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Meet your audience where they are: The dissemination and reception of political messaging among young voters [Paper]

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MEET YOUR AUDIENCE WHERE THEY ARE:

THE DISSEMINATION AND RECEPTION OF POLITICAL MESSAGING

AMONG YOUNG VOTERS

A Thesis Submitted

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Designation

University Honors

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Honors

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Date   Dr. Justin Holmes, Honors Thesis Advisor, Department of Political Science

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Date   Dr. Jessica Moon, Director, University Honors Program

Abstract

In an ever-changing media environment and growing influence of young voters, creating and disseminating messages that will reach this intended audience is a complicated and difficult task for political campaigns. Social and new media changes with each election cycle, so following standards of the most previous campaign is following an outdated strategy which may not break through in the newest media environment. With an increasing interest in strategies to reach young voters in the electorate, political campaigns and their candidates are disseminating messages online and on social media, where an increasingly large number of the voting bloc is getting their information. In the sea of available information online, the effectiveness of breaking through and being seen by voters is increasingly difficult. Unpredictable viral moments and negative perceptions of paid content online adds incredibly complicated elements into the mission of successfully reaching and resonating with the intended audience of voters. As such, this study reflects on the success and failures of campaigns within the 2020 Democratic Primary to disseminate messages to an audience, particularly college-aged voters, and how these successes and failures establish a basis for developing strategy and messaging for future political campaigns.

Meet your audience where they are: The dissemination and reception of political messaging among young voters

As communications channels evolve, politicians and campaign staff look to successfully integrate their campaign messages into a communication strategy which reaches their intended audience. This allows voters to pick and choose where they receive their information about politics and the world. For many young voters, social media and online media have become primary sources of news. With this transition into new and social media, political campaigns have become increasingly interested in bringing their messages to these social platforms. Turning to social media allows voters to participate in politics like never before, but for politicians and campaigns, this means that their voices are just some of the voices on platforms where anyone and everyone can have a voice. The problem is campaign messages have to stand out among the sea of information in order to attract attention from an audience. Adding to the complication, the personal curation of feeds can narrow the information a person sees online, so not only is the challenge in standing out, but it is in attracting enough attention for the message to be shared on these platforms in order to reach wider audiences whose friends and followers choose to see what that person reposts.

Purpose

In creating a message to reach a specific audience, campaign strategists will focus on the issues that matter to a given audience and capitalize on messaging on these issues on the channels they believe that specific audience is using. While a campaign may be strategic in deciding which and how messages are disseminated, there is no guarantee that these messages will reach their audiences because of the ability to curate feeds on social media platforms. On these new platforms, because each individual can choose which accounts and profiles to follow,

each individual's feed can look incredibly different as they decide what information they want to see. Therefore, evaluating which messages are actually being received is critical in determining how to break through to the targeted young audience online, where there are millions of other messages to compete against.

This thesis focuses on which messages disseminated by presidential primary campaigns are being received by young voters and how they are receiving those messages. In essence, it works to understand the success of campaigns in connecting intended messages with intended audience. It will also explore messages and channels that are most popular among young college-age voters. Through the research process, this research will be able to determine how successful campaigns have been in strategizing and delivering the messages they want to get to young college voters. College voters represent a growing part of the electorate and are historically less engaged in politics. Ultimately, pursuing this topic for research works to provide substantive information for campaigns regarding how to allocate resources in order to engage young voters.

Literature Review

A Changing Media Landscape

A central objective of any political campaign is to develop a message that will be heard. Until recently, there were limited avenues of where people could retrieve their news about politics including local newspapers, few national newspapers and nightly news channels (Panagopoulos, 2016). Today, candidates and their staff have turned to social media and new media to boost their campaign efforts. For the purpose of this study, new media refers to all emerging mediums such as streaming platforms where content cannot be posted by everyone like Netflix and Hulu whereas social media refers to the "online platforms that allow individuals to create and share content as well as view and comment on other users' content, whether text,

images or video" (Fowler et al., 2015, p. 115). In the world before social media, getting the message through to the electorate was difficult; this was not because of an uninterested public, but rather an overwhelmed public. Given the longevity of campaigns in the United States, "the voter is saturated with political information from the political parties, special interest groups, campaigns, candidates, and the news media for many months before election day" (Dalager, 1996, p.509). This saturation of information suggests that the voter may be overinformed rather than under or misinformed. A typical campaign season means that there are several campaigns disseminating information for several different elections, each with different candidates vying for the attention from voters (Dalager, 1996). Although an outdated landscape, this pre-social media information landscape provides insight into the current landscape that has even more information for the electorate to sift through.

This new landscape has added onto the sheer amount of information available to potential voters. The Internet and social media alone have added extensive amounts of information and conversations around information for voters to see or engage with. The sheer amount of information has expanded as "the volume of information produced and consumed in today's political world is immense" (Farrar-Myers & Vaughn, 2015, p. 1). Sifting through this endless stream of information is impossible for any voter; this inability to take in all information leads consumers of media to pick and choose outlets that coincide with their lifestyles. The rise of new and social media has "become fully infused into daily political life and contemporary election campaigns" (Farrar-Myers & Vaughn, 2015, p. 2). New media refers to all emerging mediums such as streaming platforms where content cannot be posted by everyone like Netflix and Hulu whereas social media refers to the emerging mediums like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube where any person can post content. This infusion brings information and news straight

to the consumer and is at a much lower cost than traditional mediums like television and radio.

For many organizations, not just political ones, sending messages on the Internet and through

social media is a cost-effective way to deliver and receive messages. However, having more

information does not indicate that this information "is less useful or more superficial" which

makes it difficult to measure if this helps contemporary campaigns and informing the electorate

on the issues (Sides et al., 2019, p. 82). Essentially more information does not equal a better-

informed voter as messages online that are reaching voters may not be substantial ones

addressing issues or candidate traits.

The Rapid Evolution of Social Media

Regardless, the novelty of social media makes our understanding of its impact on

political campaigns difficult to measure. In fact, in 2004, social media was hardly a factor to be

considered by political candidates. Facebook launched in 2004 but was not widely available to

be used for political purposes and "Twitter did not exist until 2006 and didn't catch on until

several years after its launch" (Sides et al., 2019, 78). As such, Obama's 2008 campaign is

considered the first campaign to utilize social media for campaign purposes (Eshbaugh-Soha,

2015). Even so, social media is a dynamic medium which can change dramatically between

presidential and even midterm elections. The following 2012 presidential election dramatically

increased campaign's interest in the utilization of social network tool. Barack Obama's

campaign used social media as well as his opponents who also "aggressively incorporate[d]

social network tools into their campaigns including Facebook, YouTube, Hulu and Twitter"

(McNeal & Bryan, 2015, p. 998). Within the 2012 campaign, both Obama and Romney's teams

utilized the tools available to them online and on social media in new and innovative ways that

they had not used previously.

The shift to new media as a means to deliver campaign messages began with one candidate's campaign for the Democratic nomination. Although Howard Dean did not go on to win that nomination, his team's "innovative use of technology served as a signal for candidates and campaign managers across the country of what the future of American elections would look like, propelling campaign tactics into an era of seemingly constant technological innovation and development" (Panagopoulos, 2016, p.1t80). This new era of campaign tactics revolves around 24-hour news cycles, infinite online sources, and social media sites that provide information and updates about politics to American citizens (Panagopoulos, 2016). In this way, campaigns and candidates can be constantly sending messages to their audiences.

The ability to constantly update information on Internet and social media sites have changed the nature of how political information is shared. In fact, "every year, more Americans turn to the Internet to get campaign information" and "from social media…through friends, family and others in their social networks" (Panagopoulos, 2016, p.185). Essentially, the instantaneous nature of the Internet has enabled people to constantly receive and even disseminate news themselves to the networks they have established online. Social media's significance, in particular, allows users to "both produce and exchange content with others" (McNeal et al., 2017, p. 284). Although typical users do not follow the fact-checking techniques of other disseminators of messages like traditional journalists, posts from someone within a given person's online social network may be taken as news. In fact, a study conducted around the 2008 election by Baumgartner and Morris (2010), found that many respondents "regarded social networking sites as a potential source of news and that many respondents did obtain news from the sites" (McNeal et al., 2017, p. 284). Viewing such sites as informational news sites provides

power to any given 'friend' on the online social network to influence opinion of the members they are connected with.

For example, if person A is a passionate supporter of candidate #1, then that person may share with their friends positive ideas about that candidate. A friend of person A sees that post about candidate #1 and shares it to their online social network and so on. This ability to quickly share information about candidates on these social media platforms allows messages to get to many people quickly, whether the message is positive or negative. In particular, social media sites, like Twitter, "enables both supporters and opponents to spread view and information about candidates rapidly" (Panagopoulos, 2016, p. 68).

Social Media and Political Campaigns

From a candidate standpoint, this means a successful campaign must be disseminating consistent information online where people can see it and share it with their friends. In practice, it means campaigns "not only have websites, but also Facebook pages, Twitter accounts and Instagram accounts" (Panagopoulos, 2016, p. 127). In the late 1990s, it was more novel for a candidate to have an online presence through a campaign website, whereas today, it is more or less required to have a website and a presence on social media (Panagopoulos, 2016). The necessity of a social media presence is well-demonstrated during the 2016 election where eventual Republican nominee Donald Trump tweeted over 4,000 times from the moment he announced his campaign in June 2015 through January 2016 (Panagopoulos, 2016). In a number of elections, the landscape largely shifted focus online and set an expectation for a campaign's presence online.

The ways candidates can disseminate their message has multiplied and now includes the ability to target specific voters through paid advertising on social media. Attributed to the greater

access to 'big data' and campaign 'analytics,' campaigns can use the immense amount of information about individual voters to "identify with great precision specific groups of voters for particular forms of outreach" (Sides et al., 2019, p. 76). This data is used to create content designed to pique the interest of an individual as identified by the data campaigns gather and use. Although a newer ability, "since 2008, every campaign in the country has had the ability to engage with voters based on an array of individual level characteristics" which illustrate "how campaigns perceive the dispositions of voters and act of those perceptions" (Hersh, 2015, p. 66). The data which may be a combination of demographics, like age and gender, and geography as well as commercial and proprietary data purchased or gathered for the campaign's use (Hersh, 2015). This data is used to position a candidate in the appropriate manner for specific audiences based on perceptions of that audience.

