University of Pennsylvania

Social Media and the 2018 Midterms:

An Analysis of House Candidates' Twitter Posts

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**Abstract:**

To date, relatively few academic studies have analyzed congressional candidates' use of social media in the 2018 U.S. midterm elections. This paper contributes to the literature by conducting a textual analysis of 697 House candidates' Twitter posts from between January 1st and November 6th 2018. The study focuses on seven key issues – the economy, gun policy, healthcare, immigration, Russia, the Supreme Court, and the Trump presidency – and assesses whether there was a fundamental difference in how Democratic and Republican candidates approached each one. The paper argues that there were partisan differences in social media use and presents two potential explanations: political polarization and how each political party was confronted with unique challenges.

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## Introduction

Social media platforms are more popular than ever in the United States. When the Pew

Research Center began tracking social media adoption in 2005, just five percent of American

adults used at least one platform ("Social Media Fact Sheet", 2018). By 2011, that share had

risen to half of all adults ("Social Media Fact Sheet", 2018). In 2018, an even greater percentage,

approximately seven in ten adults, used some type of social media ("Social Media Fact Sheet",

2018). In particular, 73 percent of U.S. adults used YouTube, 68 percent used Facebook, 35

percent used Instagram, 29 percent used Pinterest, 27 percent used Snapchat, 24 percent used

Twitter, and 22 percent used WhatsApp ("Social Media Fact Sheet", 2018).

The use of social media is not limited to the general public, as politicians use social

media sites to communicate with constituents and potential voters. According to a recent report

by the Congressional Research Service, virtually all members of Congress – 99 percent of

Representatives and 100 percent of Senators – used Facebook in 2018 (Straus, 2018, p. 3).

Similarly, all 535 voting members of Congress had a Twitter account in 2018 (Straus, 2018, p.

3).

This paper discusses how Democratic and Republican candidates running for the U.S.

House of Representatives used social media in the months leading up to the 2018 midterm

elections. It focuses on seven key issues – the economy, gun policy, healthcare, immigration,

Russia, the Supreme Court, and the Trump presidency – and assesses whether there was a

fundamental difference in how Democratic and Republican candidates approached each one. The

paper argues that there were partisan differences in social media use and presents two potential

explanations: political polarization and how each political party was confronted with unique

challenges. It also considers whether incumbents and non-incumbents used social media

differently and whether the same was true of candidates running in more competitive districts versus candidates running in "safe" districts.

The paper consists of five chapters. The first is a theoretical section that defines social media, considers why politicians use sites such as Facebook and Twitter, and provides two explanations for partisan differences in social media use. The second chapter outlines the history of how campaigns used social media between 2008 and 2016. The third summarizes the existing literature on the 2018 midterms, which provides needed context for interpreting data results in the following chapter. The fourth is a quantitative section that includes an analysis of nearly 700 congressional candidates' Twitter posts from between January 1st and November 6th 2018. The final chapter lays out areas for exploration in future papers about the 2018 midterm elections.

# 1 Literature Review

## 1.1 Some Basic Questions

In order to understand the role of social media in American elections, four basic questions need to be answered. These answers will provide a theoretical framework for the rest of the paper.

### 1.1.1 What Is Social Media?

Social media is a surprisingly difficult term to define, given a lack of consensus. Some definitions focus on social networking sites, such as Facebook and Twitter (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). By comparison, other definitions of social media include blogs, photo and video sharing communities, and web forums (Agichtein, 2008, p. 183). Nevertheless, there are some common themes in the academic literature. First, social media are "online tools operating via the broader Internet" (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Carr & Hayes, 2015). Second, content on social media is user generated. Put differently, the value of using social media is derived from the "contributions from or interactions with other users rather than content generated by [the] organization or individual hosting the medium" (Carr & Hayes, 2015, p. 51). Third, social media consist of what Carr and Hayes (2015, p. 50) describe as "disentrained, persistent channels." Unlike in face-to-face communication, people do not have to interact at the same time on social media. Rather, they can log into Facebook, Twitter, or another site at completely different hours. Fourth, social media "enable users to articulate and make visible their social networks" (Boyd & Ellison, 2007, p. 211). According to Boyd and Ellison (2007, p. 211), this can result in connections between individuals that would not otherwise be made.

### 1.1.2 What Ultimately Drives Politicians' Behavior?

Back in the 1970s, long before the advent of social media, the political scientists Richard Fenno and David Mayhew wrote two seminal books, *Home Style* and *Congress: The Electoral Connection* respectively, about the electoral process. While their books are over 40 years old, both books are essential for understanding modern American politics, including how and why politicians use social media.

The two political scientists give slightly different answers about what ultimately drives politicians' behavior. In his earlier book *Congressmen in Committees* (1973), Fenno claims that members of Congress have three primary goals: being reelected, achieving influence within Congress, and making "good public policy" (Mayhew, 1974, p. 16). By contrast, Mayhew (1974, p. 16) believes that being reelected is the "proximate goal of everyone" and that this goal must be achieved "over and over if other ends are to be entertained." In short, both scholars agree that politicians are driven at least in part by the need to win reelection, even if Mayhew places more emphasis on this goal.

### 1.1.3 How Do Politicians Win Elections?

In *Home Style*, Fenno outlines three strategies that members of Congress use to earn the support of their constituents. The first is the politician's allocation of his or her personal resources and those of his or her office (Fenno, 1978, p. 33) The second strategy is the politician's presentation of self to others (Fenno, 1978, p. 33). In particular, a politician should stress his or her qualifications for the job, convey a sense of identification with constituents, and express empathy for their problems (Fenno, 1978, p. 56-57). The third strategy is the politician's explanation of his or her Washington activity to others (Fenno, 1978, p. 33).

Mayhew, meanwhile, argues in *Congress: The Electoral Connection* that all members of Congress "must constantly engage in activities related to reelection", regardless of whether they are running in safe or marginal districts (Mayhew, 1974, p. 49). One strategy to accomplish this goal is advertising, which he defines as "any effort to disseminate one's name among constituents in such a fashion to create a favorable image but in messages [that have] little or no issue content" (Mayhew, 1974, p. 49). In particular, a politician should stress personal qualities such as experience, knowledge, responsiveness, concern, sincerity, and independence (Mayhew, 1974, p. 49). A second strategy is credit claiming, i.e. taking credit for something that benefits constituents (Mayhew, 1974, p. 53). A third strategy is position taking, which Mayhew (1974, p. 61) defines as "the public enunciation of a judgmental statement on anything likely to be of interest to political actors."

