to answer the question of whether this particular election affected (e.g., interrupted) what had become typical. This is an interesting question given the unique nature of the 2016 presidential campaign. For example, intensifying polarization and incivility at the national level might have led congressional campaigns to shift their website target audience from voters in general to supporters, and to see supporters as even more likely to visit their sites than in past years.¹⁶ The general campaign also could have stimulated greater negativity such that even incumbents—who historically avoid negative campaigning¹⁷—go negative. Additionally, the emphasis on social media at the presidential level may have led congressional campaigns to rethink their website goals and to see their websites as relatively less effective at communicating with voters. The bottom line is that 2016 appears to be a strong test case for stability. If campaigns maintained their traditional strategies in 2016, it would be powerful evidence that the place of websites in congressional campaigns is quite stable.

Views of Websites

There are reasons to expect continuity in how congressional campaign insiders view their websites. This possibility stems from three key premises. First, campaigns have limited control over the audiences that visit their websites. Regardless of technological advancements and targeted appeals, the decision to visit a campaign website still requires deliberate choice and action by individuals. The implication is that those most engaged in the campaign—engaged voters, journalists and bloggers who write about the campaign, and supportive voters and activists who selectively expose themselves to media¹⁸—are expected to visit much more often than the typical voter. Second, this lack of control does not constrain

who campaigns target. Campaigns ought to realize that any items placed on their websites can potentially become central to the campaign narrative—it takes only a journalist or an opponent to make it so.¹⁹ For this reason, campaigns need to be cognizant of the latent audience of all voters, regardless of the frequency with which average voters access the site. Thus, the main targets are likely to be voters in general and undecided voters. Third, websites are a relatively unique media insofar as they provide an unmediated and virtually unlimited presentation of information.²⁰ This contrasts with other media (e.g., television news) that do not allow campaigns to communicate directly or communications with time and space limits (e.g., speeches, mailers, most other digital media such as email and Twitter). This means websites, relative to other media, can potentially serve as digital hubs that encapsulate their entire campaign platform. These three points, in theory, are exactly what we found in our 2008 to 2014 surveys, both in aggregate and year-to-year results.²¹ But do these trends hold in the uniquely polarized, fragmented, and uncivil environment of the 2016 election?

We begin to explore this in Figure 1.1, where we present the averages and standard deviations from our questions about the perceptions of the frequency of website visits (black bars) and the primary target audiences (gray bars). The black bars show that campaigns perceived highly engaged voters, supportive voters, supportive activists, journalists, and then bloggers as the most frequent visitors in 2016. There is then a statistically significant drop in perceived frequency of visits by voters in general and undecided voters, with opponent's voters and non-voters considered the least likely to visit (comparing bloggers to voters in general gives $t_{68} = 1.767$, $p = .080$ in a two-tailed test). The gray bars in Figure 1.1 further show that campaigns targeted voters in general and undecided voters over all others (comparing undecided voters to highly engaged voters gives $t_{100} = 2.364$, $p = .020$ in a two-tailed test). Thus, even with the polarized nature of the 2016 campaign where people may have been particularly likely to be selective in media exposure,²² congressional campaign strategy on the web did not change when it came to targets. The reality of "potential" access to all meant the targets remained voters writ large.

Stability in views of the website audience is accentuated by the fact that the results in Figure 1.1 are virtually identical to the results from our 2008–2014 surveys.²³ In fact, the relative rankings and absolute values given to each group are remarkably similar. For example, respondents gave highly engaged voters an average target rating of 5.37 and an average frequency rating of 4.79 between 2008 and 2014, compared to 5.38 and 4.62 respectively in 2016 (comparing highly engaged voters' target rating between 2008–2014 and 2016 gives $t_{65} = 0.045$, $d = .964$ in a two-tailed test and comparing highly engaged voters' frequency rating between 2008–14

