Social Media and Politics:
Twitter Use in the Second Congressional District of Virginia

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Abstract

With social media recently evolving as a platform for social, informational, and political exchanges, it comes as no surprise that in the last few years several politicians have integrated Twitter into their campaigns. The goal of this study was to gain insight into how Republican Congressman Scott Rigell and Democratic candidate Paul Hirschbiel—candidates in the 2nd Congressional District of Virginia—cultivated Twitter to attract voters in the 2012 election. A content analysis of the characteristics and tactical strategies of these Twitter posts revealed that the two congressional candidates primarily used Twitter to post information and tweet about their current activity. It was also found that Rigell posted more direct communication tweets—internal and external—than Hirschbiel, while Hirschbiel used personal messages to attract followers. The tactical strategies employed by Rigell and Hirschbiel were determined to be calculated methods by which the candidates hoped to motivate citizens, activate voters and differentiate themselves from their competitor.

I. Social Media and Politics:

With social media recently evolving as a platform for social, informational, and political exchange, it has become an influential tool used to effectively target numerous sectors in American society. It comes as no surprise that politicians are using these channels of mass communication and marketing to influence attitudes about themselves, set agendas, and even shape outcomes of campaigns (Gale Opposing Viewpoints, 2010). The recently evolved "micro-blogging" social media site, Twitter, is the ideal vehicle for this kind of self-promotion, giving politicians the ability to inform mass numbers of people about their political activities almost instantaneously (Aharony, 2010). Twitter's short posts, called "tweets," enable users to share updates with friends, colleagues, and in a politician's case, potential voters, giving users the ability to influence, inform, and engage each other in topics across the board.

In the last few years, several politicians have integrated Twitter into their campaigns; 577 politicians have opened Twitter accounts, three quarters of them in 2009 (Anonymous, 2010). With its recent popularity, Twitter's relationship to politics has been the subject of numerous research studies (Aharony 2012; "International: Sweet to Tweet," 2010; Budak, 2012; Smith & Brenner, 2012). Politicians are using social media as a new tool to increase interaction and exchange with the public. By using a social media device like Twitter, politicians can easily connect to their voters and vice versa (International: Sweet to Tweet, 2010). As social media emerges more and more as a means of daily chatter, conversations, sharing of information, and political debate, politicians are no longer only responsible for their outgoing tweets, but also for the responses and dialogue they create with potential voters (International: Sweet to Tweet, 2010).

Although social media is used across the country, this study will focus on a specific region in Virginia, a swing state in the 2012 general elections. In an article in *The Washington Times*, Luke Rosiak (2012) discussed the region in Virginia that is most saturated with political media of all forms, Hampton Roads. This 2nd Congressional District of Virginia, is one of the most influential areas in the current elections and is, therefore, one of the top-most regions saturated with political advertisements. "The reason for the intensity here is as much geographical as political: Hampton Roads is an amalgamation of demographics, sometimes starkly at odds with one another and all of which use the same airwaves" (Rosiak, 2012). Divided by high population of black communities that lean toward the Democrats, suburban and rural areas that lean toward the Republicans, and the largest naval base in the world with high investment in politics, Hampton Roads has become the target for much political propaganda.

With this high influence, the 2nd District of Virginia is receiving more political advertisements than any other major district in the other battleground states. Rosiak (2012) opened with the words, "Rep. E. Scott Rigell, a Republican, is in the toughest battle for re-election of any of the state's 11 congressmen" (Rosiak, 2012). In an area of such high political influence, it is safe to assume that the candidates of this congressional election—Rigell and Hirschbiel—are cultivating a social media tool like Twitter as a part of their campaign strategy. This study conducted an analysis of the characteristics of high intensity use of the social networking site by these candidates in Virginia's 2nd Congressional District election, 2012. This study strived to collect insight into how Republican Congressman Scott Rigell and Democratic candidate Paul Hirschbiel cultivated Twitter to attract voters in the 2012 election by analyzing the characteristics and tactical strategies employed in the candidates' Twitter posts.