### 1.1.4 Why Do Politicians Use Social Media?

A separate but related question is why politicians use social media in particular to communicate with voters. One benefit of this strategy is that politicians can bypass traditional journalism and convey messages directly to potential voters (Anderson, 2015). A second benefit is that online advertising often has fewer constraints than other types of ads. For example, Internet videos, unlike television ads, do not have to be 30 or 60 seconds long or include a disclaimer (Fenn, 2009, p. 219). As a result, Internet videos are able to go into more depth, and at a fraction of the cost. A third reason is that politicians can reach a large audience of Americans, especially young people, on social media. As already discussed, about seven in ten adults used some type of social networking site in 2018 ("Social Media Fact Sheet", 2018). This included 88 percent of 18-29 year olds and 78 percent of 30-49 year olds ("Social Media Fact Sheet", 2018).

## 1.2 Reasons For Partisan Differences In Social Media Use In 2018

Both Democratic and Republican politicians running in the 2018 midterms used social media, but they emphasized different issues and framed them in distinct ways. Partisan differences in social media use can potentially be explained by two factors: (a) political polarization and (b) how each party was confronted with unique challenges.

### 1.2.1 Political Polarization

Over the past few decades, political polarization has grown in the United States, both among politicians and the general public. Democrats and Republicans increasingly share homogeneous views with members of their own party, and divergent views with members of the opposite party. Former House Speaker Tip O'Neill (D-MA)'s famous quote that "all politics are local" is increasingly outdated in an environment in which congressional elections are nationalized (Gelman, 2011).

*Elite polarization*: The Oxford Dictionaries define an elite as "a group or class of people seen as having the most power and influence in a society, especially on account of their wealth or privilege" ("Elite"). For the purposes of this paper, the term refers to American politicians running for national office. However, in other contexts, the word "elite" could just as easily refer to other groups, such as businessmen.

According to an analysis by the National Journal, Congress grew much more ideologically polarized between 1982 and 2013. In 1982, 58 senators and 344 House members had voting records that put them between the most liberal Republican and the most conservative Democrat (Kraushaar, 2014). By contrast, in 2013, no senators and only four House members occupied the same territory (Kraushaar, 2014). In fact, the author of the study concluded that

"the ideological sorting of the House and Senate by party, which [had] been going on for more than three decades, [was] virtually complete (Kraushaar, 2014).

The graph below shows how liberal or conservative the mean Democrat and Republican was in each Congress between 1879 to 2014, as measured by roll call votes ("The Polarization of the Congressional Parties", 2015). Time (years) is on the x-axis while ideology is on the y-axis. The graph shows that since 1980, the mean Republican has become significantly more conservative ("The Polarization of the Congressional Parties", 2015). By contrast, the mean Democrat has become slightly more liberal but by a much smaller extent ("The Polarization of the Congressional Parties", 2015). The biggest internal change is that the mean northern Democrat and mean southern Democrat are now ideologically similar, whereas northerners used to be much more liberal compared to southerners ("The Polarization of the Congressional Parties", 2015).



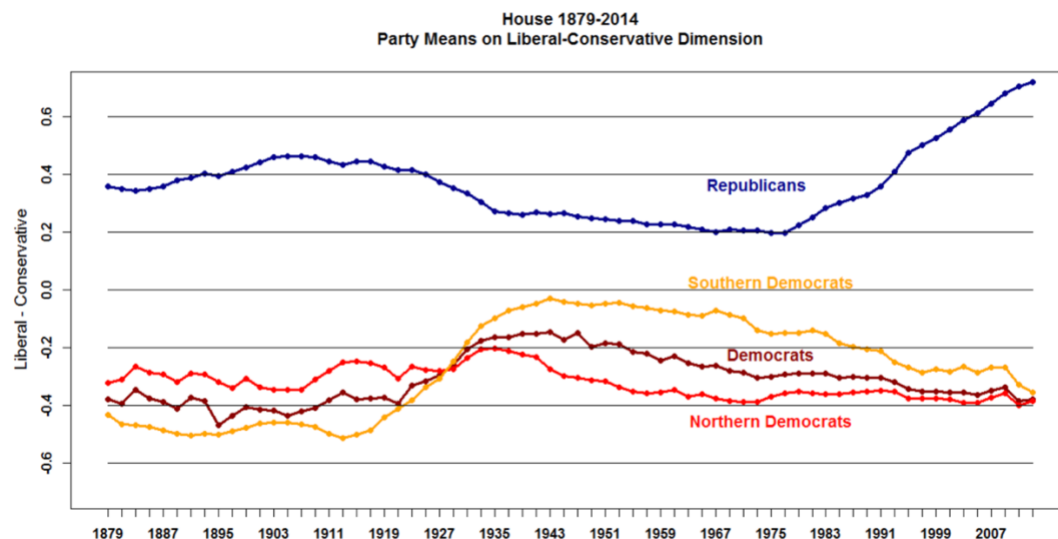Fig. 1. Party Means on Liberal-Conservative Dimension, 1879-2014. From "The Polarization of the Congressional Parties." *Vote View*, 21 Mar 2015.

Besides congressional voting records, another way social scientists can measure elite polarization is through the diction that politicians use. For example, one study by the economists Matthew Gentzkow, Jesse M. Shapiro, and Matt Taddy analyzed congressional-floor speeches

going back to 1873, using a statistical model estimating how easy or hard it would be for a typical listener to "guess a speaker's political party based on the words the speaker used in one minute of speech" (Ingraham, 2016). Their conclusion was that the partisanship of language "exploded in recent decades", beginning in the 1990s (Gentzkow et al., 2016, p. 3). The economists highlight how the 1994 midterms were a "watershed moment in political messaging, with consultants such as Frank Luntz applying novel techniques to identify effective language and disseminate it to candidates" (Gentzkow et al., 2016, p. 4). Ultimately, the 1994 midterms "kicked off a neologism arms race, a prolonged attempt by members of both parties to coin catchy new terms for their pet policies, particularly for taxes, immigration, and healthcare" (Ingraham, 2016). In addition, Gentzkow et al. (2016, p. 4) speculate that other changes, such as the expansion of cable television coverage, may have also provided "further incentives for linguistic innovation."



Fig. 2. The Rise of Partisan Language in Congress, 1976-2008. From Gentzkow, Matthew, Jesse M. Shapiro & Matt Taddy. "Measuring Group Differences in High-Dimensional Choices: Method and Application to Congressional Speech." *The National Bureau of Economic Research*, Working Paper No. 22423, Jul 2016.