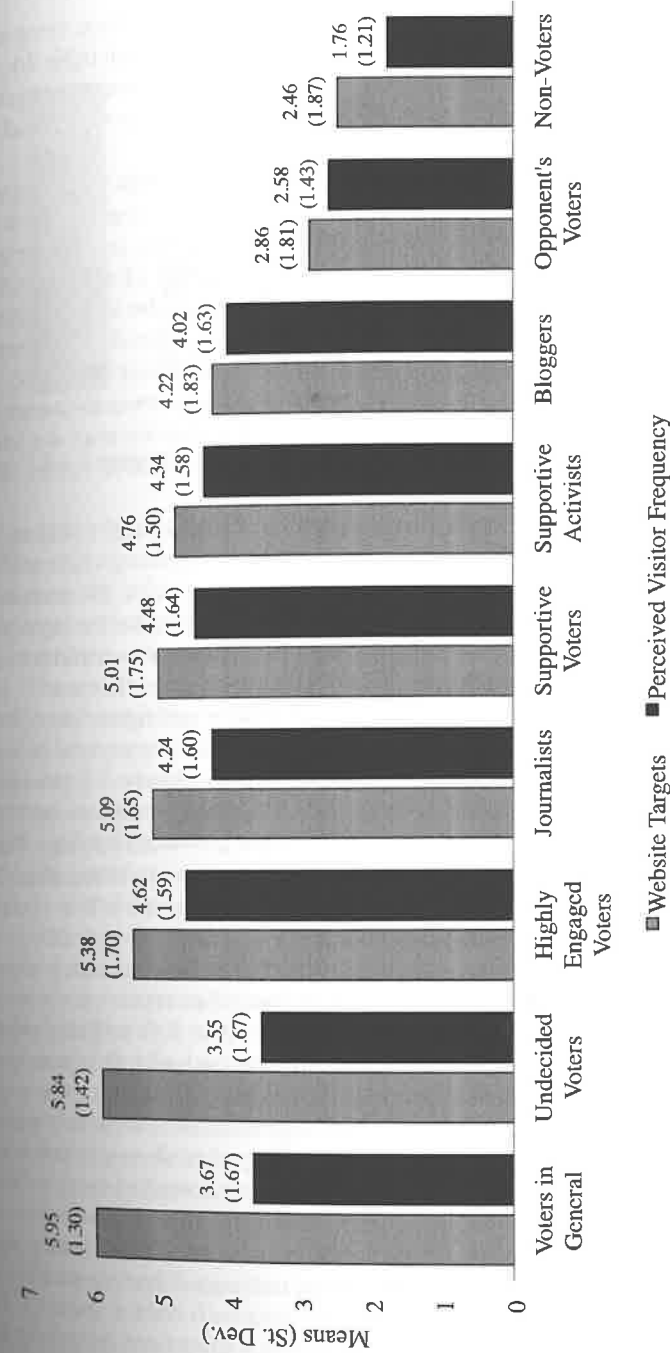


Figure 1.1. Website Targets and Perceived Visitor Frequency (2016)

and 2016 gives $t_{522} = 0.995$, $p = 0.320$ in a two-tailed test). Thus, congressional campaigns clearly did not change how they viewed their likely visitors and targets in 2016. Rather than adapting to the context, congressional campaigns stuck to their original perceptions of who visits and to whom they should tailor their website.

The realities of voter behavior and technological limits and opportunities, and not the uniqueness of the 2016 campaign, drove views of websites. Moreover, the consistency of the approach is an important reminder to avoid confounding the perceived frequency of visitors with the intended targets of the website. Certain groups may be seen as more important even if they visit less often.²⁴ This disconnect also demonstrates the danger, particularly in a highly polarized environment like 2016, of targeting supporters with websites that might alienate some other crucial group of voters. Focusing the website on a broad audience may do little to fire up the base, but it ensures that potentially persuadable voters will not be turned off, even if they do not visit all that often.

We also mentioned that technological realities might lead campaigns to continue to view their websites as digital hubs reflecting their entire campaign platform. This could be the case both because of the unmediated and infinite information capacity of websites and also because the main target audience of voters in general would be best persuaded by full information, rather than potentially contrary targeted information.