For example, "campaigns can buy ads that are linked to specific web searches that will show an Internet user an advertisement for a candidate's website" (Panagopoulos, 2016, p. 127). This sort of narrowcasting can provide "some assurance that their message is reaching individuals who at least have some interest in supporting them" (127). This opportunity to reach individuals online has only complicated the distribution of campaign funds which now has to be strategically divided among the drastically increased number of paid media outlets (Panagopoulos, 2016). The benefit of internet advertising is the ability to use big data and analytics, so you are sending advertisements to those who have shown interest in the campaign or can be targeted contextually based on their interests. The ability to target is becoming incredibly complex to the point where "voter files, consumer habits, household income, geotargeting (down to a zip code or congressional district level)" and other gathered data are combined and utilized by many industries, not just political campaigns (p. 134). This emerging

ability provides access to consumer behavior across industries which cumulates in better

targeting for both corporations try to sell products and political campaigns trying to disseminate

messages about their campaign.

However, paid advertising can be difficult to track because "detailed personal

information about online users that search engine and social media companies collect allows

them to sell very targeting advertising to campaigns" (Fowler et al., 2016, p. 119). This means

that different people are seeing different advertisements based on the data collected from their

profiles and online activity, such as demographic characteristics (Fowler et al., 2016).

Nevertheless, this paid targeting will only continue to become more efficient in reaching

potential supporters of candidates, though it does not stand superior to the influence of organic

unpaid social media content.

Campaigns believe social media provides direct access to the electorate. This is

specifically true among young voters who are "a marginalized but substantively important group

that could critically affect vote shares in competitive election campaigns" (Kim & Geidner,

2008, p.5). The nature of these social media provides campaigns the opportunity for candidates

to "address issues of the day, respond to news and media accounts, and update supporters and

followers on campaign" (Bode et al., 2016, p. 589). This flexibility means campaigns can

address the information not covered by traditional media and presents the opportunity to

"diversify political speech across the board" without the limitations of other media (Bode et al.,

2016, p. 589). Without the restrictions associated with traditional media, campaigns can portray

their candidates as more human and less like a cookie cutter politician. In particular, Twitter,

which capitalizes its platform on authenticity, "removes a layer between politicians and the

public" (Pfeiffer, 2018, p. 207). By removing this barrier, a closer relationship can be established

and provide the "opportunity for conversation or engagement that is normally reserved for elites" (Pfeiffer, 2018, p. 207). The largest argument for its success for political campaigns is the 2016 election in which "Donald Trump's pervasive use of Twitter…not only serves as the exemplar for using social media to get the message out, but it may also herald the end of television's dominance of presidential campaign communication" (Sides et al., 2019, p. 78). The nature of this social media environment is a more democratic one, which ultimately includes attracting voters who are usually disheartened or turned off by politics because of its elitist nature.

Connecting with Voters Using Social Media

Politics are complicated and difficult to follow, turning off Americans from being engaged in politics. In general, "Americans do not spend a great deal of time following politics. This is true even in presidential elections, when politics seems extraordinarily salient" (Sides et al., 2019, p. 383*).* In combination with the fact that young voters are historically uninterested in politics, this voting block establishes itself as an incredibly difficult block to reach (McNeal et al., 2017). Because the nitty gritty politics are not followed closely, attitudes of voters tend to "not change much over time. Those whose attitudes did change, tended to move in a predictable direction: toward the candidate that the individual was already predisposed to support" (Sides et al., 2019, p. 383). In this case, it seems logical to employ campaign tactics to engage this public, but additionally troublesome is the fact that Americans are also "not very responsive to the campaign or its mass media outreach." (Sides et al., 2019, p. 383). With this knowledge, it seems that building a campaign seems like a costly task which does not largely influence voter choice.

However, although voters may not closely follow or understand politics and government, they still receive information about candidates. Though "voters are ignorant of many facts about government…they still pick up important information about the principal differences between

candidates" (Popkin, 1994, p. 41). As such, it still remains important for campaigns to communicate the messages they want to portray about their candidate in order to influence the accuracy of voter perceptions of the candidate (Popkin, 1994). A particularly important time for disseminating the messages for a campaign is leading up to an election, whether it is the primary or the general because it is believed "that this is when most voter begin to focus on the choice ahead of them" (Sides et al., 2019, p. 404). As a result, states like Iowa, New Hampshire, and Nevada who come earliest in the primary season receive an overabundance of political information, and for the already uninterested block of young voters, this overabundance may leave them overwhelmed and even further indecisive.

Virality in a Political Landscape

Politics is no different than the rest of the content on the Internet in the sense that there is an incredible, even overwhelming amount of information available to the public for consumption. Candidates and their respective campaigns, particularly in larger fields, search for something "that will set them apart and change the course of the campaign" (Goodwin, 2019, para. 1). In the internet and social media age, in attempt to stand out in the incredible depth of information, campaigns "often try to produce or push content that 'goes viral'" (Sides et al., 2015, p. 142). "Going viral" refers to the phenomena of organic content being "redistributed continuously online and becomes fodder for the news" (Sides et al., 2019, p. 149). This redistribution is a form of earned media and these moments are provide momentum though they are "hard to define and impossible to predict" (Goodwin, 2019, para. 3). Anything can go viral–a moment in a townhall, a debate exchange, an interaction with a worried American– the list could go on and on. This unpredictability is critical in modern campaigns because those moments catch fire online and "are propelled by social outlets with a line into an enormous audience"

(Schneider, 2019, para. 6). These viral moments can reach voters far removed from the political world once their friend or who they follow shares a candidate's moment on social media. It is an outreach strategy unmatched by predictable means of campaign outreach and organizing.

In order to gain the most ground of these unpredictable moments, campaigns need to act fast and capitalize on the moment. Campaigns "must quickly seize on the burst and money to build their e-mail lists and fire up their core supporters, without turning off people by overdoing it" (Goodwin, 2019, para. 16).The unpredictable nature of virality is attempted to be algorithmized in order to create such moments when a campaign needs a push, but over producing these moments is off putting because in order "for a moment to gain traction it has to at least seem authentic" (Goodwin, 2019, para. 9). As such, the nature of crafting viral content is contradicting because this crafted and planned content is not organic as expected. This content is created to be viral, though it is difficult to do so because the virality of content is largely uncalculatable and cannot be predicted. Still, campaigns engage in attempts to create content they manufacture to be viral. In a more recent example, Dan Pfeiffer, White House Communications Director for Barack Obama, admitted that "political strategists spend an undue amount of time trying to create moments that may go viral" (2018, p. 102). The reality is that not every piece of content will go viral. In fact, the "overwhelming majority of campaign content doesn't go viral," but even these attempts of virality reflect the yearning for the coveted viral moment that pushes the candidate forward and ahead of the rest (as cited in Schneider, 2019, para. 13). Regardless if content is created or organic, going viral is incredibly beneficial in an online campaign strategy because it allows a candidate's content to be exposed to those who are not dedicated followers and therefore are not exposed to the content through the candidate's social profiles and pages or through their campaign website.

Going viral, however, is not necessarily always a positive thing because "the flipside of the spotlight is the microscope" (Goodwin, 2019, para. 18). Presidential candidates "are always under scrutiny during a campaign," but this "new technology allows the news media, opposing campaigns and ordinary citizens to examine everything a candidate does and to share embarrassing moments with the world" (Sides et al., 2019, p. 79). This pattern of emphasizing and spreading blunders is not new with new technology. In fact, these blunders, often known as 'gaffes' are incredibly fascinating because it "is unexpected and, from the candidate's point of view, undesired" (Sides & Vavreck, 2013, p.115). As such, gaffes "almost always make the news" which voters might view and use these moments to shape their opinion about a candidate. Although traditional excessive coverage of gaffes on traditional mediums has not been as influential for average voters who rarely tune into politics in the first place, let alone negative moments (Sides & Vavreck, 2013). On the other hand, when shared online, these gaffes can go viral when these embarrassing moments are spread like a virus and as a result, they often overshadow the issues of a candidate's campaign. This increased accessibility to gaffes may mean that the average voter is better informed of the gaffes of particular candidates, though it is still difficult to pinpoint its influence on overall opinion. Ultimately, this means that these viral moments may be more recognizable than a campaign's stance on a particular issue, problematically steering the narrative away from the substance and towards the trivial. However, candidates can and do still use these negative or embarrassing moments to stand out from the pack because for a presidential candidate, especially one in a crowded primary field, "almost any attention is better than no attention" (Goodwin, 2019, para. 35).

Nonetheless, the transparency and 'realness' of social media is a strategy to reach younger voters on these platforms. As such, social media can serve as a platform to disseminate

campaign messages to voter. However, social media's expectation of candidness makes it

difficult for traditionally polished candidates to adapt to the sites adequately. For example, a

short video created on Vine, a social media network, comes off as incredibly awkward when

Hillary Clinton, candidate for president, "held the phone too close to let her audience know she

was "just chilling…in Cedar Rapids" (Sides et al., 2019, p. 78). This awkward social media

moment could not be forgotten but continues to be recognizable among young voters because it

went viral, reposted over 76,000 times. A candidacy's ability to be successful disseminating

messages online must also be comfortable with the more casual and candid atmosphere to

resonate with voters, rather than perpetuate themselves as a stiff politician trying to break

through online to gather votes. Nonetheless, "campaigns think these viral moments usually help

more than they harm, reinforcing the old adage that any publicity is good publicity" (Sides et al.,

2019, p. 149). Thus, campaigns will likely continue to engineer and manipulate their content

specifically in attempts of getting it to go viral.