## The Rise of Partisan Neologisms



GENTZKOW ET AL
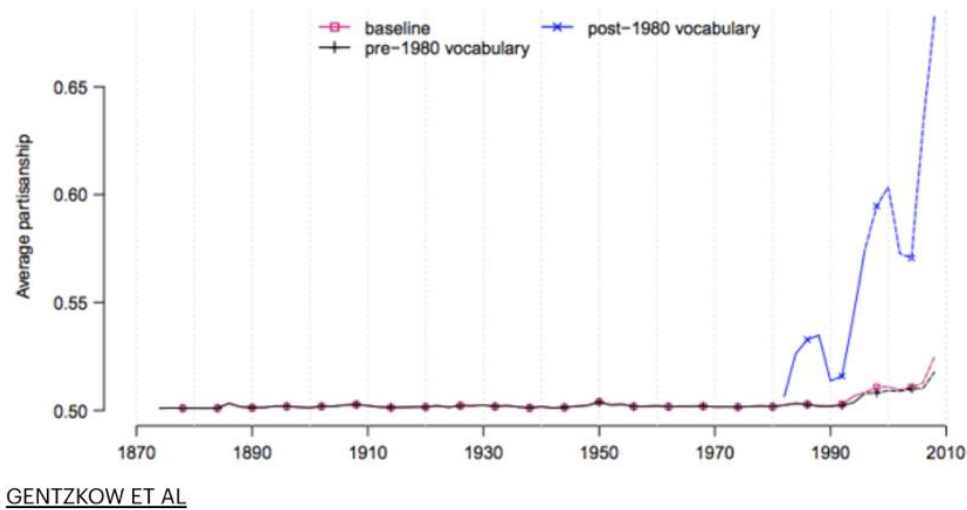
Fig. 3. The Rise of Partisan Neologisms, 1870-2010. From Gentzkow, Matthew, Jesse M. Shapiro & Matt Taddy. "Measuring Group Differences in High-Dimensional Choices: Method and Application to Congressional Speech." *The National Bureau of Economic Research*, Working Paper No. 22423, Jul 2016.

*Popular/mass polarization*: According to a study by the Pew Research Center, the American electorate grew more ideologically polarized between 1994 and 2014, as measured by their responses to ten political values questions ("Ideological Uniformity", 2014). In 1994, 64 percent of Republicans were to the right of the median Democrat. In addition, 70 percent of Democrats were to the left of the median Republican. By contrast, those percentages were 92 percent and 94 percent respectively in 2014 ("Ideological Uniformity", 2014).
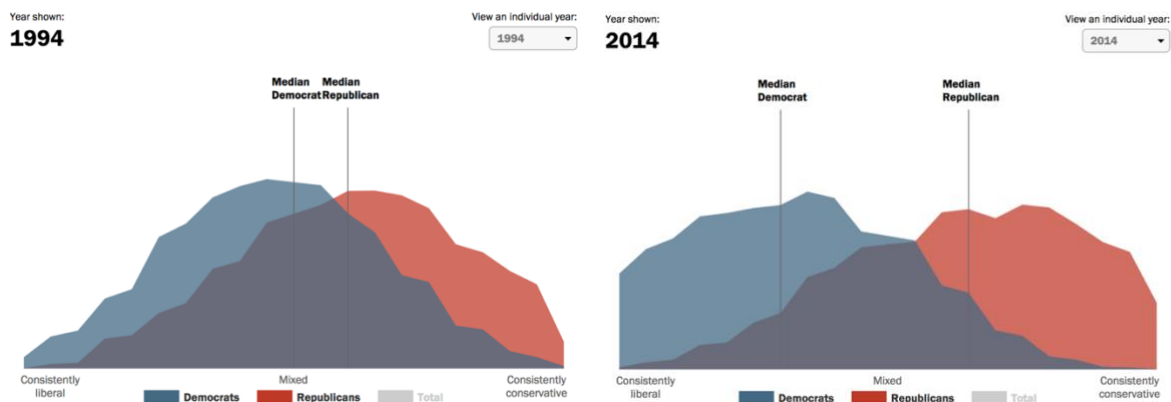
Fig. 4. 1994 Political Polarization in the American Public. From "Political Polarization in the American Public: How Increasing Ideological Uniformity and Partisan Antipathy Affect Politics, Compromise, and Everyday Life." *Pew Research Center*, 12 Jun 2014.

Fig. 5. 2014 Political Polarization in the American Public. From "Political Polarization in the American Public: How Increasing Ideological Uniformity and Partisan Antipathy Affect Politics, Compromise, and Everyday Life." *Pew Research Center*, 12 Jun 2014.

One reason for mass polarization is self-sorting. Back in the 1970s, partisan affiliation did not depend as much on ideology and both parties had strong liberal and conservative factions (Levendusky, 2009). Subsequently, though, liberals "selected" into the Democratic Party while conservatives "selected" into the Republican Party (Levendusky, 2009). The political scientist Matthew Levendusky (2009) argues that this partisan sorting "results directly from the increasingly polarized terms in which political leaders define their parties." He also demonstrates his book *The Partisan Sort* that "sorting makes voters more loyally partisan, allowing campaigns to focus more attention on mobilizing committed supporters" (Levendusky, 2009). Todd & Tann (2017) concur, arguing that since only about ten percent of voters are persuadable, political campaigns spend most of their time trying to mobilize partisans.

### 1.2.2 Unique Challenges Facing Each Party

In 2018, each party was confronted with unique challenges. After Russia interfered in the 2016 presidential election, Democrats worried that Russians might infiltrate social media again two years later and once again disseminate incendiary messages (Scherer, 2018). Meanwhile, Republicans had to deal with President Donald Trump's unpopularity. According to FiveThirtyEight, Trump's net approval was nearly 10 points underwater throughout all of 2018 ("How popular is Donald Trump", 2018). Likewise, a Morning Consult poll from November 2018 found that Trump had a net negative approval rating in 26 states ("Trump's Net Approval", 2018). In fact, between January 2017 and November 2018, the President's net approval rating

went down in every state ("Trump's Net Approval", 2018). Trump's unpopularity threatened to

drag down Republican candidates running in competitive districts.

## 1.3 Assessment of the Existing Literature

As Chapter 1 makes clear, the academic literature on social media and politics has many

strengths. First, it helps determine what constitutes social media. Second, it explains what

ultimately motivates politicians (winning reelection) and their reasons for using social media in

particular. Third, the academic literature provides insightful background information about

political polarization, one potential reason for partisan differences in social media use in 2018.

However, one shortcoming of the literature is that relatively little academic research has

analyzed the 2018 midterms. The lack of studies is an opportunity for this thesis to make a real

contribution.

# 2 History of Social Media in Politics

Chapter 2 outlines the history of social media in campaigns. It first provides a brief overview of each cycle from 2008 to 2016, and then discusses how social media was used in each cycle. This is important because many of the social media platforms and strategies used in past election cycles were used once again in 2018.

## 2.1 2008 Election Cycle

In the 2008 presidential election, Democratic nominee Barack Obama (D-IL) defeated Republican nominee John McCain (R-AZ), subsequently becoming the first ever African-American president of the United States. Obama received 365 electoral votes, and 52.9 percent of the total vote, while McCain received only 173 electoral votes, and 45.7 percent of the vote ("Presidential Election of 2008", 2018). Meanwhile, Democrats had a net gain of eight seats in the Senate and 21 seats in the House of Representatives ("Election Results", 2008). Overall, November 4th 2008 was a very good night for Democrats.