We asked respondents to rate how well campaign websites, candidate speeches, informal conversations, mailings, media coverage, and television ads “capture the campaign’s overall strategy.” Figure 1.2 presents averages and standard deviations, and shows that respondents in 2016 estimated websites to be more representative of their overall strategy than all other forms of communication. Campaign websites are rated slightly higher than candidate speeches and informal conversations while clearly outpacing the ability of mailings, media coverage, and television ads to capture the campaign’s platform.²⁵ Moreover, these results match those from previous years. For example, campaign websites received an average rating of 5.85 between 2008 and 2014, compared to 5.81 in 2016, while candidate speeches and informal conversations were basically unmoved from 5.59 to 5.60 and from 5.48 to 5.49 respectively.²⁶ In fact, the only change over time that approaches statistical significance is with television ads, which dropped from 4.75 to 4.28 (comparing television ads between 2008–2014 and 2016 gives $t_{354} = 1.661$, $p = .098$ in a two-tailed test), which may reflect an increasingly fragmented television market and thus a move towards more targeted advertising.²⁷ Campaign insiders clearly still value websites for their ability to present an unlimited and unmediated portrait of their entire campaign strategy.

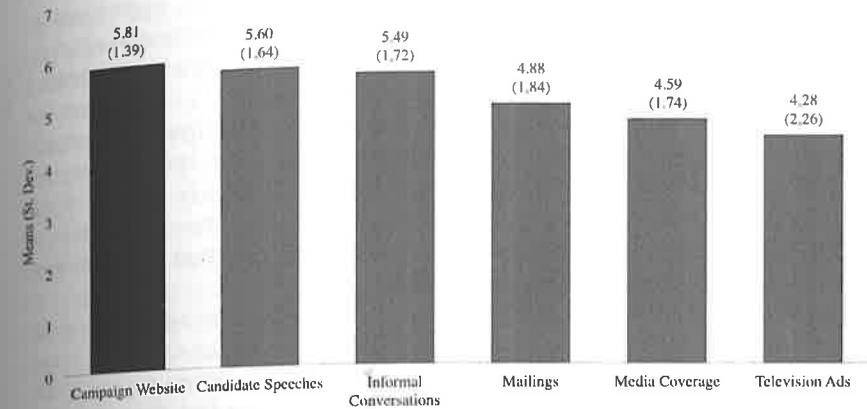


Figure 1.2. Communicating the Campaign’s Overall Strategy (2016)

Our last inquiry into how campaigns view their websites concerns the relative effectiveness of different new media. We measured perceived effectiveness by asking respondents to rate how much their campaign used campaign websites, email, and various social media to communicate with voters in 2016—the idea being that media use reflects perceived effectiveness. The results in Figure 1.3 show that respondents used websites moderately, although significantly less than Facebook and email (comparing email to campaign websites gives $t_{93} = 5.090$, $p = .000$ in a two-tailed test). While congressional campaigns also used Twitter moderately in 2016, they reported much less use of YouTube, Instagram, LinkedIn, and other social media, indicating a nuanced view of social media as a direct communications tool (comparing Twitter to campaign websites gives $t_{92} = 0.362$, $p = .718$ in a two-tailed test, campaign websites to YouTube gives $t_{91} = 5.806$, $p = .000$ in a two-tailed test). Perhaps campaigns resist relying on social media that constrains their communication in terms of length (Twitter) or written content (Instagram), even if the communication is active and targeted. It could also be that campaigns feel there are simply too many social media platforms to maintain with limited staff resources or they worry that social media will promote open, two-way communication (unlike websites) that they would rather avoid.²⁸

We have less data on trends when it comes to this issue as our past work only explored it in 2014. Nevertheless, the results above replicate those we received in 2014 when we asked about websites, email, Facebook, and Twitter. In fact, the only significant differences between 2014 and 2016 were with email, which marginally increased from 5.39 to 5.79, and Twitter, which dropped from 5.39 to 4.76 in terms of use.²⁹ The fact that websites maintained a relatively lower ranking than Facebook and

email is sensible insofar as websites, despite providing an opportunity for holistic messaging, are limited in terms of reach. As mentioned above, individuals must make a concerted effort to visit a campaign website, which means that only a select portion of the population is likely to visit. Websites represent a passive form of communication compared to email and social media that can be used to actively distribute information to subscribers and followers. Thus, campaigns are relatively unsure that website information is reaching the intended voters, but they can be fairly certain that email and social media posts are being received. This makes emphasizing Facebook and email sensible.

This ostensible stability means that even though 2016 was purported to be the ultimate social media campaign,³⁰ little changed in terms of how much congressional campaign websites were used to communicate with voters. The consistency between media also reflects the fact that, despite all of the social media hype in 2016, we find campaigns holding consistent views on the fundamental differences between social media, email, and campaign websites in terms of their inherent ability to communicate with voters—i.e., their fundamental qualities have stayed the same. It may take a more dramatic shift for congressional campaigns to rethink how they communicate with voters online.