II. Literature Review

Theoretical Framework

The importance of influential, informational social exchange between politicians and users of social networking sites is implied by some of the tenants of Gerardine DeSanctis' and Marshall Scott Poole's (1994) Adaptive Structuration Theory (AST). A core premise of the AST is the idea that advanced information technologies, like social networking sites, enable multiparty participation and exchange in organizational activities through sophisticated information management (DeSanctis and Poole, 1994). More simply, it suggests that in order to nurture human interaction and communication, different society groups (systems) adapt information technologies (structure).

The AST proposes that this relationship between society and technology, or system and structure, is a two-sided exchange that leads society to a response or "movement" (Turner, 1986). Structures are both the medium and the outcome of social action, and systems are the means by which this information is circulated. This exchange is not only about the technology, but also about how these technologies are used. It is the users who set the agenda for the kind of information they receive and respond to.

In its basic form, the AST shows that the advancement of technological devices changes an organizational structure. Accordingly, the AST applies itself as a way to analyze the use and penetration of new media technologies in our society (DeSanctis and Poole, 1994).

The AST specifically applies to this study in that it is a study of the interplay between three distinct elements: social structures, human interactions, and advanced information technologies. By directly applying these assumptions to social groups in terms of social media outlets (such as Twitter), a few customizable observations can be made. First, social media sites are a means of transferring information from one societal group to another. Second, this informational exchange is not one-sided but circulates from structure to system and system to structure. And finally, as this social networking device advances and there is an increase in "interpenetration of structure," it can impact an entire social organization and inspire change (DeSanctis and Poole, 1994; Turner, 1986).

Social Networking by Politicians

The social media site, Twitter, and its use by politicians have recently emerged as the subject of many studies. According to Smith and Brenner (2012), 15% of Internet users used Twitter in February 2012, which

is a 3% increase from August 2011. And, of the 15% of users, 31% are between the ages of 18-24 years old. Twitter's increasing popularity has made it a platform through which politicians influence, inform, and engage their publics while gathering feedback.

The most relevant study to this research is a content analysis of how three political leaders—the Prime Minister of Israel, Benjamin Netanyahu, the Prime Minister of Britain, David Cameron, and the President of the United States, Barack Obama-- used Twitter between August and October, 2010. This study indicated that Obama tweeted more than the other leaders, then Netanyahu, followed by Cameron. It concluded, "all three leaders use Twitter for transparency and outreach" (Aharony, 2012).

As is the case with this study, Aharony (2012) studied how this politician-to-public exchange is created, used, and managed. The researcher did so by conducting an analysis in two phases: a statistical analysis and a content analysis. For both phases, Aharony (2012) examined all tweets that appeared during the set period, August through October, 2010. The research was guided by questions like (1) Do the leaders differ regarding their number of tweets, and (2) Does the content of the tweets from the three leaders differ? This study used the same methodology that Dr. Aharony (2012) used with some modifications: content analysis as the sole means of analyzing the tweets, and only the second research question addressed.

To perform the content analysis, two themes were analyzed—content and language—and each was assigned categories (Aharony, 2012). The researcher used a clustering approach, creating new categories whenever a main emerging topic did not match any existing categories. At the end, the coder generated a total of 10 new categories according to the tweets' content. These categories, used as a model for this present study, include topics like general information, personal information, donation requests, events, general blessings, pictures, and so on. To analyze the language of the tweets, they were classified into two categories: formal and informal language, The latter included slang and abbreviations (Aharony, 2012).

Research conducted by Golbeck, Grimes, and Rogers (2010) about Twitter use by the U.S. Congress also shaped the data collection in this study. As Aharony (2012) did with her content analysis topics, the author separated "tweets by type," such as inner communication, fundraising, requesting action, personal message, external communication, location/activity, and information. Aharony's (2012) process and Golbeck et al.'s (2010) coding were replicated to shape the protocol and process of content analysis in this present study.

Twitter Use by Politicians

The structure of Twitter is designed to allow for a kind of dissemination of information, just as DeSanctis and Poole (1994) suggested in their research. With a 140-character maximum, Twitter is used to send out small bursts of information to large groups of people. The PEW Internet Project conducted in 2012 found that 66% of adults who are online use social networking sites. In this study, 75% of these adult users say their friends post at least some content related to politics, and 37% of users post political related material on these sites at least occasionally (Smith and Rainie, 2012). This real-time information network allows for politicians to connect to users almost instantaneously and gives them the ability to share information with people while gathering feedback.