Virality is not limited to campaign-generated content. In fact, because social media

allows for the democratization of spreading information, regular citizens may create their own

content to show support or dismay of a particular candidate. In this situation, candidates may

either disassociate themselves from the content, particularly if it reflects negatively on the

campaign, or utilize and capitalize on the true organic nature of viral moments created by regular

citizens. Nevertheless, this ability for any user to create a viral moment makes it virtually

impossible for campaigns to control their image on the internet (Sides et al., 2019).

Authenticity Online

Thus, having a presence online as a campaign provides opportunities to reach members of

the electorate who are not otherwise reached through traditional campaign strategies. Social

networks not only provide channels to disseminate message, but as Kim and Geidner (2008) suggest, they "may promote voting, especially among young voters who have been, relatively alienated from politics" (p. 18). The young voter in particular is important because of their inactivity in civic actions like voting. They are accessible through new media because "younger individuals (while less likely to vote) were among those to first embrace the Internet" (McNeal et al., 2017, p. 284). As such, "younger people are also more likely to share and receive news via social networks" (Sides et al., 2019, p. 220). Not only does this age group embrace the Internet itself, but the majority of eighteen- to twenty-five years olds (70%) perceive it as a "useful source of political and issue information" (Carlisle & Patton, 2013, p.886). Having this information accessible to young voters provides them the opportunity to receive it, though this does not mean they read or remember the information they see online.

Other studies around this group of young voters also shows that "reading online news was positively associated with increased political knowledge" (McNeal & Bryan, 2015, p. 994). Having access to information is a pinnacle piece for all voters in linking "their opinions on policy issues to their decision at the ballot box" (Henderson, 2014, p. 631). However, this increased participation among young voters on social media does not equate to issue-related knowledge. Because social media platforms like Twitter "include less issue-related information," it can be concluded that the information received online is less policy focused than a traditional media advertising might be (Bode et. al. 2016, p. 591). This makes sense for platforms like Twitter, who used to have character limits of 140 characters; although the limit has increased to 280 characters, it is unsurprisingly difficult to pack complex, detailed information into a single tweet (Fowler et al., 2016,). In fact, a common complaint about the modern campaigns is that "they don't focus enough on policy, they lack substance" (Sides et al., 2019, p. 81). This, of

course, is amplified by the sensational algorithms of social media which promote the viral

moments, which are not necessarily policy focused. However, issue-specific information may be

more likely to be obtained by voters if they see it as personal concern and there is availability to

this information. Seeking information on the basis of personal relevance regards such

populations as 'issue publics' (Henderson, 2014). In essence, issue publics reiterates the idea that

"on the issues important to them they are well-informed" (Henderson, 2014, p. 633). Regardless

of what political information they are getting, the evidence suggests that young people feel more

empowered with political information because they found that information on a platform that

was accessible to them and limited the cost of reaching that information. This is especially

important when issues present personal relevance to them because in intersection with the

availability of information, campaigns can "provide an important political resource to voters who

are otherwise weakly engaged with politics in a general sense" (Henderson, 2014, p. 655).

Today, as social networking sites and other non-traditional mediums continue to develop,

campaigns continue to adopt more digital friendly strategies to adapt to changing audiences.

These sites are used "to enhance the effectiveness of their messages, to engage citizens online

and promote activism on behalf of candidates, and to help candidates better understand the

opinions of the electorate" (Panagopoulos, 2016, p. 127). Given social media's presence in the

2008, 2010, 2012, 2014, and 2016 elections, and the fact that "the use of the Internet and social

media advertising continues to grow each year," in the long term, the role of social media like

Twitter and Facebook "will become more embedded into the political landscape" (Fowler et al.,

2016, p. 132; Carlisle & Patton, 2013, p. 892). This increasing role of new and social media

requires continuous investigation for its effectiveness in reaching voters, particularly the young

as the population known for adapting these technologies quickly. They will continue to become a

larger part in the electorate audience, substantiating the importance of campaigns reaching this

audience with their messages in many elections to come.

Research Questions

This thesis project seeks to answer the following questions:

a. Where are college-age voters receiving their messages about political candidates?

b. What messages are campaigns disseminating to young, college-age voters through social media?

c. Are disseminated campaign messages reaching the college-age audience?

Methodology

The methodology for this project included two data-gathering processes, the first of which involved data collection through investigating the top four candidates' Twitter timelines. Front-running candidates were targeted for this data collection which were determined by the general pattern of the top four candidates in national and Iowa polls: former Vice President Joe Biden, Senator Bernie Sanders, Senator Elizabeth Warren and former mayor of South Bend, Indiana, Pete Buttigieg. Data collection was conducted within a period of two weeks before and one week after the Iowa caucus before any of the aforementioned candidates dropped out. Every other tweet between January 20th through February 4th was evaluated to allow for controlled randomization. Tweet content was used to determine key issues or messages of the campaign leading up to the Iowa Caucus. Tweets could be classified as addressing more than one issue or message. Of the classifications, the most common were utilized to illustrate which issues were important to the candidate and the campaign which form the messages which are disseminated towards the audience on Twitter. In general, the audience on Twitter includes a large number of younger voters, though all messages addressed in the tweets evaluated may not resonate with young voters. This first part of data collection laid the basis for understanding and evaluation for the second data-gathering process.

The second data-gathering process included interviews with college-age students. Sixteen college-aged voters, ages 18-22 from the University of Northern Iowa, completed an oral interview. Prior to recruiting and conducting interviews, this study worked with the Institutional Research Board to ensure protocol used in this study abided by IRB approved standards of research with human subjects. Various recruitment strategies including email and verbal invitations were utilized in gathering participants for this study. In total, 16 interviews were conducted. These strategies targeted all college students at one public university, the University of Northern Iowa. These participants were invited to participate in this study through recruitment emails or through verbal request by researchers. This study was explained to them as 'a study into political messaging for young, college-age voters.' Participants volunteered their time to be interviewed and were not compensated for doing so. Under this explanation, participants were asked about which candidates they were getting messages from, what those messages were, and where they were receiving those messages. Provided that the presumptive nominee for the Republican party for 2020 was Donald Trump, the interview was focused on gathering information from participants about their knowledge of candidates within the Democratic primary. Within the appendix of this study is the questionnaire utilized by researchers to gather information from participants.

After gathering the results from both techniques, identifying connections and disconnections between intended messages and messages received by the intended audiences will help determine which campaigns, which messages, and which strategies were best at reaching and resonating with young college-age voters.

Data

Data collected from young voters was obtained through oral interviews conducted in January and February 2020. The timeline of this data collection was chosen to reflect the time when Iowa voters would be best informed of the Democratic party candidates vying for the nomination, leading up to the Iowa Caucuses held on February 3rd, 2020. Within this time period, it is expected that Iowans were particularly tuned into the state of the primary and the candidates as campaigns focused resources to communicate messages that may persuade caucus-goers in the weeks and days leading up to the caucus.

Additionally, given that students were not compensated for their participation, students' decisions to be involved in this study may present a participation bias where those who are more interested in the content of the research volunteer to participate, over-representing a population of potentially better-informed and engaged young voters. Nevertheless, the research team made cognitive efforts to specifically recruit and conduct research with some admittedly less engaged and informed young voters to limit this bias.

Retrieval Platforms

In a world with a continuously growing number of sources one can use, knowing where this population received these messages may point to larger patterns and preferences of specific platforms. In order to understand the perceptions of each of the candidates and the issues they advocate for, participants were asked to identify where they procure information about candidates and the race in general. Below are the results. During this study, many participants asserted that they use at least several different sources in information retrieval suggesting there is no one single source of information they use in retrieving information about candidates, but rather their perceptions are a combination of the many messages they may see across several sources.

Additionally, many participants mentioned their tendency to cross reference the information they encountered, especially on specific platforms they deemed less trustworthy, like Facebook, and when the information was contentious. The following data presents the raw total number of participants who claimed to use the corresponding source for information about candidates. For the purpose of this analysis, word of mouth is used as an umbrella term covering a combination of answers revolving around interactions with others including talking with friends, talking with campaign organizers, conversations about candidates in classes or other gatherings. One participant admitted that they received at least some of their information from overhearing conversations between other classmates without their direct participation in the conversation itself.

To further breakdown what platforms were used by participants, those who claimed that at least some of their information came from social media sites were asked to list which platforms and identify if the information they saw was an organic post (i.e.: post shared by a friend) or a paid post (i.e. an advertisement). This differentiation provides an understanding of the participants ability to do so which may influence the impact it has on a voter. Organic content tends to be taken as more reliable because the messaging was not developed by the campaign itself.

Table 1	
Information Sources	
	(N)
social media	15
word of mouth	7
news organizations (app, website or podcast)	6
candidate websites	6
streaming apps (Hulu, HBO, Amazon,etc).	6
candidate visits	5
Podcasts other than news	2

Table 2		
Social Media		
	Organic	*Paid*
Twitter	9	3
YouTube	0	10
Facebook	5	1
Instagram	4	1

Table 1 displays the information sources used by participants in this study alongside the raw number of mentions of each source.
Table 2 provides a more in-depth look at the social media used as information sources among participants including whether the content on each platform was organic or paid.

Of all information sources, social media is presented as a widely used platform by the participants in the study. Among social media platforms, Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram were all referenced as sources where participants saw more organic content than paid, though there was still some identification that at least a minority of information seen on these platforms was paid content. YouTube, on the other hand, was identified as a strictly paid content source. Although it is a social media site available for anyone to post, participants did not indicate the content they saw on YouTube was organic. Participants were not seeking this content from the official YouTube channel rather they came across the information they saw on this platform as a result of a campaign's paid advertising on the site. Of this observation, many participants noted they typically did not process the messages within the advertisement, rather which candidate the advertisement

was supporting. Several participants noted the dominance of a candidate not included in this study on this platform's advertisements, Tom Steyer.

Moreover, these participants also commented that after seeing so many of Steyer's advertisements, they were annoyed or even frustrated with the sheer quantity of them. Having seen so many of them, they perceived his candidacy more negatively than others who they had not seen so much paid content for. The information provided in the advertisements were not processed and instead triggered negative reactions from many participants. Given this, if not through paid content, how can a candidate disseminate messages beyond their following?