All of these results present a virtually unchanged view of congressional campaigning on the web in 2016. Those who design and maintain campaign websites clearly resisted the opportunity to reassess their approach in the context of a historic election, which speaks to the power of fundamental strategic incentives over technological trends and changes in the political environment. Congressional campaigns continue to see their websites as digital hubs, ideally suited for presenting broad messages

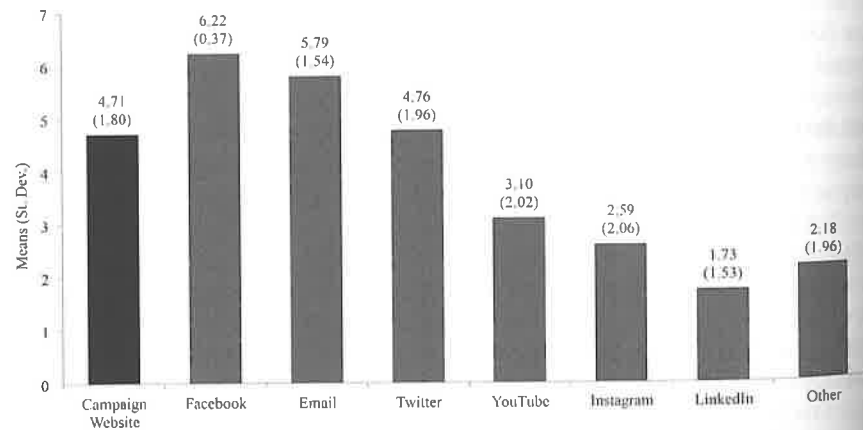


Figure 1.3. Effectiveness of Various Media in Communicating with Voters (2016)

to voters in general while favoring email and Facebook for communicating directly with supporters and engaged voters. Moreover, in results available from the authors, we find limited variability in these findings across campaign types—the views of websites reported here are virtually constant regardless of race competitiveness, candidate party, office level, incumbency, or gender. The realities of voter behavior and technology apply across campaigns, which speaks to the fact that these views are based on powerful premises that are largely constant across both time and electoral context. Even the 2016 campaign could not dislodge views of websites, at least at the congressional level. This also speaks to perhaps the potentially limited direct impact that presidential campaigns have on congressional campaigning.³¹ The lesson is *continuity*.

Website Uses

While campaigns may have a fairly uniform and stable *view* of their websites, this does not necessarily mean that they all *use* their websites in the same way. Indeed, the logic underlying website usage may differ from the aforementioned key points about how they view their websites. This is because different types of candidates—even if they all view voters in general as the central target—may have distinct incentives on what type of message to put forth. The central point of variation in message preference concerns incumbency status.

It is well known that incumbents enjoy an edge over challengers, all else constant. Their status alone can generate up to a 10% advantage in vote share,³² which has meant that House and Senate incumbents have historically won more than 85% of the time.³³ This gives incumbents scant incentive to actively campaign, and instead they would be best served by focusing on what makes incumbents preferable, namely their backgrounds, which involves having ties to the district and experience.³⁴ In contrast, challengers need to get voters' attention, which they can do by going negative,³⁵ and they must also mobilize people to vote and persuade them to focus on issues and other items that can counter the incumbency advantage. These are the exact trends we found from 2008 to 2014,³⁶ which could hold in 2016 given the fundamental nature of these incentives.

In 2016, we assessed these dynamics with a question that asked respondents to rate the importance of various website goals (i.e., how they used their websites) on seven-point scales. Figure 1.4 shows that, overall, the primary goal of most campaigns is to increase awareness of issue positions, followed by increasing awareness of the candidate's background and persuading undecided voters. The graph then shows a gradual decline from fundraising to providing information on the opponent's

