Chapter 84
Twitter and Political Elections

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ABSTRACT

The rise of Twitter has changed human communication behavior not only in the political domain, but also in many other fields. Individuals are increasingly using microblogging platforms like Twitter for political deliberation, making full use of the features offered for discussions and social networking. At the same time, politicians and political parties hop on the bandwagon, using Twitter to reach a larger audience and communicate to constituents. As is the case for blogs, the political Twittersphere is fragmented along party lines, but stimulates communication between different ideological clusters. The publicly available discussions on Twitter can serve as a basis for election forecasts and have the potential to complement opinion polls and prediction markets in the future.

INTRODUCTION

The relevance of the microblogging platform Twitter (http://www.twitter.com) and social media in general for political elections and for political deliberation online is illustrated best by the fact that Barack Obama turned to Twitter to announce "We just made history..." right after winning the presidential election in 2008. His campaign was supported by a successful social media campaign with over 700,000 supporters on Facebook (Wil-

liams & Gulati, 2008) and 100,000 followers on Twitter, compared to approximately 5,000 for John McCain (Lardinois, 2008). In 2009, more than 1.5 million users followed John McCain on the microblogging platform Twitter (Senak, 2010) to read his messages and in 2010, 22% of online adults engaged with the election through social networks (Smith, 2011). Since 2006 microblogging through Twitter has become a mass phenomenon on the Internet. One year after its launch, approximately 0.4 million people were registered on Twitter (Ruiz, 2011). Five years later, Twitter adds approximately 0.5 million accounts per day,

while its users are pressing the "tweet" button around 1 billion times a week (Twitter, 2011).

The rise of Twitter can be attributed to three highly successful design choices: enabling casual conversations with a low barrier to entry, its inherent social network structure that mirrors the relationships of its users and a large ecosystem building on the Twitter infrastructure. The first aspect is best illustrated by comparison with blogs, which emerged as prime Internet publishing platform a few years earlier. Blogging offers individuals an easy way to distribute information online and voice their opinion to a potentially broad audience through a post on their blog. Blog posts are composed of a title and several paragraphs of text, similar to traditional newspaper articles or diary entries. But the fact that other bloggers can leave a comment or publish a reply on their own blog, linking back to the commented blog post sets them apart and marks the transition to participatory internet. Twitter even further emphasizes the casual and conversational notion and limits the length of the messages (so-called "tweets") to a mere 140 characters. On Twitter's website, all tweets are displayed in various ways: tweets from across the world appear on the overall public timeline as soon as they are published, while publicly accessible profile pages feature the tweet stream of the respective user. When composing a message, senders often tag it with keywords (so-called "hashtags", using the format #hashtag in the message text). This allows readers to explore messages from other users sharing the same hashtag. Individual hashtags can be chosen freely and are not regulated by Twitter, but in most instances their use converges quickly within the community of users, resulting in one hashtag being used for a specific topic or discussion. Tweets can be sent to one or many specific recipients in public ("mentions", in the format @username) or between users in private ("direct messages"). Twitter's second successful design choice, its inherent social network structure, doubles as filter which addresses the users' need to individualize the

extensive and ever increasing information stream. Users can "follow" other users (they receive an aggregated stream of tweets posted or retweeted by users they follow) and can organize followed users in lists or curate a set of "favorite" users. These lists can be viewed by the public and help identify interesting users who are worth following (a list "baseball stars" curated by a baseball fan could list all Twitter accounts of professional baseball players). As a side effect, being frequently "followed", "listed" or "favorited" provides a sense of status and influence in the Twitter community. With "retweets" (characterized by "RT" in the message) users highlight noteworthy messages to their own followers, sometimes adding a comment, similar to forwarding an email message to a broader audience. The third design choice, opening its microblogging platform to third-party developers, creates a vast ecosystem of software applications that leverage the Twitter infrastructure. In consequence, users can tweet from home or mobile on all desktop and mobile operating systems and devices. In summary, these three design choices clearly encourage users to publish messages and frequent updates on their status in real-time and participate in discussions with other users (Honeycutt & Herring, 2009), while also building their own social network of relevant users and tailoring the information stream to their own needs.

As a communication platform, Twitter caters to many aspects of a democratic debate: On the one hand open discussions are a fundamental part of any democracy, on the other hand it is critical for political parties to reach their audience, especially in the run-up to political elections (Mayhew, 1974). Citizens need to be able to voice their political opinions freely and have an intrinsic motivation to discuss political ideas with others. Twitter satisfies both needs. With the massive adoption of microblogging, Twitter has become a communication channel that can no longer be ignored by candidates and political parties. Long before the rise of blogging, the political community already

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