Figure 1

DO YOU FOLLOW CANDIDATES ON SOCIAL MEDIA?

At least one candidate, top choice(s) n=5

Do Not Follow Candidates n=9
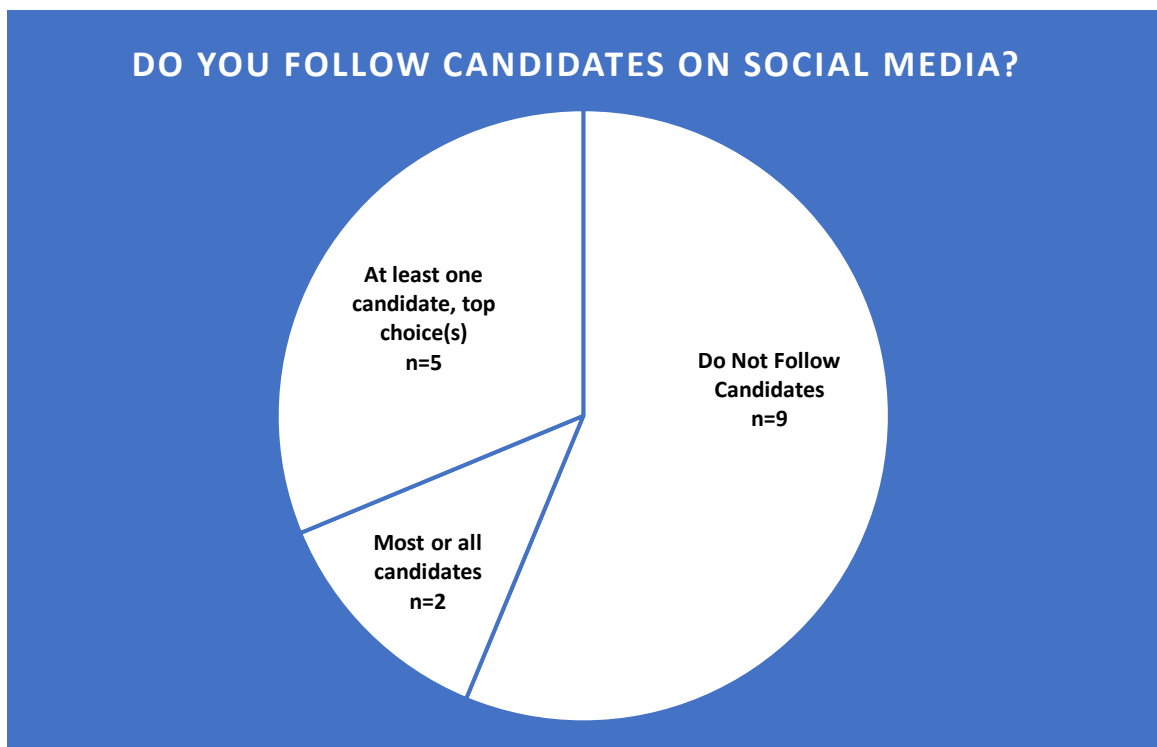
Most or all candidates n=2

Figure 1 provides a visual for the participants answers to the question "do you follow candidates on social media?" of which more than half did not.

While seven of the sixteen participants said they followed at least one candidate on social media, that leaves nine participants, or over half of the participants who are not personally

following candidates via social media. Of the seven who follow at least one candidate on social media, only two of the participants explained they followed most or all of the top polling candidates rather than following the candidates they considered to be their top choice(s). This suggests a significant gap where campaigns can directly disseminate messages to voters at all. Voters who have decided on their top candidate[s] may be difficult to persuade. However, deciding voters may not even connected with many of the campaigns through social media, which creates a significant obstacle for campaigns who disseminate messages for the purpose to inform and persuade such voters to support their candidate.

However, those who do follow at least some of the candidates can influence on the opinions of their own followers. Consider if 100 people shared or retweeted content posted by the campaign onto their own timelines. This provides potential for that message to reach each of the followers or friends for those 100 people. Bringing the social influence online provides a less direct pathway to voters because it is dependent on followers to share your content, but it also allows for their content to reach more voters organically. They may see campaign content through a shared post or tweet by a friend or someone they follow which may posit the candidate more favorably because their friend is sharing positive things about the candidate. Almost like a virtual endorsement from an ordinary user, the power of reach via sharing and retweeting is immense and provides a connection between a candidate and a friend whose opinion may be valued by the voter who sees it.

In a similar vein, word of mouth as an information source can be especially influential. Talking with friends or classmates about candidates may equate to a less regulated message because it is not directly controlled by the campaign, though it still can be influential for voters who look to friends, families and other members of their social network to gather information

about candidates. Additionally, word of mouth as a source refers to the conversations that participants had with campaign workers or organizers. As a representative of the campaign, the messaging during a conversation with a voter may be better controlled while still connecting with young college-age voters.

Even with the availability of information on social media and from friends and family, participants also turned to news organizations to get information about candidates. Few of the participants who mentioned using news organizations referenced that they were often led to an online article or video from a news company through social media. For example, a friend might share a link about a candidate's response to a current event and the participant would see that article and read it because it was introduced to them via social media by a friend or someone they follow.

Also notable about the information sources utilized by the participants is that only six, or 37.5%, would seek out information from the campaign website itself. For these participants, they often sought out a candidate's website to learn specifics of a policy plan or to help differentiate candidates from one another as they approached making a decision about which candidate to support in the caucus. Once an innovative way to inform voters, the limited number of participants utilizing candidate's websites to obtain information suggests that this is no longer as important of a source to retrieve information about a candidate.

Similar to the advertisements seen on YouTube, many participants noted they saw candidate advertisements on various streaming platforms. For these participants, streaming platforms have replaced or overshadowed the use of cable television. As such, campaigns displayed advertisements on these platforms instead, though less participants cited this as a source for information in comparison to YouTube which although it is considered a social media

platform, the content viewed on this platform is video thus making it similar to these streaming platforms which participants use in place of traditional cable television.

Campaign Messaging

Determining a campaign's messaging strategies to promote their candidate among specific audiences is often considered proprietary data of the campaign itself. Nonetheless, messaging and issue focus can be determined by the frequency of a message and where the messages are being disseminated. Given that more and more Americans are turning to the Internet, particularly social media to get their information, studying a candidate's Twitter account can provide reflections of their campaign messaging (Panagopoulos, 2016). Notably, social media is especially important to younger voters who overwhelming perceive the Internet as a valuable source for information about candidates (Carlisle & Patton, 2013). Moreover, the extension of the democratization of social media like Twitter provides better accessibility to information among young people who are more likely to retrieve information on social media.

This study operates under the general belief that social media like Twitter, with a generally younger audience, can serve as an indicator of message and issue focus towards younger voters (Sides et al., 2019). As such, the Twitter pages of each of the candidates utilized in this study were analyzed to determine messaging focus through frequency. In particular, this study focused on tweets disseminating the two weeks up until the Iowa Caucus, when it is expected more of the Iowa electorate is tuning in to determine which candidate they might caucus for. In general, it is understanding that an integral period for information dissemination for a campaign is in the weeks leading up to a primary or election, where the average voter focuses on which candidate they will support in the upcoming voting (Sides et al., 2019). As such, the data gathered for this study includes tweets from January 20th, 2020 through February 3rd, 2020, or two weeks leading into the 2020 Iowa Caucuses.

First, the data was compiled into general categories of messaging among the candidates including issue-related, candidate traits, and electability messages. Historically, campaigns have debated which category of messages to focus on to persuade the public to support their candidate. For this study, three concentrations of messaging, issue stance, candidate trait and electability to reflect different categories of message focus. Alongside aligning stances with political candidates, research suggests that voters consider strategy in their vote, regardless of political sophistication (Rickershauser & Aldrich, 2007). The strategic vote in presidential primaries revolves around issue stance as well as the given candidate's chance of winning the general election in November, also known as his/her electability (Rickershauser & Aldrich, 2007). As such, emphasizing electability as a candidate is utilized to suggest that candidate seems "better poised to win" (Rickershauser & Aldrich, 2007, p. 372). This is particularly important in re-election year campaigns like the 2004 election between one Democrat and the already established Republican candidate, George W. Bush, who was running for re-election (Rickershauser & Aldrich, 2007). As such, the 2020 election provides a similar circumstance in which campaigns may utilize electability arguments to perpetuate their candidate forward to win the nomination because they have poised themselves the most capable of winning in the general election against the incumbent, Donald Trump.

In order to measure the category of messages each campaign focused on leading up to the caucuses, the tweets used as data were classified into each of these categories to reflect the concentration of their messaging strategy on Twitter. The approximate number of tweets sent during this period are calculated at the bottom of the table, though only half were analyzed for categorization. Additionally, some tweets originally selected for analysis based on the randomization strategy explained in the methodology did not clearly into the categories that were developed. These tweets did not address identified campaign messages, rather they were irrelevant in nature because of this. These 'throwaway' tweets were disregarded and not included

in the analysis because of their irrelevance within the study. Examples of some tweets which

were regarded as these sorts of tweets and therefore not utilized in the data are provided below.

Figure 2

Figure 2 provides an example of a 'throwaway tweet' or a non-relevant tweet for this particular study from Pete Buttigieg where he thanks another candidate for wishing him a happy birthday.

Figure 3

Figure 3 provides an example of a 'throwaway tweet' or a non-relevant tweet for this particular study from Joe Biden where he congratulates former First Lady Michelle Obama on an accomplishment unrelated to his campaign messages.

Candidate Message Concentration

Table 3		**Candidates**			
		Bernie Sanders	*Elizabeth Warren*	*Joe Biden*	*Pete Buttigieg*
Message Concentration	Issue-Related	52	69	23	35
	Candidate Trait	7	6	6	9
	Electability	6	15	16	15
	TOTAL TWEETS	237	300	107	246

Table 3 outlines the message concentrations of all the four campaigns studied utilized three broad categories of concentration: issue-related, candidate trait, and electability.