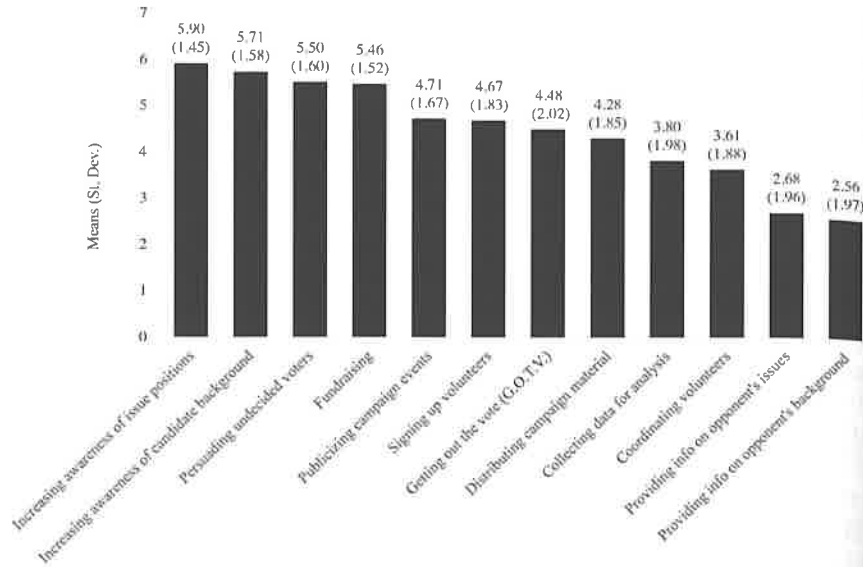


Figure 1.4. Campaign Website Goals (2016)

background. This order is almost entirely consistent with the goals expressed by campaign insiders in previous years.³⁷

Of more importance is the fact that these goals differ based on incumbency status, as they have in past years. We analyze the role of incumbency in Table 1.1, where we regressed each goal on a variety of campaign features. The results show that incumbent campaigns continue to use their websites to promote the candidate's background much more than non-incumbent campaigns, while non-incumbent campaigns put more emphasis on all other goals. These other goals include the aforementioned efforts to counteract the incumbent's advantage by promoting issues and active campaigning (e.g., fundraising, persuading, and distributing material). While past results were a little more robust, the fact remains that, in 2016, website goals continue to differ between incumbent and non-incumbent campaigns. We also, in Table 1.2, studied if non-incumbent campaigns go negative more often. We find that 2016 was no different than past years in that non-incumbent campaigns continue to use their websites to attack their opponents much more often than incumbent campaigns.

Taken together, these results paint a clear picture of how congressional campaign insiders viewed and used their websites in 2016. They targeted voters in general while recognizing that engaged voters and supporters were more likely to visit, and they saw their websites as digital hubs, better suited for capturing their entire strategy than communicating directly

Table 1.1. Campaign Website Content Goals (2016)

	Promote Issues	Promote Background	Fundraise	Persuade	Distribute Material	Sign Up Volunteers	Publicize Campaign Events	G.O.T.V.	Coord. Volunteer	Opp. Background	Opp. Issue
Democrat	-.213 (.247)	-.337 (.244)	-.199 (.231)	-.099 (.235)	.135 (.224)	-.083 (.225)	-.394* (.226)	-.063 (.227)	.058 (.228)	-.083 (.242)	-.115 (.238)
Senate	-.493 (.402)	-.785* (.414)	.760* (.429)	-.878** (.395)	-.830* (.397)	-.418 (.394)	-.158 (.388)	.003 (.429)	-.226 (.393)	-.387 (.438)	-.491 (.439)
Competitiveness	-.104 (.172)	-.021 (.167)	.103 (.168)	-.230 (.166)	-.301* (.162)	-.077 (.161)	-.122 (.160)	.055 (.163)	.130 (.163)	.175 (.171)	.029 (.170)
Incumbent	-.646** (.257)	.668*** (.260)	-.238 (.244)	-.374 (.246)	-.523** (.243)	-.414* (.240)	-.573** (.241)	-.209 (.241)	-.285 (.242)	-.275 (.262)	-.250 (.257)
Female	-.067 (.289)	-.075 (.285)	-.282 (.269)	-.102 (.273)	.038 (.262)	.019 (.261)	.010 (.261)	-.027 (.266)	.392 (.269)	.125 (.286)	-.027 (.283)
Log Likelihood	-132.217 96	-137.078 96	-148.780 96	-148.672 95	-168.941 95	-178.022 96	-170.644 96	-177.809 95	-175.235 94	-143.159 95	-150.013 95

Note: Entries are ordered probit coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. *** p < .01; ** p < .05; * p < .10 for two-tailed tests. Test statistics available from authors on request.