In the 2008 cycle, an estimated $17 million was spent on online advertising, making it the first election in which there was serious spending on Internet ads (Fenn, 2009, p. 217). However, it is also worth putting the number in context. About $2.6 *billion* was spent on total political advertising in 2008, meaning that the vast majority was spent on traditional media (Seelye, 2008). In subsequent cycles, the amount of online spending by campaigns would grow dramatically, as the value of online advertising became more appreciated.

Most social media sites were relatively new in 2008. MySpace, one of the main social networking sites at the time, was launched as recently as 2003 ("The History of Social Media", 2019). Facebook was created in 2004 and only became available to the general public in 2006 ("The History of Social Media", 2019). YouTube was from 2006, and Instagram and Snapchat

would not be launched until 2010 and 2011 respectively ("The History Of Social Media", 2019).

Nevertheless, many social media sites, especially YouTube, proved to be influential in 2008.

During the 2008 campaign cycle, 39 percent of voters watched some type of campaign-related

video on YouTube or another web video site (Gulati, 2010, p. 189). In particular, 27 percent of

the public had watched at least one of these four videos: "Obama Girl", "Bomb Iran", "I Feel

Pretty", and the Clintons' parody of the *Sopranos'* final episode (Cornfield, 2009, p. 209). 44

percent had heard of at least one of them (Cornfield, 2009, p. 209).

In the 2008 election cycle, there was a mismatch between the online activity of

Democrats and Republicans. For example, the average Democratic Senate candidate with a

Facebook page had 1,853.2 followers, whereas the average Republican had only 571.9 (Gulati,

2010, p. 199). Likewise, the average Democratic House candidate with a Facebook page had

416.7 followers, whereas the average Republican had only 260.8 (Gulati, 2010, p. 199).

Nowhere was the partisan divide on social media more pronounced than at the

presidential level. In 2008, the Obama campaign was very innovative in using social media, such

as Facebook, Linkedin, and YouTube (Bimber, 2014, p. 134). The campaign even had its own

social media site, MyBO, that "provided registered users with activism tools such as phone

banking and volunteer coordination" (Bimber, 2014, p. 134). By contrast, the McCain campaign

was less effective at using social media. The Republican candidate experimented much less with

new technologies and made the poor decision to treat his digital strategy as separate from his

"main campaign" (Bimber, 2014, p. 136). One reason for this was McCain's tech illiteracy. In an

interview with *The New York Times* in July 2008, the Senator described himself as "not literate

with the Internet and as dependent on his wife and aides to get online in order to read

newspapers" (Bimber, 2014, p. 136). Ultimately, McCain would be the last major presidential

candidate in the U.S. to run for office "treating the digital media environment as distinct and separate from the larger context for political communication" (Bimber, 2014, p. 136).

The Democratic nominee also had substantially more followers on social media. On Election Day 2008, Obama had about 112,000 Twitter followers, whereas McCain only had 5,000 (Bimber, 2014, p. 137). On Facebook, Obama had about 2 million followers; McCain had only 600,000 (Bimber, 2014, p. 137). About 115,000 people subscribed to Obama's YouTube channel, compared to only 28,000 to McCain's (Bimber, 2014, p. 137).

In an article from two years later, the political scientist Girish Gulati provides a few reasons why Republicans initially struggled with navigating the new media environment. First, incumbent politicians sometimes have a tendency to rely on communications strategies they have successfully used in the past (Gulati, 2010, p. 198). This reticence to change what has worked sometimes stifles newer ways to reach constituents and donors. Second, Republican strategists and activists found the "unruly nature of the Internet foreign and unpredictable" (Gulati, 2010, p. 199). Third, the McCain campaign struggled financially in 2007, which made it harder for the Republican presidential nominee to invest early in the "infrastructure and staff needed for an extensive online effort" (Gulati, 2010, p. 199).

## 2.2 2010 Election Cycle

Compared to 2008, the Democratic Party fared much worse in the 2010 midterm elections. Democrats suffered a net loss of six seats in the Senate and 63 seats in the House of Representatives (Blake, 2014). Ultimately, Democrats lost control of the House and would not be able to reclaim it until the 2018 midterms (Madison, 2010). The results in 2010 were so poor that President Obama described Election Night as a "shellacking" and he took responsibility for what he saw as "humbling" losses (Madison, 2010). A second reason the 2010 midterms were

noteworthy was low voter turnout. Only 36.9 percent of the voting-age population cast ballots, compared to 57.1 percent in 2008 (Desilver, 2014). This was a key reason why Democrats lost so many congressional seats (Montanaro, "Voter Turnout", 2018).

One question studied by survey researchers is how Americans were engaged with politics on social media in 2010. Their findings are complicated. On the one hand, only a small minority – 22 percent – of adult Internet users used social networking sites to follow the 2010 midterms (Smith, 2011). Additionally, only eight percent of adult Internet users posted political content on a social networking site, seven percent followed a candidate or political group, and seven percent started or joined a political group on a social networking site (Smith, 2011). Two explanations for these low numbers are voter apathy and the fact that millions of Americans were not yet on social media. On the other hand, social media engagement was actually *higher* than in 2008 in a couple of ways. For example, on Facebook, more than 12 million people used the "I voted button" in 2010, whereas only 5.4 million had in 2008 (Calabrese, 2010).

One difference with the 2008 cycle is that there was less of a mismatch between how much Democrats and Republicans used social media. Among social networking site users, 40 percent of Republicans and 38 percent of Democrats – a fairly insignificant difference – used these sites to get involved politically (Smith, 2011). In addition, adult internet users who followed the 2010 midterms on social media voted for Republican congressional candidates over Democratic candidates by a 45 to 41 percent margin (Smith, 2011).

In fact, there is evidence that Republican candidates running for office were actually more engaged on social media compared to their Democratic counterparts. According to a study by the University of Michigan, Republicans tweeted an average of 723 times during the 2010

campaign (Livne et al., 2011, p. 4). By contrast, Democrats tweeted an average of only 551 times (Livne et al., 2011, p. 4).

## 2.3 2012 Election Cycle

Compared to 2010, Democrats fared much better in the 2012 cycle, even if they were unable to retake the House of Representatives. Facing off against Republican nominee Mitt Romney (R-UT), incumbent president Barack Obama (D-IL) won 332 electoral votes, and 51.1 percent of the vote ("Election 2012", 2012). Romney received only 206 electoral votes, and 47.2 percent of the vote ("Election 2012", 2012). Meanwhile, Democrats had a net gain of one seat in the Senate and eight seats in the House of Representatives ("Election 2012", 2012).