Among the candidates studied, there are several patterns which emerge. The first being a larger focus on issues. This may be attributed to the nature of social media which provides the opportunity for campaigns to respond to news as it is happening. Campaigns may design their responses to demonstrate a stance on the particular issue related to the news while showing active engagement by responding to the news as it happens (Bode et al., 2016). Also notable is the limitation of highlighting character traits among each of the campaigns. Provided that social media is traditionally seen as platforms which "lack substance," there is a significant dominance of issue-related messages over less substantial candidate trait messages (Sides et al., 2019, p. 81). Finally, all of the campaigns presented at least some focus on electability messages except Bernie Sanders.' However, it is still difficult to calculate which strategy is nonpareil, specifically in the determining of the value of electability messages, its effectiveness can only be evaluated after a candidate is actually elected therefore proving their electability argument. Nonetheless, indications of a focus on this message reflects as part of the messaging strategy of a campaign.

The second analysis of the data gathered from candidate's Twitter is determining specific messages disseminated within the categories of issue-related and candidate traits. The same data was used for this portion of the study, though analyzed more specifically to demonstrate what the

messages being disseminated say about the candidate themselves or the issues that are prioritized by

the campaign because of the frequency of messages regarding specific issues. This data is available

for each candidate including their dominant issue messages and trait messages included with the raw

number of mentions of the corresponding messages. Note that several messages may be mentioned in

one tweet and that tweets without specific mention of a character trait or an issue were not utilized in

this part of the study.

Bernie Sanders' Issues and Candidate Traits

Table 4			
Bernie Sanders			
Issue		Candidate Trait	
Worker's Rights/Middle class	18	long-time activist	8
the 1 percent/ the establishment	14	left/more liberal	1
Medicare for All	12		
Climate Change	10		
College plans	1		
LGBTQ+	1		

Table 4 presents the issues and candidate trait messages of the campaign of Bernie Sanders based on the number of tweets relating to specific issues or traits.

Based on the frequency of mentions in his tweets during this period, it seems the

dominating issue concerns of Sanders' campaign are worker's rights/strengthening the middle

class, acknowledging and dismantling the incredible power of the top one-percent of Americans

and the establishment of large corporations, Medicare for All and addressing climate change.

These issues are mentioned much more frequently and suggest these are messages the campaign

often disseminates to the electorate in hopes these messages will be received and Sanders will be

associated with these issue concerns by voters to translate into support for his candidacy because

of his focus on these particular issues. In the tweets analyzed, Sanders often addressed several issues in one tweet like the one featured below which addresses both working class issues and access to health care. Provided is a tweet from Sanders during this period which reflects his messaging focus and integration of several issues within one tweet.
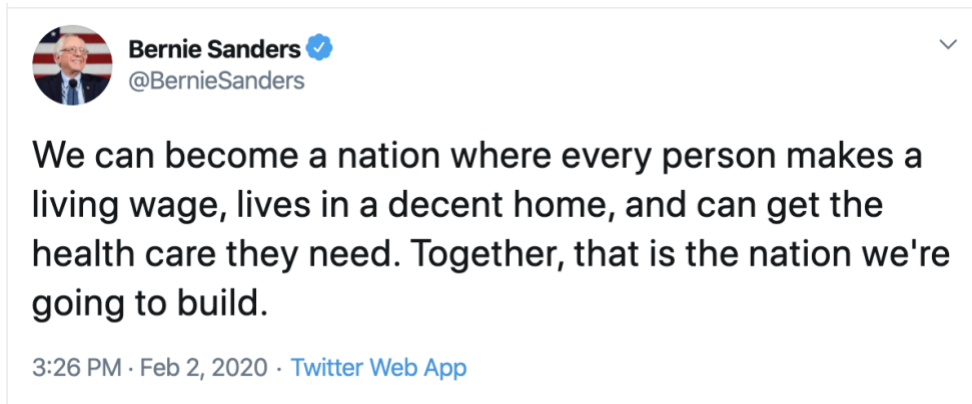
Figure 4

Bernie Sanders ✔
@BernieSanders

We can become a nation where every person makes a living wage, lives in a decent home, and can get the health care they need. Together, that is the nation we're going to build.

3:26 PM · Feb 2, 2020 · Twitter Web App

Figure 4 is a Sanders tweet which represents a general sense of the emphasis of his messaging regarding working families as well as health care.

Additionally, there are frequent mentions of Sanders being a long-time activist throughout this time period. The account emphasizes his work overtime serving much of the same values he runs this campaign on. Because it is so often mentioned during this period, it is clear the campaign wishes to highlight the consistency of his character during his time in public life. Again, this is a message which with higher frequency would be expected an important message for the campaign.

Elizabeth Warren's Issues and Candidate Traits

Table 5			
Elizabeth Warren			
Issues		Candidate Traits	
Corruption/Wall Street/Billionaires	21	Bailey, the dog	2
Campaign specific messages: Dream Big Fight Hard, she's got a plan for that, Big Structural Change	15	best woman running	2
immigration	9		
workers' rights/families	9		
women's rights**	6		
gun violence	5		
climate change	4		
education plans (preschool through higher education)	4		
Medicare for All	4		
LGBTQ+	2		

Table 5 provides totals for the raw number of mentions within tweets studied of each issue and candidate trait message.

Of all of the candidates in this study, Elizabeth Warren's Twitter reflected the widest range of issue focus with minimal focus dedicated to disseminating traits about the candidate. This may be a reflection of the fact she sent the most tweets out during this period with 300 tweets over the two-week period. Among the issue messages frequently sent out during this period, there is a wide range of issues addressed, covering many of the issues that other candidates focus on and then some. The most prominent messages suggest a Warren campaign messaging focus on rooting out corruption across industries and utilizing specific campaign slogans like 'Dream Big, Fight Hard,' 'She's got a plan for that,' 'Big Structural Change' and Warren positioned as the 'unity candidate.' These campaign specific messages are used

consistently among many issue concerns and provide a cohesiveness among the many issue

concerns she addresses on the platform. Additional higher frequency issues include immigration

and advocacy for worker's rights, specifically working families. Many of her tweets are

accompanied with a video to further illustrate her messaging and like Sanders, Warren's tweets

often address several campaign messages at a time. Below is an example tweet which is

characteristic with much of Warren's tweets studied including a video and text which address

several issues and integrates one her campaign slogans.

Figure 5
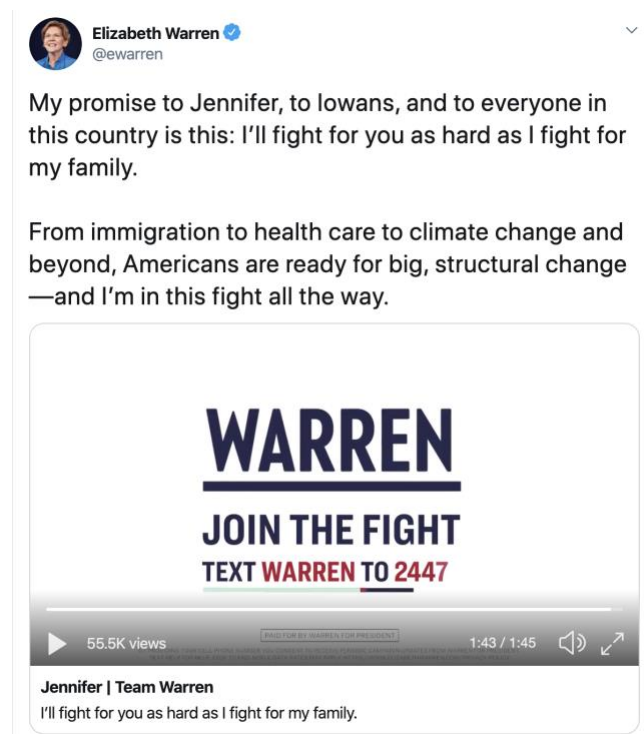
Figure 5 serves as a representative tweet of her messaging on Twitter. In this tweet alone, she addresses several messages including immigration, health care, climate change and her campaign specific message: big, structural change.

The campaign rarely shared information about the candidate or traits associated with the

candidate, instead focusing on issue stances in combination with campaign specific messages.

Within the data, there are multiple occasions where a single tweet addressed and connected

several issues again creating a sense of cohesion among issues and under the campaign's overall

messaging.

Joe Biden's Issues and Candidate Traits

Table 6			
Joe Biden			
Issue		Candidate Trait	
beating Trump	21	former VP	3
soul of the nation	9	expanding on Obama's success	3
public option/ expanding on Obamacare	3		
experience	3		
foreign policy	2		
social security	2		

Table 6 provides the data gathered from Biden's Twitter during the period of this study and the emphasis of each issue and candidate trait with the raw number of mentions within the tweets studied.

Joe Biden's Twitter was the least active among the candidates studied. While most

campaigns sent many tweets the same day, Biden's Twitter was significantly less active with

only a few tweets sent per day during this period. Over the entire two-week period, Biden's

account only tweeted 107 times which pales in comparison to all the other candidates in the

study. Among the limited tweets, there was one primary messaging tactic utilized most

frequently. Many tweets referenced Biden as the electable candidate with the ability to beat

Donald Trump while emphasizing the negative traits about Donald Trump.

Other than that, his message focus for other issues and candidate traits was very limited.

Aside from his primary message, his campaign also included a focus, though less frequent on a

campaign specific message where a Biden presidency would restore 'the soul of the nation.' This

soul of the nation is a theme among tweets and suggests a divided and broken country he is most

qualified to restore. A prime example of a Biden tweet during this period is provided.