Table 1.2. Going Negative (2016)

	Negative Mention of Opponent
Democrat	.085 (.305)
Senate	.629 (.483)
Competitiveness	.278 (.187)
Incumbent	-.973*** (.329)
Female	.278 (.376)
Log Likelihood	-53.512
N	95

Note: Entries are probit coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. *** $p < .01$; ** $p < .05$; * $p < .10$ for two-tailed tests.

with supporters. Non-incumbent campaigns also used their websites much more aggressively than their incumbent counterparts. What is perhaps most remarkable, however, is how consistent these results are with those from previous years. On nearly every measure, congressional campaign insiders reported virtually identical responses, despite the fact that 2016 provided an opportunity to reassess their approach to online campaigning—the emphasis on social media and the unique nature of the 2016 presidential campaign *did not change incentives in congressional campaigns*. The fundamentals of congressional campaigning seem invulnerable to technological trends and contextual changes, at least in the face of the historic 2016 presidential campaign. That said, one area where the presidential election may have crept in concerns when campaigns engage with the presidential race by mentioning either Hillary Clinton or Donald Trump. We now turn to this question.

MENTIONING 2016 PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES ON CONGRESSIONAL CAMPAIGN WEBSITES

The most notable political story by far in 2016 was the presidential race, and at first glance it might make sense for congressional campaigns to raise their profiles by engaging and mentioning that race. The 2016 presidential campaign was novel in a number of respects, including the backgrounds, characteristics, and behavior of the candidates themselves. In Hillary Clinton, Democrats had the first woman to be nominated for

president by a major American political party, a politician with years of experience who had wrapped up the vast majority of in-party endorsements,³⁸ and a politician with a history of some negative baggage. In Donald Trump, Republicans had nominated a billionaire outsider who had never held political or military office and promised to transform American government,³⁹ a reality television personality who had shaped his brand through controversy, and a provocateur who made numerous outlandish statements on the campaign trail and in his prior professional life, including statements about women.

Together, these candidate qualities brought extraordinary attention to the open seat presidential contest. Indeed, there were relatively large segments of the voting public who did not like the candidates, albeit for very different reasons. Both major presidential candidates had historically low favorability ratings with the country as a whole and the electorate,⁴⁰ and coverage of the presidential campaign itself was overwhelmingly negative.⁴¹ So, congressional campaigns had difficult choices to make about whether they would associate themselves with or mention (potentially negatively) the campaigns of Donald Trump or Hillary Clinton. There may have been some risk in doing so.

Trump's outsider status, controversial campaign style and statements, and low ratings with the electorate overall could conceivably give his own partisans reasons to distance themselves from him and Democrats motivation to attack him online to energize base voters.⁴² On the other hand, and despite low overall favorability ratings, Hillary Clinton's historic candidacy and popularity with the Democratic base might lead more Democrats to associate themselves with her campaign.

One key dynamic in the race was the combination of Clinton's historic candidacy as the first female nominee of a major American political party and Trump's history with and statements about women. The intensity of attention to these aspects of the campaign could have made this an election in which congressional candidates and their campaigns were more acutely aware of gender (and discussion of gender) and its perceived effects on voters.

The older conventional wisdom when it comes to gender and congressional campaigns is that there is stereotyping by voters, gendered patterns in how the different sexes communicate through campaign advertisements, and differences in press coverage of men's and women's candidacies.⁴³ However, more recent research casts some doubt on whether there are still significant differences between male and female candidates in how their campaigns communicate and how the news media covers their candidacies.⁴⁴ Hayes and Lawless argue that gender gaps in issue agendas and word usage in campaign communications have more to do with differences across political parties than the gender of the candidates.

There is, however, a shortage of research on how congressional candidates of different genders relate to presidential candidates. It is possible that Trump's behavior was not an "issue" in the sense that types of policy programs constitute issues and his actions and comments about women prompted Democrats and female candidates to mention him more on their websites.