Ultimately, Aharony (2012) suggested, "As the political leaders use Twitter, they use a channel that is not filtered by local or national media, thus they are able to convey their own unique agendas without being censored or filtered." With a free means of expressing their own personal, independent opinions concerning various topics, political leaders connect to voters on a more personal level, bypassing the media. "There is a significant amount of direct communication taking place between Congresspeople and users who send them questions or comments" (Golbeck et al., 2010). A study done by Ingenito (2010) indicated that "today, tens of thousand of political discussions currently populated on [social networking sites] allow members from around the corner and across the globe to discuss and debate issues, trends, and topics they find most interesting and immediate (2)."

Research Questions

This research, propelled by the past studies reviewed, looked at the characteristics and tactical strategies of high intensity use of Twitter by incumbent Scott Rigell (R) and candidate Paul Hirschbiel (D) in Virginia's 2nd Congressional District election, 2012. Based on this discussion, this paper posed the following questions:

• What is the content of incumbent Scott Rigell's and competitor Paul Hirschbiel's social

media usage of Twitter in the election?

• How does each candidate distinctively cultivate Twitter to attract voters?

III. Method

As Hampton Roads, the 2nd Congressional District of Virginia, is one of the top-most regions saturated with political advertisements during this upcoming congressional election, this study analyzed the congressional Twitter strategies of this district's Republican incumbent Scott Rigell and Democratic candidate Paul Hirschbiel.

Content analysis is described as a means of "sorting messages into different categories according to some set of classification criteria" (Rosenberry and Vicker, 2009). This methodology was an effective way of analyzing Twitter user accounts, sorting through the user's mass amounts of posts, and organizing them in a clear, concise manner. The aim of using a content analysis approach was to attain a big picture understanding of a phenomenon by looking at the underlying concepts or categories describing the phenomenon (Elo and Kyngas, 2007). Its efficient coding methodology allows for a swift analysis of information.

Data Gathering

In order to conduct this content analysis, the researcher collected the 200 most recent posts, or tweets, from both Congressional candidates-- incumbent Scott Rigell and candidate Paul Hirschbiel. For most congressional Twitter accounts, the number of tweets by each candidate is dependent on how long they have used Twitter (Golbeck, Grimes, and Rogers, 2010). This was the case with Rigell, who was an early adopter of Twitter and had gained a following throughout his past term in Congress. With this in mind, only the most recent 200 tweets from each candidate's user account were evaluated. The tweets were analyzed to provide insight into the content and types of posts Rigell and Hirschbiel were producing.

Coding

Each tweet was classified into as many classes as was appropriate. The classes for this coding scheme were developed based on previous research (Aharony, 2012, and Golbeck et al., 2010) in addition to using a clustering approach, creating new categories whenever a main emerging topic did not match any existing categories. Classification labels and descriptions were drawn from the methods section of Golbeck et al.'s research conducted in 2010.

• DC-- Direct Communication: A message directed at a specific person with the @id convention. Direct Communication was divided into the following two mutually exclusive subclasses:

* IC-- Internal Communication: This included messages from one candidate to another politician or from a candidate to a staff member.

* OC-- External Communication: All other messages, such as those to constituents, were marked as external communication.

• PM--Personal Message: These are non-business oriented messages or notes, such as holiday greetings or other personal sentiments.

• Activities: A message reporting on the candidate's activities. This was divided into two mutually exclusive subclasses:

* OB-- Official Business: This included any official business including voting, committee meetings, or making speeches on the house floor.

* LA-- Location or Activity: This code was used when a candidate was describing non-official activities including trips, meetings with constituents, lobbyists, or non-Congressional organizations, or activities in the home district.

• IN-- Information: This code describes a message that provides a fact, opinion, link to an article, position on an issue, or resource.

• RA-- Requesting Action: When a candidate requests constituents to take some action like signing a petition or voting, the message is coded this way.

• FU-- Fundraising: Messages occasionally ask for donations and contributions, and were coded as fundraising.