Figure 6
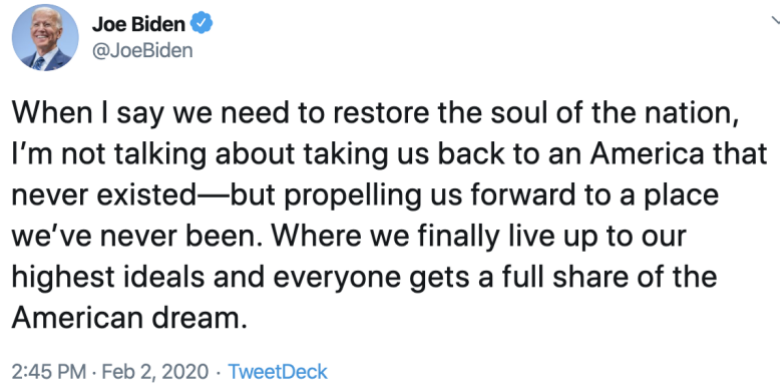
Figure 6 is a sample tweet from Joe Biden during this period which repeats his prominent messages discovered in this study.

Nevertheless, a less active Twitter from Biden's campaign may suggest that the focus for

messaging in not on social media for this campaign and as such, the limited data available to

evaluate may not reflect overall messaging of the campaign. Interesting is the mentions of social

security through at least two tweets during this period. Under the assumption that Twitter and

social media in general targets a younger audience, it seems particularly obscure to share

messages on Twitter related to social security where it would seem this audience is not interested

in such information.

Pete Buttigieg's Issues and Candidate Traits

Table 7			
Pete Buttigieg			
Issue		Candidate Trait	
Campaign Specific Messages: New Generation/turning the page in history	31	mayor	5
Veteran Affairs	6	young	4
Medicare for All who Want it	3	moderate	2
		South Bend/Indiana/Midwest	1
		veteran	1

Table 7 presents the frequently utilized messages regarding issues and candidate traits for Pete Buttigieg's campaign.

Pete Buttigieg's Twitter indicates emphasis on one message in specific and that message is reiterated in this period more than any other campaign's top message and one that is specific to his campaign. From the tweets studied, the campaign included messaging revolving around the idea of the new generation of leaders who are turning the page in history by choosing an outsider not infiltrated in traditional Washington politics. With this messaging, the campaign posited Buttigieg as the leader and pioneer for such an effort, though not every tweet with this message explicitly stated that. The other issue messages are shared much less, though there are many more candidate trait related messages shared from Buttigieg's campaign when compared to other candidates included in this study. Again, a representative example from the candidate's tweets over this period is provided.

Figure 7

Figure 7 was chosen to provide a representative example of the common messages of the Buttigieg campaign within the period of this study.

In studying each of the candidate's messaging on a platform in which other research and other parts of this study suggests is a source of information for many young voters, the next step is evaluating the success of the message delivery and reception with the perceptions of young voters about each of the candidates including which messages they believe are disseminated by the campaign.

Candidate Trait and Issue Identification

For each of the four highest polling candidates leading up to the caucus, each student participant was asked to spontaneously identify character traits and personal background of the given candidate. Additionally, participants were asked to identify which issues or stances a campaign and its respective candidate care about. Most participants identified several character traits and issue stances for each of the candidates. Of these aspects, several key messages, whether trait or issue related, were identifiable by at least several participants. For simplicity, language used within the tables were chosen to reflect the answers of participants, even if he/she did not use the exact language but still mentioned the trait or issue in their interview.

In the tables provided, percentages representing the number of participants to mention the specific candidate trait or issue listed. The actual number of participants spontaneously connecting traits and issues of each of the candidates is also recorded.

Bernie Sanders' Identifiable Issues and Candidate Traits

Table 8

Bernie Sanders

	Issues	*Candidate Traits*	
81% (13)	Medicare for All	democratic socialism	**63% (10)**
56% (9)	College plans	long-time activist/politician	**50% (8)**
50% (8)	Climate Change	senator	**44% (7)**
44% (7)	Worker's Rights/Middle Class	left/more liberal	**44% (7)**
25% (4)	Women's Rights	ran in 2016	**44% (7)**
19% (3)	The 1 Percent	independent	**44% (7)**
		heart attack	**25% (4)**

Table 8 presents the answers from participants regarding their perceptions and knowledge about Bernie Sanders and his campaign.

Both candidate traits and issues were frequently identified by many participants of the study. The most identifiable issues for Sanders included Medicare for All (81% or 13 participants), his focus on college issues including free four-year college and student loan debt cancellation (56% or 9 participants), and his views regarding climate change (50% or 8 participants). For example, 44%, or 7, of the participants identified that Sanders ran for the nomination in 2016, he is currently a senator, he is an independent in Congress and his ideology falls on the left side of liberal politics. Even more than that, more half of participants (63%) noted that he identifies with democratic socialism and half identified Sanders has a long history of being an activist and politician, some even calling Sanders have always been "on the right side of history" throughout his time in the public sphere. Of these traits, most of them are relatively

positive or neutral with heart attack and democratic socialism as potential attributes that some of the electorate will view negatively.

Elizabeth Warren's Identifiable Issues and Candidate Traits

Table 9

Elizabeth Warren

	Issues	*Candidate Traits*	
69% (11)	Corruption/Wall Street/Billionaires	senator	**56% (9)**
63% (10)	plans for education (Preschool-Higher Ed)	law grad/professor	**19% (3)**
44% (7)	Medicare for all	left/progressive	**19% (3)**
31% (5)	Campaign specific messages: Dream Big Fight Hard, she's got a plan for that, Big Structural Change, Unity Candidate	Bailey, her dog	**19% (3)**
25% (4)	climate change	caring	**19% (3)**
25% (4)	women's rights**	"strong grandma vibes"	**13% (2)**
25% (4)	LGBTQ+	best woman running	**13% (2)**

Table 9 is a presentation of the data gathered from participants of their knowledge and perception of the Warren campaign including issues and candidate traits.

Elizabeth Warren's key campaign issues were also well identifiable, though there were less identified candidate traits among participants. Of the wide variety of candidate traits identified, her current role as a U.S. senator was most identified where 56%, or 9 participants, identified this trait. Other than that, several identified her background as a law school graduate or law professor, that she is a more progressive member of the party, and several participants identified her as caring, which they connected her campaign's strategy of calling grassroots donors as an indicator of her caring nature. Just as identifiable, several participants mentioned Warren's dog, Bailey, as a part of their general knowledge of her as a candidate. There are no particularly negative candidate traits widely identified with Warren from this study. Among messaging, Warren's two most identifiable messages surrounded her focus on tackling

corruption (69% or 11 participants) and her plans enhancing all levels of education, specifically

her stance regarding student loan debt and funding higher education (63% or 10 participants).

Additionally, she was associated with Medicare for All and several participants named virtually

verbatim some of the campaign's specific messages and/or taglines including 'Dream Big, Fight

Hard,' 'she's got a plan for that,' and 'Big Structural Change.'

Joe Biden's Identifiable Issues and Candidate Traits

Table 10

Joe Biden

	Issues	*Candidate Traits*	
25% (4)	experience	former VP	**100% (16)**
19% (3)	public option/expanding Obamacare	moderate/center	**50% (8)**
19% (3)	foreign policy	expanding on Obama's success	**44% (7)**
6% (1)	electability/ability to beat Trump**	stutter	**25% (4)**
		son's relationship with Ukraine	**25% (4)**
		creepy/touchy	**25% (4)**
		led Anita Hill hearings	**13% (2)**

Table 10 provides the data from participant interviews of their perceptions of the issues and candidate traits of the Biden campaign.

Within these interviews, issue identification was incredibly low for Joe Biden with no

one issue being identified by more than 25% of the participants. In fact, several participants

admitted that they "know literally nothing about what issues Joe Biden cares about." With the

understanding he is a more moderate member of the party, several participants could

approximate on issues based on the patterns of the alignment within the party, though no of those

few participants confidently believed they could describe his specific stance on issues.

Joe Biden's most identifiable message was his background as a former vice president for

44th president, Barack Obama. Every one of the participants identified this, most of whom

identified this trait first. He also was largely identified as a more moderate or center candidate

(50% or 8 participants). Additionally, nearly half of participants (44% or 7 participants)

expressed their general belief that Biden was running to expand off of Obama's success, some of

whom elaborated to explain they believe he was running on "nostalgia for Obama." Among these

character traits and background, several identified his controversial past regarding interactions

with women and that his son was a focus within the impeachment inquiry of Donald Trump.

Additionally, four participants noted that Biden often stuttered, though only two of those

participants knew this was an adversity Biden had faced much of his political career. Still, he

was defined by this character trait. At least four of the identified candidate traits may be

construed as negative and as such, were most likely disseminated by the campaign itself.

Pete Buttigieg's Identifiable Issues and Candidate Traits

Table 11

Pete Buttigieg

	Issues	*Candidate Traits*	
44% (7)	Medicare for All Who Want it	gay	**100% (16)**
38% (6)	LGBTQ+ **	mayor	**94% (15)**
19% (3)	Electability*	South Bend/ Indiana	**50% (8)**
19% (3)	New Generation	veteran	**50% (8)**
13% (2)	Veteran Affairs	young	**38% (6)**
6% (1)	Cheaper College	affluent	**31% (5)**
		moderate	**31% (5)**

Table 11 presents the cumulated data gathered from participant interviews regarding their understanding of issues and candidate traits of Buttigieg.

Of the issues associated as important to Buttigieg's campaign, Medicare for All Who

Want it (44% or 7 participants) and concern for LGBTQ+ issues (38% or 6 participants) were

identified most among participants. However, many participants who answered that Buttigieg

focuses on LGBTQ+ issues admitted they made this connection because the candidate himself

was gay. A similar phenomenon happened with Warren where one of those who identified

women's rights as an important issue for her campaign, made this assumption because Warren is

a woman herself.

Several traits were listed frequently by participants regarding Pete Buttigieg. Of his

identified candidate traits, all of them were identified by at least 5 and as much as 15 of the 16

total participants. All but one of the participants identified that Buttigieg identifies as a gay man,

15 identified his background as a mayor, 8 of which identified either that he was a mayor in

Indiana or specifically identified he was mayor of South Bend, Indiana. Additionally, half of

respondents (8 participants) identified he was a veteran while 6 participants were able to identify

he is a young candidate and 5 participants identified he was moderate candidate within the

democratic party and 5 participants commented he had an affluent background. This distinction

of Buttigieg is particularly reflective of his background and potentially may reflect negative

perceptions of his candidacy because of his history of privilege in his past.