To test these ideas, we added a new item to our 2016 survey of congressional campaign insiders that asked whether their websites mentioned any of the presidential candidates. Campaigns in general reported very few mentions of either Clinton or Trump—they cautiously stayed away from the potentially polarizing candidates. Table 1.3 shows only 17.09% of campaigns reported mentioning Trump and a slightly higher percentage—18.80%—mentioned Clinton. In other words, the vast majority of campaigns did not mention the presidential candidates at all. Beyond that, there appear to be some interesting partisan differences. Democratic campaigns mentioned Clinton (25%) significantly more than Republicans (10%), while Republicans were only marginally more likely to mention Trump (22%) than Democrats (14.06%) (comparing Clinton mentions by Democrats and Republicans gives $t_{114} = -1.851$, $p = .067$; comparing Trump mentions by Democrats and Republicans gives $t_{114} = 1.001$, $p = .319$). These differences suggest that when presidential candidates were mentioned, there was a slight partisan slant which is perhaps not surprising given the polarized environment. Overall, though, the campaign did not cause the majority of congressional candidates to engage with the presidential race.

Table 1.3. Descriptive Statistics on Presidential Candidate Mentions (2016)

		Clinton		Trump	
		%	n	%	n
	All Candidates (117)	18.80	22	17.09	20
Party	Democrats (64)	25.00	16	14.06	9
	Republicans (50)	10.00	5	22.00	11
Gender	Female (23)	30.44	7	30.44	7
	Male (93)	16.13	15	13.98	13
Office	House (104)	20.19	21	16.35	17
	Senate (13)	7.69	1	23.08	3
Status	Incumbent (44)	25.00	11	15.91	7
	Non-Incumbent (72)	15.28	11	18.06	13
Competitiveness	Solid (62)	20.97	13	16.13	10
	Leaning (36)	16.67	6	22.22	8
	Toss-Up (18)	16.67	3	11.11	2

There also appear to be some differences between male and female congressional candidates. Female candidate campaigns mentioned both Clinton and Trump on 30.44% of their websites, while male candidate campaigns were marginally less likely to mention Clinton (16.13%) and significantly less likely to mention Trump (13.98%) (comparing Clinton mentions between female and male candidates gives $t_{114} = -1.570$, $p = .119$; comparing Trump mentions between female and male candidates gives $t_{114} = -1.883$, $p = .062$). Again, while the vast majority of congressional campaigns avoided any mention of either presidential candidate, it seems as though some female candidate campaigns were drawn in more than their male counterparts.

Table 1.4 shows logit coefficients and standard errors for separate regressions for reported Clinton and Trump mentions. The results substantiate the findings above. First, Democratic campaigns are significantly more likely than Republican campaigns to mention Clinton on their websites; however, there is no party difference when it comes to mentioning Trump, all else constant. Second, we find that female candidate campaigns are marginally ($p = .114$) more likely than male candidate campaigns to mention Clinton and significantly more likely to mention Trump.

We believe these findings suggest that, overall, congressional campaigns reacted cautiously to the presidential campaign context. Most avoided any mention of either presidential candidate on their campaign websites. However, of those that did enter the fray, there was a tendency among Democratic and female candidate campaigns to become more involved than their counterparts. Republicans and male candidates ostensibly had fewer incentives or felt it would be riskier to mention either Trump or Clinton. While this suggests that the political environment may

Table 1.4. Presidential Candidate Mentions (2016)

	Clinton	Trump
Democrat	1.116** (.568)	-.521 (.533)
Senate	-.732 (1.11)	.292 (.773)
Competitiveness	-.084 (.355)	-.106 (.358)
Incumbent	.760 (.546)	-.460 (.564)
Female	.901# (.571)	1.078* (.561)
Log Likelihood	-51.4356	-50.4996
N	115	115

Note: Entries are logit coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. *** $p < .01$; ** $p < .05$; # $p < .10$, # $p < .115$ in two-tailed tests.

have prompted a small group of congressional campaigns to mention the presidential contenders, the point remains that even major environmental forces, like the intense partisanship and gendered dynamics of the 2016 election, have a limited ability to cause most congressional campaigns to deviate from the message they present online.

CONCLUSION

The nature and outcome of the 2016 presidential campaign surprised most scholars, pundits, and citizens. Many point to its polarizing nature, but regardless, if nothing else, it was unique for its inclusion of a clear political outsider (i.e., Trump is the first president to have neither prior political nor military experience) and a major party woman candidate. There were also numerous reports about the perceived importance of social media and its potential to change the nature of campaigning.⁴⁵ We sought to assess whether these realities altered how congressional candidates campaigned on the web. We did so by following up on our prior work that entailed surveys of campaign website personnel from 2008 through 2014.