Not all tweets had one code; in fact some fit into two or even three categories. Once coded, the most popular categories from Rigell's tweets were compared with those of Hirschbiel's. The coder started at October 20, 2012, on each candidate's Twitter feed and proceeded to look back at the past tweets until reaching the 200th post, excluding "reply" tweets. The coding was compiled in an excel spreadsheet and analyzed based on the number of times each tweet fell into each category. The resulting findings provide insight into how the Republican and Democratic candidates distinctly cultivate Twitter to attract voters.

IV. Findings

The goal of the current study was to analyze the tactical strategies and characteristics of incumbent Scott Rigell's and competitor Paul Hirschbiel's social media usage of Twitter in the election. To code the content of these tweets, the researcher used a number of categories (as described in the methodology): Internal and External Communication, Personal Message, Official Business, Location or Activity, Information, Requesting Action, and Fundraising. On several occasions, tweets were coded into more than one category. Tweets could be coded in several categories.

Overall Twitter Use

For congressional candidates, the number of tweets and followers is dependent on how long they have been using Twitter, the frequency at which they post. Congressman Scott Rigell, who was an early adopter of Twitter and has served a term in office, had a total of 1,058 tweets and 3,683 followers as of October 20, 2012. Hirschbiel, his competitor, had a total of 224 tweets and 236 followers on said date.

Tweet Types and Content

Informational tweets (IN), the majority, accounted for a little more than 30% for both candidates. The vast majority of these Information tweets had links to other articles or resources relevant to their campaign. Information posts often read like mini-press releases (Golbeck, Grimes, and Rogers, 2010). The following sample of tweets provides an accurate snapshot of the type of content posted.

• **RepScottRigell**: The Rigell Report: Changing Congress and Leading by Example.

• **RepScottRigell**: Today is the eleventh anniversary of Operation Enduring Freedom. Freedom and liberty are paid for by heavy sacrifice.

• **RepScottRigell**: Rigell supports & House passes National Security and Job Protection Act to stop sequestration:

• **RepScottRigell**: Yesterday in Afghanistan we lost more courageous American service members. Let their sacrifice for our freedoms never be forgotten.

• **PaulHirschbiel**: There has been a lot of false information out there about Medicare. Listen to Paul set the record straight.

• **PaulHirschbiel**: Check out the Daily Press' story on Paul's Small Business Plan:

• **PaulHirschbiel**: The Daily Press confirms what we have known all along: this is going to be a close race . . . .

Following these Information posts were Location or Activity posts, used when the candidate was giving updates about meetings, personal activities in the home district, visits with lobbyists, or non-Congressional organizations, or trips. These Location or Activity posts (LA) accounted for about 20% of the candidate's tweets. Again, the following posts from this category provide a representation of the kind of content found.

• **RepScottRigell**: Always love visiting

• **RepScottRigell**: Great day to be in a parade!

• **RepScottRigell**: Teri and I are so honored to be a part of tonight's Still Hope Foundation Gala! Learn about them here:

• **PaulHirschbiel**: I posted 26 photos on Facebook in the album "Congressman Bobby Scott's 36th

Annual Labor Day Cookout"

> • **PaulHirschbiel**: Pumped up crowd tonight! Enjoyed talking with great leaders like

> • **PaulHirschbiel**: Had a blast this weekend at the new OFA Office in Norfolk! The crowd was as fired up as they come and ready to work!

> • **PaulHirschbiel**: Great turnout at the Eastern Shore Harvest Festival today! Here with my good friend Senator Northam!

However, when Official Business (OB) activity-related posts are added to the Location or Activity tweets, the total number of activity posts takes a shift, and the percentage increases for both parties. Official Business tweets are similar to those shown above, but they are restricted to official business in Congress, including voting, committee meetings, or making speeches on the house floor (Golbeck et al., 2010). For example:

> • **RepScottRigell**: It's a good day! First, my

> • **RepScottRigell**: I'll be speaking on the House floor around 7:30 tonight. Topic - stopping

> • **PaulHirschbiel**: Tonight Paul is participating in an AARP tele-townhall sharing his vision for creating jobs and protecting Medicare!

> • **PaulHirschbiel**: Today Paul announced his Congressional Reform Agenda, which will help end the partisanship in Congress and bring...