Virality

In addition to identifying character traits and issue focuses of each leading candidate,

participants were also asked to identify viral moments throughout the primary up until the point

of their interview. For the purpose of this question, participants were answering under the

definition of virality as 'anything that stood out to them or they thought were being talked about

frequently during the campaign.' This includes information that does not necessarily happen

within this specific campaign cycle, but may be influential in positioning of these candidates

during this campaign cycle. Under this assumption, there were several general categories of

answers including campaign moments, debate moments, endorsements, feuds, and personal

background information threatening their current campaign. Each answer has been codified as

either positive, negative or neutral based on the general sentiment of the delivery of the answer

by the participant and/or whether they interpreted that specific information as positive or negative for the campaign.

In the tables below, 'viral' moments or information is presented with its respective sentiment for each candidate. In the case that several participants mentioned similar moments or information, the actual number of participants is denoted within the table. The final numbers calculated at the bottom of the table represent the total number of positive, negative, and neutral moments identified by participants, including any overlapping mentions in order to articulate the overall sentiment of 'virality' for each given candidate.

Notably, viral moments are difficult to identify at any given time which is why participants were asked to identify any information or event which they believed to dominate the overall conversation of candidates at any given time. However, recency of some events often mean higher identification of moments that have just happened prior to data collection while older moments are less identifiable because of the longer period of time existing between when the moment happened and when they were asked to recall said moment during the interview. As such, timeliness is an incredibly important factor when considering virality for these candidates. Additionally, some moments that campaigns might consider 'viral' may be overshadowed by other issues and moments which are dominating conversations instead as perpetuated by social media and traditional media. Ultimately, 'dominating' the conversation includes enough coverage of any given moment or issue that it receives enough attention to cross several communication channels including but not limited to social media, traditional media, news coverage, and interpersonal conversation.

Viral Moments for Bernie Sanders

Table 12

Bernie Sanders

Campaign Moment	Sentiment
Debate Moment: "I wrote the damn bill" (3)	Positive
Feud with Warren (8)	Negative
Alexandria Ocasio-Cortes Endorsement	Positive
Heart attack (2)	Negative
General negative coverage	Negative
Debate Moment: 'Buy My Book'	Neutral
running through the airport	Neutral
Debate Moment: grunts/yelling (2)	Negative
TOTAL	
Positive	4
Negative	12
Neutral	2

Table 12 presents the results of participants interviews as the moments identified as viral for the Sanders campaign and the general sentiment associated with each moment.

Among the candidates included in these interviews, Bernie Sanders was identified with a wide variety of viral moments, spanning across sentiments, though all moments could be directly identified with this campaign cycle. Several participants mentioned an interaction on an early debate stage where Sanders proclaimed, "I wrote the damn bill," when challenged by another candidate that he did not know the details of his Medicare for All bill. Additionally, Sanders' endorsement by rising democratic star, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, plays as an incredibly positive moment for the candidate and the campaign. However, more recognizable was the negatively perceived feud with fellow progressive candidate, Elizabeth Warren, regarding a difference of interpretation of a private meeting held between the two candidates in late 2018. Notably, this

moment happened within a significant timeframe with the interviews, meaning that this moment

may have been more recognizable because it was more recent than others. Finally, only two

participants identified Sanders' heart attack and health concerns in October 2019 as a significant

moment in his campaign. Such a moment seems like it would be memorable among voters,

though this data collection set suggests otherwise. Though, this may also be attributed to the

recency effect because it happened earlier in the campaign and may have been forgotten by the

time of the interview.

Viral Moments for Elizabeth Warren

Table 13

Elizabeth Warren

Campaign Moment	*Sentiment*
Townhall Answer: "if you can find one"	Positive
Debate Moment: Warren confronts John Delaney	Positive
Jonathan Van Ness Endorsement	Positive
Feud with Sanders (8)	Negative
Debate Moment: Women win (2)	Positive
Des Moines Register Endorsement	Positive
Campaign: Interaction with Iowan regarding Free College	Negative
General negative coverage	Negative
Campaign: Video interactions with voters from campaign	Positive
Debate Moment: Interaction with Buttigieg—wine cave	Positive
TOTAL	
Positive	8
Negative	10
Neutral	0

Table 13 presents the results of participants answers for viral moments for Warren and the sentiment associated with each moment established.

Of all the candidates included in this data collection, Elizabeth Warren’s results for this part of the study is the most balanced with eight positive moments and ten negative moments. Again, most recognized was the feud with Bernie Sanders. Aside from this debate moment, two participants also identified a debate moment where Warren provided a strong argument for why women candidates win, deconstructing an argument that women were less electable than men.

Other than that, several random moments were identified by participants, with less overlap of these moments including an answer she gave during a townhall regarding same-sex marriage, a rebuttal towards another candidate at the time, John Delaney, during an early debate, the endorsement of *Queer Eye* star, Jonathan Van Ness and of the Des Moines Register, and an critique of Pete Buttigieg during a debate for hosting high-dollar fundraisers in exclusive venues like a wine cave. Finally, one participant called attention to the ability of the Warren campaign to continue presence in the conversation at any point in time because of the videos shared by the campaign. These videos are often short, portray intimate moments with voters on the campaign trail, and are constantly being posted, which are shared by the campaign itself, campaign officials and Warren supporters thus ending up on the timelines of many voters including those who do not follow the campaign, but rather they see the video through someone who shares it that is someone they do follow.

Viral Moments for Joe Biden

Table 14

Joe Biden

Campaign Moments	Sentiment
"No malarkey"	Neutral
Stutters/Foot-in-Mouth (3)	Negative
Poor Debate Performance (5)	Negative
Sexual Misconduct claims (5)	Negative
Son's Ukraine conflicts (2)	Negative
Debate Moment: Interaction with Kamala Harris (2)	Negative
Canvassers forced out in the snow	Negative
Buy My Book	Neutral
TOTAL	
Positive	0
Negative	18
Neutral	2

Table 14 presents the data gathered outlining the viral moments of his campaign and candidacy as mentioned by participants and the respective sentiments.

A large majority of the moments or information identified by the participants in this study were negative in sentiment. Ultimately, this reflects that according to the participants, the moments most recognizable regarding Joe Biden are negative ones. Among those most commonly identified was Biden's stuttering or "foot-in-mouth" moments. These "foot-in-mouth" moments include various times Biden unintentionally said something offensive, foolish or counterproductive for his campaign. Additionally, his poor debate performances were highly identifiable which can include stuttering or foot-in-mouth moments which perpetuate his poor performance. Five participants mentioned his history with sexual misconduct, often calling him 'too touchy,' 'creepy,' and overall disrespectful regarding personal space of women in particular.

Also associated with his campaign's overall image includes his identified catchphrase, "no

malarkey." Though only identified by one participant, this language antiquates Biden as a

candidate with vintage language which indicates overall perception of Biden as an older

candidate and political figure, thus he has more time in public life to be criticized for. Finally, it

should be noted that the claims of malpractice of Biden's son in Ukraine business by President

Donald Trump were identified by several participants suggesting that the narrative perpetuated

by other prominent political figures influences perception of a candidate.

Viral Moments for Pete Buttigieg

Table 15

Pete Buttigieg

Campaign Moments	*Sentiment*
Campaign: "Clap for me"	Negative
Trouble reaching African American voters (3)	Negative
Race issues in home community (2)	Negative
Debate Moment: Interaction with Warren--"Wine Cave" (3)	Negative
Klobuchar-Buttigieg scuffles during debates	Negative
Buy my book	Neutral
Unexpected success	Positive
TOTAL	
Positive	1
Negative	10
Neutral	1

Table 15 establishes the viral moments for Pete Buttigieg as indicated by participants in this study and the sentiment that is associated with each moment.

Though Buttigieg's unexpected success serves as an incredibly monumental moment for

his campaign, the majority of identifiable moments identified in this study were negative.

Notably, his debate interaction with Elizabeth Warren regarding high-dollar fundraisers in wine caves serves as negative moment for Buttigieg whereas it was positive for Warren. Aside from this debate moment, also mentioned were tension-filled moments between Buttigieg and Amy Klobuchar, another moderate candidate seeking the nomination. Most prominent among identified moments/information is Buttigieg's struggle among the African American community including race relation issues within his home community and his overall struggle with reaching and grasping support of African Americans who serve as a large bloc of voters for the Democratic Party. This struggle also included a mishap of the campaign where in attempt to brand his proposed 'Douglass Plan' to benefit the communities of color he was struggling with, the plan used stock images of African children which ultimately reflected his campaign's disconnect with this community and was seen as incredibly disrespectful regardless of the policies and ideas that the plan laid out.

Discussion

Much like previous literature suggests, the results of this study further indicate that young, college-aged voters are turning away from traditional mediums like television and turning towards new and social media for the information regarding political candidates. Even the once novel campaign websites are becoming a less prominent information for young voters who are instead receiving the information from the sources, they already interact with most, including social media and from conversations with others. As such, campaigns should be designing their campaign messages to be disseminated where these voters are, on social media, when considering the effective efforts to reach this population. Furthermore, nurturing a campaign's strongest citizen supporters to be advocates for the candidate and subsequent campaign is another way to bolster campaign messages. A group of such advocates can be sharing campaign

content to their own followers on social media and communicating about the candidate in word of mouth communication to influence their network both online and offline.

The data indicates that candidates are identified by not only their stance on specific issues, but also by their background or collection of character traits. The more progressive candidates in the data set, Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren were better connected with specific stances on issues, while participants struggled to identify specific stances for the two moderate candidates, Joe Biden and Pete Buttigieg. One participant even called Biden's viewpoints as "wishy-washy" because "he doesn't want to step on people's toes" so he adjusts his positions or stances to align with popular opinion. Even so, it cannot be understated the significance that many participants were able to identify several character traits and issue stances for each of the candidates. This suggests that in the endless sea of information, participants had, to some degree, sifted through that information to determine these traits or stances for the candidates and remember them when prompted. It also speaks to the ability of campaigns 'cut through' and integrate information about candidates into an environment that reaches young voters who may not even be explicitly seeking this content.