Perhaps surprisingly, we find amazing continuity in how campaigns view and use their websites. National politics does not dislodge historic congressional campaign practices, at least when it comes to web campaigning. Congressional campaign websites continue to serve as digital hubs, capturing the campaign's overall platform and being used strategically depending on a candidate's status. Whether these trends will sustain going forward, as new technologies develop, is a question for future research. We also find that the intense partisanship and gendered dynamics of the 2016 presidential race had limited impact on congressional candidate mentions of Trump and Clinton. Despite, or perhaps because of, powerful narratives at the national level, the vast majority of congressional campaign websites stayed away from the presidential race. We see all of this as quite remarkable given the incentives that congressional campaigners had to change, even if only slightly, their approach to online campaigning. The 2016 campaign was a strong test case for change, and yet the results are clear: congressional campaign use of the Internet remains consistent and cautious.

NOTES

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26. Two-tailed t-tests between 2008–14 and 2016 yield no statistically significant results on websites ($t_{511} = 0.234$, $p = .815$), candidate speeches ($t_{507} = 0.062$, $p = .951$), or informal conversations ($t_{509} = 0.065$, $p = .949$).

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37. Two-tailed t-tests between 2008–14 and 2016 yield few statistically significant results. The only differences that reached statistical significance are on increasing awareness of issue positions ($t_{529} = 1.792$, $p = .074$), signing up volunteers ($t_{528} = 1.720$, $p = .086$), and providing information on opponent's issues ($t_{525} = 2.546$, $p = .011$). See Druckman, et al. "An Inside View of Congressional Campaigning on the Web."

38. Clinton won the nomination by securing insider and elite support and defeating an outside candidate—Senator Bernie Sanders—who had always run

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39. Trump, who had not always been a registered Republican, ran as the consummate outsider candidate with statements and tactics that defied primary and general election campaign norms. Trump's victory in the primaries despite the vocal opposition from establishment party figures was seemingly at odds with expectations that the "party decides" presidential nominations (see Marty Cohen, David Karol, Hans Noel, and John Zaller. *The Party Decides: Presidential Nominations Before and After Reform*. [Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009]; Steve Kolowich. "The Life of 'The Party Decides.'" *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, May 16, 2016. <http://www.chronicle.com/article/The-Life-of-The-Party/236483>).

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Campaigning in 140 Characters

A Content Analysis of Twitter Use by 2016 U.S. Congressional Candidates

Casey Frechette and Monica Ancu

In November of 2016, Americans elected 34 U.S. Senators and 435 U.S. House Representatives. Prior to the election, Democrats held 44 Senate seats, Republicans held 54, and independents held 2. In the months prior to Election Day, most opinion polls favored Democrats, even suggesting they might regain their Senate majority. Of the 34 seats being contested, Democrats were defending only 10 and Republicans were defending 24, with 10 of these Republican seats viewed as competitive. Republicans controlled 246 seats and Democrats 186 in the House of Representatives, but polls forecasted very few surprises there. Control of the House was expected to stay Republican, with only 23 of the seats considered competitive. In this context, how did congressional candidates use Twitter, a social media communication tool that has become a new mainstay in campaign communication?

Studying how political candidates communicated through Twitter during the 2016 campaign is especially relevant given Donald Trump's numerous headline-grabbing tweets. Among the top 10 global trends on Twitter in 2016, "#Election2016" ranked second (after the Olympics' "#Rio2016"), while "#Trump" ranked eighth.¹ This chapter documents how U.S. congressional candidates used Twitter in 2016 and compares the results to what we know about Twitter use from prior election cycles. Twitter has evolved from a novelty in the 2008 and 2012 election cycles to become a major global social media platform with widespread adoption among the U.S. population. Therefore, research is needed to track how politicians use this medium for campaign communication. Among the questions explored are: How many candidates used Twitter? How often did they do so? What did they tweet about? At what rate did they interact with other users? And, to what degree did they use all the features (text, visuals, links, and conversation) of the platform? The research can help us understand how political innovation and social communication technology diffuse from presidential campaigning to lower-level campaigns.