A unique way of embodying both categories, Official Business and Information, can be seen in Hirschbiel's frequent posts that led his followers to Facebook albums. Often, these posts gave links to images of the candidate at political events and Congressional functions. These messages were coded in Official Business Activity and Information categories since they gave insight into Congressional activity while serving as a resource for information on his political stance based on events attended. Examples of these tweets are as follows,

> • **PaulHirschbiel**: I posted 4 photos on Facebook in the album "Education Roundtable #2"

> • **PaulHirschbiel**: I posted 2 photos on Facebook in the album "Women's Roundtable"

> • **PaulHirschbiel**: I posted 4 photos on Facebook in the album "Congressional Reform Roundtable"

As seen in FIG 1, Congressman Rigell's Official Business updates were found increasingly more often than candidate Hirschbiel's, for a total of 47 tweets (making up 15% of his official business content) vs. Hirschbiel's 18 tweets (5%). When added together, Rigell's activity posts make up 37% of his Twitter content. Hirschbiel's activity posts, official business (OB) and location or activity (LA), total 26%.

Rigell and Hirschbiel posted few quotes requesting action (RA) from their followers, both equaling 6%. These posts sent followers to outside sources for volunteering, registering to vote, and applying for various forms of service, as seen in the following tweets.

> • **RepScottRigell**: NOTICE! Application materials for service academy nominations are due 11/1/12.

> • **RepScottRigell**: What would you most like to hear from President Obama? Vote here:

> • **PaulHirschbiel**: TODAY IS THE VOTER REGISTRATION DEADLINE IN VIRGINIA! Make sure your voice is heard!

> • **PaulHirschbiel**: Watch Paul's new ad and then share it with 5 friends.

FIG. 1. The types of content posted by Congressman Scott Rigell.

Divided into two mutually exclusive categories—Internal (IC) and External Communication (EC)—Direct Communication refers to messages directed at a specific person with the @id convention. Direct Communication (DC) posts were in Congressman Rigell's posts more often than candidate Hirschbiel's. Rigell posted a combined 14% of tweets that directly communicated with other twitter users; this includes congressman, staff members, friends and constituents. Hirschbiel's direct communication, however, made up only 5% of his Twitter post content, for a total of 14 tweets directed to other Twitter users.
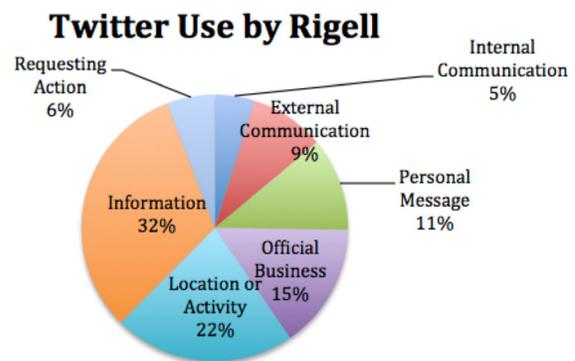
External Communication posts are messages sent directly from the Congressman to another Twitter user outside of Congress. These connections (@) were typically found at the beginning or end of the message as a way of recognizing a constituent. These posts were also coded in other categories including Location or Activity or Official Business.

- **RepScottRigell**: Honored to be recognized by
- **RepScottRigell**: It was great to speak with the hard-working men and women
- **RepScottRigell**: Looking forward to visiting
- **PaulHirschbiel**: Thanks for the follow
- **PaulHirschbiel**: Happy 7th Anniversary to all the staff over at

As seen in the above posts, Hirschbiel used external communication to thank constituents for following his page, as well as recognizing friends who have helped with his campaign. Rigell used this type of post differently, however, communicating (@) with organizations rather than individuals.

Internal Communications posts, referring to Congressman to Congressman or Congressman to Congressional staff communication, occurred rarely. Messages tweeted internally looked like:

RepScottRigell: Pleased to be here w/

RepScottRigell: Happy Birthday

RepScottRigell: So grateful to have support of

Making it Personal

The most dramatic change in content between Democratic candidate Paul Hirschbiel and Republican Congressman Scott Rigell is in the use of Personal Messages (PM). As seen in FIG 2, Hirschbiel's personal message posts accounted for more than double the number of Rigell's. These posts are non-business oriented, more informal messages or notes such as greetings, appreciations, or other personal sentiments. With a total of 28%, Hirschbiel's personal messages account for the second highest category of his tweets, coming second to information posts (35%). Rigell's personal messages make up 11% of his posts.