The 2012 cycle was also noteworthy because more politicians than ever before were on social media. In January 2011, only 44 percent of the Senate and 35 percent of the House were active on Twitter ("100 Senators", 2013). By January 2013, those numbers had increased to 100 percent of the Senate and 90 percent, or 398 representatives, of the House ("100 Senators", 2013). Moreover, there were 29 states with their entire delegation tweeting in January 2013 ("100 Senators", 2013). Every state, without exception, had at least 70 percent of their delegation tweeting ("100 Senators", 2013).

One difference between the 2008 and 2012 presidential elections was the amount of money spent on digital ads. Johnston (2015) claims that digital advertising spending increased by 251 percent between the two presidential elections. In fact, the Obama and Romney campaigns "spent about $22 online for each vote they received" (Johnston, 2015). The amount spent on digital advertising would only continue to grow in later election cycles, as social networking sites grew more popular and campaigns increasingly recognized the importance of the Internet (Johnston, 2015).

Unlike in 2008, both presidential candidates were active on social media. As Bimber (2014, p. 37-38) observes: "Where the McCain campaign had maintained a mass-media strategy that had little room for digital media, the Romney campaign adopted the Obama approach of integrating digital media tools into the core of the campaign." In particular, the Romney campaign had its own social media site, MyMitt, that included volunteer-management and phone-from-home tools (Bimber, 2014, p. 138). Like the Obama campaign, Romney was also active on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube (Bimber, 2014, p. 138). Romney's use of digital media in 2012 "constitutes a verification of Vaccari's (2010) observation from two years earlier that the tools Obama employed in 2008 had "become commoditized and a routine part of the context in which [election campaigns] are conducted" (Bimber, 2014, p. 138).

Another difference with 2008 is that both presidential campaigns focused much more on data analytics. As Bimber (2014, p. 131) explains: "In the context of lowered voter turnout and dissipated enthusiasm, the Obama campaign exploited data analytics to engage in an unprecedented level of personalized message targeting in a handful of states, in order to win a closer election with highly honed, state-by-state tactics." In order to accomplish this microtargeting, the Obama campaign acquired data from people's social networks, using it to model the likely behavior of citizens (Bimber, 2014, p. 140-41). The models were helpful for "crafting messages and making tactical decisions about how to allocate resources" (Bimber, 2014, p. 141).

Similarly, the Romney campaign had a significant data analytics effort. Bimber (2014, p. 143) writes that it "apparently [surpassed] what had been done by any other Democratic or Republican campaign prior to 2012." Nevertheless, it fell "well behind" the Obama campaign's use of data analytics (Bimber, 2014, p. 143). Another difference is that the Romney campaign

relied much more on outside analytics firms, whereas Obama "centralized his data analytic efforts inside his campaign" (Bimber, 2014, p. 143). Some studies suggest that Romney's digital analytics campaign was also more "focused on [the] persuasion of undecided voters than on [the] turnout of supporters" (Bimber, 2014, p. 143).

One similarity with 2008 is that once again, there was a mismatch in how many individuals followed the two presidential candidates on social media. On Election Day 2012, Obama had 33 million Facebook supporters, whereas Romney only had 12 million (Bimber, 2014, p. 138). On Twitter, the difference was even more stark. Obama had 22 million followers, whereas Romney only had 1.7 million (Bimber, 2014, p. 138). As Bimber (2014, p. 138) observes, some of this mismatch is due to incumbency, "since Obama had accumulated followers and supporters while president." However, a "considerable amount of the gap" was a result of the 2012 campaign (Bimber, 2014, p. 138). In September 2011, Obama only had 10 million followers on Twitter, so gained 12 million new followers during the 2012 cycle (Bimber, 2014, p. 138). By comparison, Romney "acquired less than one-fifth of that number" during the 2012 cycle (Bimber, 2014, p. 138).

Following the 2012 presidential election, the Republican National Committee (RNC) recognized that there was a digital divide between the two parties. In order to narrow the gap, the RNC offered several recommendations as part of a post-election autopsy report. Specific suggestions included hiring a chief technology and digital officer, expanding the RNC's technology and digital teams, and creating in-house staff training programs ("Growth and Opportunity", p. 22).

## 2.4 2014 Election Cycle

Unfortunately for Democrats, their party fared poorly in the 2014 midterm elections, just as it had in 2010. The Democratic Party suffered a net loss of nine seats in the Senate and 13 seats in the House of Representatives (Blake, 2014). As a result, the GOP, which had already controlled the House since January 2011, assumed a majority that was larger than at any point since the Great Depression (Blake, 2014). In addition, Democrats lost control of the Senate (Blake, 2014). A second similarity with the 2010 midterms was low voter turnout. A record low 36.7 percent of the voting-age population cast ballots, the lowest percentage in 70 years (Montanaro, "Voter Turnout", 2018). Like in 2010, low turnout was a key reason why Democrats fared so poorly (Montanaro, "Voter Turnout", 2018).

However, the parallels between the 2010 and 2014 midterms do not extend to the use of social media. One difference between the two cycles is that more people followed politicians on social media. In 2010, only six percent of registered voters followed candidates or other political figures on social media (Smith, 2014). By 2014, the number was up to 16 percent (Smith, 2014). However, it is possible that this discrepancy is simply due to more people using social media. A second difference between the two cycles is that digital advertising increased a staggering 1,825 percent between the 2010 and 2014 midterm elections (Johnston, 2015). In fact, digital advertising was higher than that of 2012 by over $100 million, despite the 2014 midterms having lower turn-out (Johnston, 2015).

Between 2010 and 2014, there were also significant changes in mobile phone use. In 2010, only 13 percent of registered voters used their cell phones to track political news or campaign coverage (Smith, 2014). In 2014, the same was true of 28 percent of registered voters (Smith, 2014). One key reason is that cellphone and smartphone accessibility increased between

the two midterm elections. Between 2010 and 2014, the percentage of Americans who had a cell phone increased from 85 percent to 90 percent (Soergel, 2014). The percentage of Americans owning a smartphone increased from 35 percent in 2011 to 58 percent in 2014 (Soergel, 2014).

## 2.5 2016 Election Cycle

In the 2016 presidential election, Republican nominee Donald Trump (R-NY) won an upset victory over Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton (D-NY). Trump received 304 electoral votes whereas Clinton only received 227 ("2016 Presidential Election"). This outcome occurred despite the fact that Clinton won the popular vote 48.2 percent to 46.1 percent ("2016 Presidential Election"). Politico described Trump's victory as "the biggest upset in U.S. history", as Clinton had "led national polls and in most battleground states heading into the election" (Goldmacher & Schrecinger, 2016). Meanwhile, Democrats only had a net gain of two seats in the Senate and six seats in the House, meaning that Republicans maintained control of Congress ("Congress elections, 2016").