In general, voters, particularly young voters, do not spend a significant amount of time following presidential campaigns leading up to the general election, let alone a primary election with a large number of candidates. In total, twenty-eight different candidates ran during the Democratic primary in 2020, whereas ten candidates remained in the race at least through the Iowa Caucus and another entered the race prior to the caucus but after the final registration date to be on the Iowa ballots. Leading up to the caucus, there was an incredible number of campaigns which were each disseminating myriads of information about their candidate. As such, standing out in the primary was recognizably more difficult and doing so to some degree as

each of the top four candidates reflects remarkable messaging dissemination and wide retrieval

among the audience.

Among recognition of traits and stances of a candidate, the assumption would be that any

negative or potentially harmful information spread about a candidate is not done by the campaign

itself. Instead, the ability to associate an issue stance or positive trait is a better reflection of the

capacity of a campaign's ability to reach an audience. Under this assumption, any negative

associations likely came from other sources such as an opposing candidate's critiques or even an

ordinary Twitter users' tweets about a candidate. This speaks to a difficulty campaigns face in

this public sphere of constant information in the news and online platforms which are considered

more democratic because they include the voices of those often ignored by other mediums. A

campaign can send countless positive messages about their candidate, showing off their

candidate's stances on issues that matter to the electorate, but they cannot control the negative

discourse that may occur outside the realm of the campaign. Still, these negative messages can

be associated with the candidate despite any efforts of the campaign.

In a world of information saturation, the challenge for campaigns remains, how can

campaigns really reach voters, particularly younger voters as they grow to become a larger and

larger bloc of the electorate? The answer, it is complicated, difficult and unpredictable. While

this research demonstrates the general trend of the growing use of social media and other internet

sources among younger voters, the information disseminated on these platforms by campaigns

are not necessarily the messages that voters receive and use in developing perceptions of

candidates. It is an ever-changing strategy of reaching voters and this data proves as such.

Whereas just a few elections ago, a website was a critical element of communication for a

campaign, the data suggests its relevance is fading with more adoption of social media as sources

of information instead. Though a campaign website is not obsolete because it can further clarify

issue stances more complex than 280 characters, it cannot be considered a primary information

source for the average young voters. This presents the challenge to reconstruct and simplify

information to be disseminated on social media though this provides no guarantee that the

message is actually getting to the intended audience. Instead, the information competes with the

compelling and much more dominant conversations of the moment. Whether the moment is

planned for virality like an interaction on the debate stage or at a townhall or a moment

demonstrates incredible obstacles for a campaign to overcome the repercussions of negative

perceptions developing and spreading like wildfire among the electorate on social media.

Of the campaigns studied, it is clear that Sanders and Warren's messages were more

widely known among participants which result from a higher quantity of all content and

frequency of language and messages disseminated by the campaign. The messages did not need

to be completely altered to resonate with young voters, it just needed to be brought to where

these voters were and repeated enough for them to remember. High associations between

Sanders and Medicare for All reflect the emphasis implemented by the campaign to address this

issue in much of the content produced on Twitter. Similarly, the Warren campaign's

concentration about rooting out corruption and similar messages resulted in a higher rate of

retrieval of such messages. The specific campaign messages like 'Dream Big, Fight Hard,' 'she's

got a plan for that,' and 'big structural change' repeated verbatim by some participants reflects

an impressive, disciplined message which was reiterated enough to endure in the minds of young

voters.

The best bet on strategy for winning the conversation online is to generate consistent

content that can engage dedicated supporters to share the message onto their timelines for their

followers to see. In the case of Joe Biden, the content disseminated by the campaign twitter faces

competition of negative viral moments created out of and uncontrollable by the campaign is

bleak in comparison because it is so limited. While not a clear correlation, it is possible that

pushing more content on platforms like Twitter provides more opportunities to push through the

sea of information to spread among young voters. Even more opportunity presents itself if the

campaign content can be identified as personally relevant to the young voters rather than

dissemination of messages that just do not matter to them in that time in their life. The negative

moments of Joe Biden in particular extend beyond this campaign cycle, including historical

moments that happened before the participants were even born like the negative sentiment

associated with his role in the Anita Hill hearings of 1991. These negative moments have been so

closely associated with Biden that it has sustained those moments for long enough that they are

used as a reflection of his character as a candidate and thus transforms into the negative

perception as a candidate trait. These negative perceptions persisted in such a way that one

participant spoke to a 'mob mentality' developed and spread among many peers against Biden's

candidacy. Citing a viral TikTok video, the participant suggested that all young people were

pleading the American electorate to vote for a candidate other than Biden with their own

versions cultivated from "please don't make me vote for Joe Biden, I don't want to vote for Joe

Biden."

   As a new politician on the scene of national politics, Buttigieg was carrying much less

leverage from his past, but the negative moments of his campaign were exasperated. As reflected

by several participants, the emergence of social media allows for a new world of knowledge for

young people in politics where they have the opportunity and access to learn Buttigieg's name

and his background, but as one participant put it, "every scandal [is] multiplied." With such

minute moments viewed under a microscope and discussed among the young electorate on social media, it is difficult to compete with more offensive messages. As such, the emphasis on the 'new generation in Washington' and preparing to 'turn the page' on this time is history was unsuccessful in the information overload landscape on the politics of today. This message was not retrieved by the audience as so few of the participants recognized this as a part of his overall messaging. Instead, only one issue message and a handful of candidate trait messages was associated with his candidacy. Those trait messages were basic background of the candidate including his sexual orientation and his most recent history in politics and was not identified as an emphasis for campaign messaging. His sexual orientation, though not emphasized by the campaign itself, led voters to develop a basis for a focus on LGBTQ+ issues. This sort of identity politics was nearly as potent as an actual issue focus targeted by the campaign, reflecting the difficulty of controlling the message in contemporary campaigns.

Conclusions

Meeting the audience where they are is more convoluted than ever before and becoming more so with continuous development of and migration to new media like social media. There is no conclusive strategy which provides the best pathway to reach young voters with the controlled campaign messages. The rapidly changing information environment challenges campaigns to constantly assess and reassess their communications while maintaining concentration of their specific messages to determine how the current moment provides opportunity for their information crafted to resonate with the audience to break through and reach young voters.

Essentially, the overall conclusion from this study should be that campaigns cannot rely on strategies that worked in previous elections to disseminate messages to voters. Even the most recent of strategies developed in the last campaign cycle should be considered outdated. This

means each strategy must be developed each campaign cycle based on the landscape of new and social media of the given moment to determine how a campaign can be successful in breaking through and reaching voters. Provided this, campaigns must also constantly evaluate the strategies and messages used to adjust to construct the best possible solution for that campaign cycle.

However, previous campaigns should not be completely disregarded. Understanding what worked and what did not work previously narrows the scope of possibilities for developing the correct solution for the time being. Most importantly may be acknowledging failures of past campaigns and intentionally avoiding similar failures in the development of the strategy and messaging for the campaign to come. For example, Joe Biden's limited attempts to drown out against negative messages with positive, campaign-disseminated messages provides insight on the importance of the frequency of dissemination of messages. Additionally, Elizabeth Warren's success with connecting content with campaign specific messages also provides evidence for future campaigns to study in creating strong associations with campaign specific messages with their candidate.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

The limitation of the focus of this study to one public university in Iowa must be acknowledged as it limits the population of which the sample can represent. Nonetheless, it provides some data when utilized with caution may provide an understanding the population of young voters (ages 18-24) in the United States. Additional limitations include participation bias as presented by the structure of the study. Given that students were not compensated for their participation, students' decisions to be involved in this study may present a participation bias where those who are more interested in the content of the research volunteer to participate, over-

representing a population of potentially better-informed and engaged young voters. Nevertheless, the research team made cognitive efforts to specifically recruit and conduct research with some admittedly less engaged and informed young voters to limit this bias.

As a study focused on primary candidates, the conclusions may not provide insight into similar questions revolving around the general election. Future studies should evaluate how the dissemination and reception of messages may change in a general election. Additionally, this study's focus on Democratic candidates may not be applicable to Republican candidates and as such, future studies may discover differences among messaging dissemination and reception for Republican candidates and their messages. Finally, as suggested by the conclusions of this study, there is value in studying each campaign for its failures and successes as it provides a basis to develop future campaigns.

As young voters continue to become a larger and larger part of the electorate, establishing effective strategies to connect with this voting bloc will become all the more important for campaigns. The constantly changing media landscape will continue to challenge campaigns in understanding the best strategies within new and social media, even as the strategies change from one election to the next or from one part of the campaign to the next. Ultimately, the future of successful campaigning in the changing media environment will rely on a campaign's ability to evaluate and adapt their communications strategies to continue to break through and be remembered by the audiences most important to winning an election.

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Appendix

Student Questionnaire

Do you know who you are voting for?

Where do you get your information about candidates?

Which candidates have you heard about for the 2020 presidential election?

What do you know about Elizabeth Warren?

What messages/issues do you think Warren's campaign focuses on?

What do you know about Joe Biden?

What messages/issues do you think Biden's campaign focuses on?

What do you know about Bernie Sanders?

What messages/issues do you think Sanders' campaign focuses on?

What do you know about Pete Buttigieg?

What messages/issues do you think Buttigieg's campaign focuses on?

Where do you see these messages?

How are you getting informed?

What do you do to decide on a candidate?

What media are you using? Hulu? TV? Twitter? Snapchat?

What specifically have you heard about this issue/messaging?

How did you first hear about this candidate?

What moments would you consider a 'viral moment' for any of these campaigns?

Paid advertising or shared on Twitter timelines?

Do you follow candidates on social media?

How involved are you?