As previously mentioned, on several occasions tweets were coded in more than one category. These personal messages often fell into other categories, such as Location or Activity, Official Business, or Information. The following posts provide a snapshot of the kinds of tweets in this category.

FIG. 2. The types of content posted by candidate Paul Hirschbiel.

- **RepScottRigell**: Excited to play the drums at YouthBand's Ultimate Summer Jam tonight in
- **RepScottRigell**: Great way 2 start Mothers Day! Daughter Shannon made cinnamon rolls from scratch this morning 4 her amazing mom, Teri.
- **PaulHirschbiel**: I posted 6 photos on Facebook in the album "Meet and Greet with my Mom"
- **PaulHirschbiel**: Looking forward to cheering on former Hampton University track sprinter Francena McCorory in the 400 meter sprint today!
- **PaulHirschbiel**: I posted 11 photos on Facebook in the album "Memorial Day Weekend"
- **PaulHirschbiel**: Happy Valentines Day. I am so thankful for the love of my life Susan and my two amazing children Anna and Matt.

Unlike Congressman Rigell's personal messages, Hirschbiel's posts often contained references to Facebook albums he had posted from family events. These tweets were coded in Personal Message and Location or Activity categories since they gave followers personal insight into his private activities. An interpre-
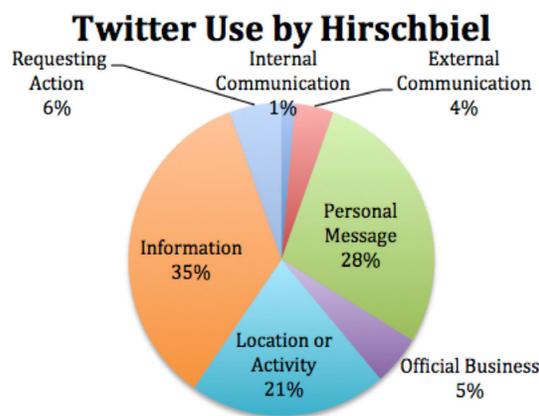
tation of this Twitter use is put in the next section.

V. Conclusion

The primary goal of this study was to define the tactical strategies of incumbent Scott Rigell and competitor Paul Hirschbiel's social media use of Twitter in the 2012 Congressional election. Past research indicated that congressmen on Twitter in 2010 primarily used it to disseminate information, particularly links to news articles and blog posts, as well as updating the public on current activity (Golbeck, et al., 2010). Until now, research in this area has been broad—focusing on all Congressmen using Twitter—and has not been confined to a specific congressional district during a political race. This study sought to narrow it to two individuals running in the 2012 general election in the 2nd Congressional District of Virginia. As the election is in November 2012, only one month away from the date of gathered research, this study is timely and a strong indicator of how these candidates are using Twitter to inform and engage their publics.

To conduct this study, the researcher used content analysis to collect, categorize, and code the 200 most recent Twitter posts, or tweets, shared by each candidate starting October 20, 2012. The resulting findings provided insight into how Scott Rigell and Paul Hirschbiel distinctively cultivated Twitter to attract voters.

At its most basic level, the findings of this study are consistent with past research and findings about congressional posts. The two candidates, Scott Rigell and Paul Hirschbiel, used Twitter to (1) post information and (2) tweet about their current activity, making up over 60% of each candidate's posts. Gerardine DeSanctis' and Marshall Scott Poole's (1994) Adaptive Structuration Theory (AST) mentioned in the literature review supports this idea that social media sites are a means of transferring information from one societal group to another and that this informational exchange is two-sided and circulates from structure to system and system to structure. The AST also makes the assumption that as this social networking device advances and there is an increase in "interpenetration of structure," it can impact an entire social organization and inspire change (DeSanctis and Poole, 1994). In the case of this study, the social networking device is Twitter, and Rigell and Hirschbiel used it as a means of attracting voters in a social structure.

In the political realm, Twitter creates opportunities for politicians to motivate and activate their followers and differentiate themselves from their competitor. Although the research showed that both candidates use Twitter to post information and update followers about their current activity, there are differences in the direct communication and personal messages posted by the candidates.