In the 2016 election, social media was used more as a news source than ever before. According to Shearer (2016), about a quarter of U.S. adults received their campaign news from the social media posts of the Clinton and Trump campaigns. By comparison, only 10 percent received news from the candidates' website and only nine percent received it from their emails (Shearer, 2016). In particular, younger voters disproportionately received their news online (Echelon Insights, 2016). According to one study by Echelon Insights (2016), social media was the primary way Americans aged 18-49 found news online, at 33 percent. Social media was followed by search at 23 percent, visiting a news organization's website at 17 percent, and email at 7 percent (Echelon Insights, 2016).

More so than previous election cycles, 2016 also demonstrated how social media could be used to create narratives around candidates. Two candidates in particular benefited: Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump. Sanders was portrayed by his supporters as "static, unchanging, and thus unyielding" (Kolehmainen, 2017). Parody twitter accounts, such as @BernieWanCanobi and @PoliticoPotter, also added a layer of mythos to the Senator. As Kolehmainen (2017) discusses: "In both cases, Sanders was depicted as the mentor character (Obi-Wan Kenobi or Dumbledore), a hero-maker archetype whose primary function was to guide and empower the actual hero of the tale - who, in this instance, were his supporters." Meanwhile, Donald Trump was portrayed - both in his Twitter feed and by his supporters - as an "alpha male" (Kolehmainen, 2017) and an "authentic outsider" (Enli, 2017, p. 58). His "amateurish yet authentic style" in social media, especially when contrasted with Clinton's professional, carefully managed image, helped reinforce this narrative (Enli, 2017, p. 50). By contrast, one major candidate, Hillary Clinton, was hurt by a social media narrative: the idea that she was dishonest. In particular, one video titled "Hillary Clinton lying for 13 minutes straight" emphasized changes in Clinton's political stances over time (Kolehmainen, 2017). Donald Trump's nickname for Clinton, "Crooked Hillary", also fed into this narrative and even cast her into the role of a villain (Kolehmainen, 2017).

More importantly to this paper, two major controversies impacted the 2016 election, each with lasting implications. Over the past three years, both stories have received countless headlines and continue to influence both parties' social media strategies.

The first is the Facebook-Cambridge Analytica data scandal. In 2014, Aleksandr Kogan, a data scientist at Cambridge University, developed a survey app called "This Is Your Digital Life" (Hern & Cadwalladr, 2018). Even though less than 300,000 Facebook users took the

survey, the data of people in their social networks were also collected (Albright, 2018).

Consequently, data on as many as 87 million Facebook profiles may have been collected in what

was later described by the *New York Times* as one of the largest data leaks in the social network's

history (Kang & Frenzel, 2018; Rosenberg et al, 2018). In 2015, Kagan shared the data with

Cambridge Analytica, a voter-profiling company, which then used 30 million of those profiles to

"construct psychological profiles of voters" (Albright, 2018). By looking at a voter's Facebook

profile, Cambridge Analytica wanted to know if a particular voter was, say, "a neurotic introvert,

a religious extrovert, a fair-minded liberal, or a fan of the occult" (Friedman & Bromwich, 2018;

Rosenberg et al., 2018). That way, the Trump 2016 could more effectively micro-target voters

with messages (Rosenberg et al., 2018).

The second controversy is how Russia meddled in the 2016 presidential election. For

example, the Internet Research Agency, a Russian group, launched a disinformation campaign in

which they "disseminated inflammatory posts" on social media (Isaac & Wabayashi, 2017).

Their posts reached 126 million users on Facebook, which is nearly as many people as voted in

the 2016 U.S. presidential election (Isaac & Wabayashi, 2017). In addition, Russian agents

published more than 131,000 messages on Twitter and uploaded over 1,000 videos to Google's

YouTube service (Isaac & Wabayashi, 2017). Remarkably, the Internet Research Agency did not

spend a huge amount; they only had a monthly budget of $1.2 million (Clark, 2018).

Nevertheless, their posts were able to reach over a hundred million users, demonstrating the

potential of social media for low-cost but effective advertising.

By interfering in American politics, Vladimir Putin's government sought to "undermine

public faith in the U.S. democratic process, denigrate [Hillary] Clinton, and harm her electability

and potential presidency" (U.S. Intelligence Community, 2017). However, it remains hotly

debated to this day whether Russia was ultimately responsible for Donald Trump's narrow victory in the 2016 American presidential election. Kathleen Hall Jamieson, the director of the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania, believes the answer is yes. Her reasoning is that while Russians did not tamper with voting machines, they persuaded many people through their disinformation campaign to either vote for Trump or to sit out the presidential election (Mayer, 2018). Other experts are either less convinced than Jamieson, instead focusing on "Clinton's weak performance as a candidate and […] her campaign's tactical errors" (Mayer, 2018). Regardless, the Russia story is relevant because it illustrates how the two parties, especially the Democrats, need to be wary of bots and foreign interference on social media going forward.

# 3 Existing Literature on the 2018 Midterms

Chapter 3 describes the existing literature on the 2018 midterms, beginning with a general overview and then discussing what issues candidates emphasized on social media. Without this section, it would be difficult to interpret the results from Chapter 4, when House candidates' Twitter posts are analyzed, or understand why they are important.

## 3.1 Overview

In the 2018 midterm elections, the Democratic Party had a net loss of two seats in the Senate but a net gain of 40 seats in the House of Representatives ("2018 Midterm Election Results", 2018). On balance, these were excellent results for Democrats, even if the party was only able to reclaim the House. Democrats won the House by a margin of nearly 10 million votes, or 8.6 percent, the largest margin ever in a midterm election cycle (Enten, 2018). Enten (2018) went so far as to describe the House results as not simply a "blue wave" but as a "tsunami."

Importantly, Democrats' retaking of the House was not a forgone conclusion, as they had to overcome a number of structural barriers, including gerrymandering. As Phillips (2018) noted: "Republicans swept into control of state legislatures in 2010 in time to take charge of drawing electoral districts after the 2010 Census. Democrats [were subsequently] locked out of power in the House." A second barrier was partisan self-sorting. As Phillips (2018) explained: "Democratic-leaning voters cluster in cities, while conservative voters spread out in rural areas across the rest of the state. The result is that Democrats' votes are essentially diluted by living in areas that would vote for a Democrat for Congress anyway." Due to these two structural factors, Democrats had to win the popular vote by as much as seven to 11 percentage points in order to gain even a simple majority in the House (Phillips, 2018).