Motivate, Activate, and Differentiate

Motivate. The top-most employed tactical strategy used by Hirschbiel and Rigell in their Twitter posts is informational tweets. The vast majority of these informational tweets have links to other articles or resources relevant to their campaigns. By sharing information, the candidates provide their Twitter followers with facts, figures, and incentives to side with their campaign. This kind of political information effort arouses citizens and gets the candidates one step closer to their desired goal: more votes. Since Twitter is being used to aggregate and disseminate information to the broad population of the candidates' Twitter followers, leveraging its power can reconnect citizens to the voting process and inspire political excitement.

Activate. Following the use of information posts are activity posts—both official business and location updates—used when the candidate informs followers about congressional meetings, personal activities in the home district, visits with lobbyists, or non-Congressional organizations, or trips. By tweeting about current activity to followers, the candidates excite political participation and activate volunteers. For example, Hirschbiel tweeted: "Had a blast this weekend at the new OFA Office in Norfolk! The crowd was as fired up as they come and ready to work!" One might notice in Hirschbiel's post that he mentions volunteers are already at the event "ready to work." A tweet like this informs followers about the volunteer work that citizens are doing for Hirschbiel's campaign, while instilling excitement about potential volunteer opportunities for his followers in the future.

Twitter has the power to influence attitudes about politicians, set agendas, and even shape outcomes of campaigns (Gale Opposing Viewpoints, 2010). After opening up the door to this kind of social media interaction with the public, politicians are smart to use Twitter to their advantage. As previously mentioned, the Adaptive Structuration Theory asserts the idea that a social media device can influence an entire social

structure and inspire change in behavior. Effective use of location and activity posts is an important means of inspiring citizens to take a more active role in their preferred candidate's campaign.

Differentiate. Content analysis reveals that Republican candidate Scott Rigell posted more direct communication tweets—internal and external—than Democratic candidate Paul Hirschbiel. These kinds of tweets were directed at a specific person with the @id convention and intentionally created a connection between Rigell and his followers. With Twitter's increasing popularity, organizations and individuals are striving to separate themselves from the many social media users around them. Using direct communication likely reflects the way in which Congressman Rigell differentiates himself from his competitor.

While Congressman Rigell uses direct communication to target his followers, candidate Paul Hirschbiel takes the more informal, non-business oriented approach, posting personal messages about his daily routine, personal sentiments, and family updates. Although Rigell tweeted personal messages on his Twitter feed, the percentage of Hirschbiel's tweets coded as personal messages (28%) was more than double that of Rigell's (11%). Candidate Hirschbiel engages with his Twitter followers by making himself more "human," perhaps in hopes of seeming more accessible to the public. This pattern has significant implications for voters' understanding of how Hirschbiel distinctively cultivates Twitter to attract them.

Seen in the two political candidates' Twitter campaigns, Twitter is an influential tool that if used correctly, can activate and motivate supporters. Twitter and other forms of social media provide a direct link from the candidates to the public, enabling them to differentiate themselves from their competitor, target a specific audience, increase their financial base of support, and attract new voters. By their very nature, "social" media outlets help a candidate reach the public through a more personal and intimate avenue than through the television and radio ads that have previously limited their direct contact with potential supporters. Candidates can post videos and tweets from campaign stops, put up testimonials, share their political views, state their parties' platforms, and show their involvement in the community using the friendly, personal, and immediate avenue of social media. If harnessed effectively, Twitter, and social media as a whole, has the unprecedented potential to create grassroots support for a candidate never before seen in American politics.

Future Study

Although this study was concise and timely, a future study might analyze outgoing tweets from congressional candidates as well as the responses, re-tweets, and discussions these posts stimulate with their followers. Also, a future study of politics and Twitter could analyze the impact of different kinds of tweets and their potential relationship with the outcome of the political election.

For this study the researcher excluded "reply" tweets on the candidate's account. Originally, the researcher wanted to collect data more extensively; however, with limited time the research was capped. In addition, there was only one researcher conducting the content analysis of the tweets. If two or more researchers had been involved in coding, the results might have been more reliable.

Both candidates had two Twitter accounts—one personal and one political—and, although similar tweets were posted on both the candidates' accounts, the findings in this study were gathered only from the congressional Twitter accounts of these particular candidates, not from their personal accounts.

Acknowledgements

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