Even the Senate results, which disappointed many Democrats, are more impressive than they might seem at first glance. Of the 33 Senate seats up for reelection, 24 of them were held by Democrats (Kilgore, 2018). Ten of the Democrats ran for reelection in states carried by Donald Trump in 2016, whereas only one Republican ran for reelection in a state carried by Hillary Clinton (Kilgore, 2018). Most dauntingly for Democrats, five of their Senate candidates ran for reelection in states that Trump won by 18 points or more (Prokop, "Democrats' prospects", 2017).

Clearly, though, Democrats had some factors in their favor, given how they ultimately performed. First, the president's party typically loses House seats in midterm elections. The mean result for a president's party in postwar midterms is a loss of 25 seats, while the median result is a loss of 22 seats (Prokop, "Democrats' prospects", 2018). Depending on someone's interpretation, Democrats' 2018 performance is either consistent with this historical trend or far exceeded it. Second, the Democratic base was highly energized during the 2018 midterms, which "[contributed] to [the] recruitment of strong candidates, fundraising, and turnout" (Prokop, "Democrats' prospects", 2018). Third, as already discussed, Donald Trump's approval rating was underwater. Low approval rating is associated with poor midterm performance (Prokop, "Democrats' prospects", 2018).

Between 2014 and 2018, digital advertising skyrocketed. In the 2014 midterms, advertisers only spent about $250 million on digital ads (Lynch, 2018). By comparison, about $950 million was spent in the 2018 midterms (Lynch, 2018). These statistics illustrate how campaigns increasingly used the Internet for voter outreach. However, it is also worth putting the last number in context. In 2018, $5.25 billion was spent on total advertising, meaning that only a fraction of the ads were online (Lynch, 2018).

## 3.2 Major Issues

Seven key issues that were salient during the 2018 midterms are as follows: the economy, gun policy, healthcare, immigration, Russia, the Supreme Court, and the Trump presidency. This section provides background information – including public opinion and historical context – on each of these seven issues. The existing literature provides overwhelming evidence of mass polarization. On almost every issue discussed, Democratic and Republican voters held radically different views in 2018 (i.e. mass polarization). For example, Democrats believed much more in government intervention in areas such as gun policy and healthcare, whereas Republicans did not. In addition, there was a partisan split on how salient issues were. Democrats clearly cared more about some issues, such as the need for affordable healthcare. Republicans cared more about others, such as border security. However, it remains an open question whether Democratic and Republican politicians also held divergent views and an intensity gap on the same seven issue areas (i.e. elite polarization). These questions are later considered in Chapter 4, in which the Twitter posts of 2018 House candidates are analyzed.

### 3.2.1 Economy

#### *3.2.1.1 Public Opinion*

In the 2018 midterms, the economy was less of a top issue compared to previous midterm elections. According to Gallup, 94 percent of voters said that the economy would be extremely/very important to their vote in 2010 (Newport, "Top Issues", 2018). In 2014, a still very high number, 88 percent, made that claim (Newport, "Top Issues", 2018). By comparison, only 78 percent of voters said that the economy would extremely/very important to their vote (Newport, "Top Issues", 2018). In fact, only 13 percent of Americans – close to a record low – said in October 2018 that the economy was the nation's most important issue (Newport, "Top

Issues", 2018). Newport ("Top Issues", 2018) speculates that the deemphasis of this issue was due to a relatively prosperous American economy, with low unemployment and relatively strong GDP growth. Davidson and Shell (2018) concur, claiming that the average person was "pretty happy" about the economy and so focused on other political issues.

Another finding is that Democratic and Republican voters placed more importance on different economic issues. For example, the Gallup poll suggests that Democrats cared more about income inequality. 82 percent of Democratic and Democratic-leaning voters, but only 52 percent of Republican and Republican-leaning voters, said that the "way income wealth are distributed in U.S. society" would be extremely/very important to their vote (Newport, "Top Issues", 2018). By contrast, Republicans cared more about taxes. 76 percent of Republican and Republican-leaning voters, but only 64 percent of Democratic and Democratic-leaning voters, said that taxes would be extremely/very important to their vote (Newport, "Top Issues", 2018).

### 3.2.1.2 Major News Stories

*Tariffs*: On the 2016 campaign trail, Donald Trump was an outspoken critic of American trade policy. He promised to "fix our terrible trade deals", which he saw as benefitting other countries' exports to the United States and hurting American exports to other countries (Davidson, 2018). He also said he would label China a currency manipulator and "impose punitive tariffs on Chinese goods" (Corasaniti et al, 2016). Trump framed his race with Hillary Clinton as a choice between nationalism and the policies of "a leadership class that worships globalism" (Corasaniti et al., 2016). True to his word, Trump subsequently imposed a series of tariffs during his presidency, especially against China (Gonzales, 2018).

*Trump tax cuts*: In December 2017, President Trump signed the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act (Soffen & Fischer-Baum, 2017). This was the biggest tax overhaul in over 30 years, "[slashing]

the corporate and individual income rates, [eliminating] numerous deductions, and [setting] up a new system for international taxation" (Soffen & Fischer-Baum, 2017). The Trump administration outlined four goals of the TCJA: tax relief for middle class Americans, simplifying the tax code, growing the American economy, and not adding to the debt or deficit ("Donald J. Trump's Tax Plan").

From the very beginning, the TCJA was controversial. One critique Democrats raised is that the law would cost an estimated $1.5 trillion over a decade (Soffen & Fischer-Baum, 2017). A second critique is that some groups benefited more than others from the TCJA, such as corporations and the wealthy (Soffen & Fischer-Baum, 2017). A third argument against the tax law is that it eliminated the Affordable Care Act's mandate that individuals buy health insurance or pay a fine (Soffen & Fischer-Baum, 2017). According to the Congressional Budget Office, 13 million more Americans will be "uninsured in a decade because of Republicans' decision to eliminate the individual mandate (Soffen & Fischer-Baum, 2017).

### 3.2.2 Gun Policy

#### 3.2.2.1 Public Opinion

Besides the economy, gun policy was another salient issue area in the 2018 midterms. According to a Gallup poll, 72 percent of voters said that gun policy would be extremely/very important their vote (Newport, "Top Issues", 2018). When broken down by partisanship, the results show a small but significant intensity gap. 76 percent of Democratic and Democratic-leaning voters, but only 68 percent of Republican and Republican-leaning voters, said that gun policy would be extremely/very important to their vote (Newport, "Top Issues", 2018).

Democratic and Republican voters held radically different views on guns. For example, 51 percent of Democrats said there would be more crime if more Americans had guns, whereas

56 percent of Republicans said the opposite (Oliphant, 2017). Nearly two-thirds of Democrats said there would be fewer mass shootings if it was harder for people to legally obtain guns; only about a quarter of Republicans agreed (Oliphant, 2017). In particular, Democrats and Republicans held polarized views on the National Rifle Association (NRA). According to a poll by the Pew Research Center, 60 percent of Democratic gun owners and 67 percent of non-owners said that that the NRA has too much influence (Igielnik & Brown, 2017). By contrast, 67 percent of Republican gun owners and 62 percent of non-owners said that it has the right amount of influence (Igielnik & Brown, 2017).

### 3.2.2.1 Major News Stories

*Parkland*: On February 14th 2018, a gunman named Nikolas Cruz opened fire at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, killing 17 people in what would be the deadliest high school shooting in U.S. history (Hampson, 2018). Almost immediately, there were calls for more gun control. "We are going to be the last mass shooting," Emma Gonzalez, a Parkland student, vowed in a speech that went viral. "We are going to change the law" (Hampson, 2018). True to their word, the Parkland survivors, including Gonzalez, then turned to social activism, including holding a well-publicized march in Washington, DC (Andone, 2019).

In 2018, gun control activists were unusually successful in passing legislation, one reason being the Parkland activists. According to a year-end report by the Giffords Law Center, 67 new gun laws were "enacted by both Republican and Democratic legislators in 26 states and Washington, DC" ("Trend Watch", 2018). One caveat, though, is that the NRA also had some successes. 203 "anti-gun" bills failed or were defeated in 2018, and seven more were vetoed by governors (Andone, 2019). In addition, the NRA claimed that 26 "pro-gun" laws were enacted at the state level in 2018 (Andone, 2019).

### 3.2.3 Healthcare

#### *3.2.3.1 Public Opinion*

Healthcare was an important, if not the key, issue area in the 2018 midterms. According to a Gallup poll, 80 percent of respondents said that healthcare would be extremely/very important to their vote (Newport, "Top Issues", 2018). When results were broken down by partisanship, the results reveal an unmistakable intensity gap. 87 percent of Democratic and Democratic-leaning voters, but only 72 percent of Republican and Republican-leaning voters, said that healthcare would be extremely/very important to their vote (Newport, "Top Issues", 2018).

Democrats and Republicans held very different opinions about healthcare. According to a poll by the Pew Research Center, 85 percent of Democratic and Democratic-leaning voters said that the federal government should be responsible for ensuring health coverage (Kiley, 2018). By contrast, 68 percent of Republican and Republican-leaning voters said that it should not (Kiley, 2018). With that being said, though, a majority of Republicans (55 percent) believed that the government should continue programs like Medicare and Medicaid (Kiley, 2018). Only 10 percent of Republicans said that the government should not be involved in providing health insurance at all (Kiley, 2018).

#### *3.2.3.2 Major News Stories*

*Affordable Care Act*: In 2010, Congress passed the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, also known as Obamacare or the ACA. The ACA was the largest overhaul of the US healthcare system since the 1960s, designed to "extend health insurance to the estimated 15 percent of Americans who lacked it" ("Has Trump Managed To Kill", 2018) The ACA also aimed to slow the growth of U.S. healthcare spending ("Has Trump Managed To Kill", 2018).

From the very beginning, the Affordable Care Act was controversial. Republicans claimed the bill was an "unwarranted intrusion into the affairs of private businesses and individuals" and voted dozens of times to repeal it ("Has Trump Managed To Kill", 2018). However, despite controlling all three branches of government, Republicans failed to repeal the ACA in 2017 ("Has Trump Managed To Kill", 2018). By comparison, Democrats painted the ACA as a beneficial, but imperfect, reform to the American healthcare system and offered to work with Republicans to improve it ("Has Trump Managed To Kill", 2018). They also stressed some of the ACA's most popular provisions, such as how children could stay on their parents' healthcare plans until age 26 and how no one with preexisting conditions could be denied insurance ("Has Trump Managed To Kill", 2018).

*Democrats' emphasis on healthcare*: Last year, a team of researchers working for The Atlantic studied political ads posted on Google between May 3rd and October 29th 2018 (Lemee & Graham, 2018). The team found that healthcare was the most common issue in Democratic ads, but only the sixth most common issue in Republican ads (Lemee & Graham, 2018). Roughly a quarter of Democratic ads mentioned healthcare, whereas it only appeared in seven percent of Republican ads (Lemee & Graham, 2018). A separate report, by the group Protect Our Care, found that fifty percent of Democratic spending on broadcast advertising was spent on healthcare ("Defined by Health Care"). In September 2018 alone, more than 130,000 pro-Democratic ads mentioned healthcare ("Defined by Health Care"). As the Twitter analysis in Chapter 4 will show, these results are not surprising. In all sorts of media, including on Twitter, Democrats talked a lot more than Republicans about healthcare.

*Medicare and Medicaid*: In 1965, Lyndon B. Johnson signed two programs, Medicare and Medicaid, into law. Medicare provides hospital and medical insurance for Americans age 65

or older, whereas Medicaid "offers health coverage to certain low-income people" ("Johnson Signs", 2019). Both programs were salient issues in the 2018 midterms, the most obvious reason being that millions of Americans rely on them. In 2017, about 60 million people U.S. citizens were enrolled in Medicare ("Overview of Medicare", 2019) and nearly 74 million U.S. citizens were enrolled in Medicaid ("Total Medicaid enrollment", 2018). A second reason for the issue saliency is that both programs, especially Medicare, are expensive. In 2017, Medicare "accounted for 15 percent of total federal spending and 20 percent of total national health spending" ("Overview of Medicare", 2019). A third reason is that Democrats made Medicaid expansion, which was established under the Affordable Care Act, a major focus of the 2018 midterms ("Medicaid Expansion", 2018).

*Rising health expenditures*: As Rooney and Moyer (2018) observe, healthcare costs have "gone through the roof and are now the highest [they have] ever been for the American economy, companies, and individuals." For example, health expenditures used to be only five percent of GDP in 1960 but were 18.2 percent of GDP in 2018 (Rooney & Moyer, 2018). Despite spending twice as much as any other high-income country in the world on medical care, though, the United States has similar utilization rates to comparable countries (Rooney & Moyer, 2018).

*Pre-existing conditions*: The Affordable Care Act may be divisive, but its protections for people with pre-existing conditions are broadly popular. According to one survey, more than seven in 10 of Americans said it is important to retain the ACA provisions that "prevent insurance companies from denying coverage based on a person's medical history" and from "charging sick people more" (Singh & Lee, 2018).

Politicians of both parties actively campaigned in favor of protecting pre-existing conditions. However, Democrats accused their opponents of hypocrisy, arguing that the Republican Party's "repeated attempts to repeal the Affordable Care Act would have undermined protections for sicker Americans" (Bryan, 2018). By contrast, Republicans claimed that they wanted to protect pre-existing conditions, despite opposing the Affordable Care Act, while also providing more choices for consumers (Bryan, 2018).

### 3.2.4 Immigration

#### 3.2.4.1 Public Opinion

A fourth important issue area was immigration. According to a Gallup poll from October 2018, 78 percent of respondents said that immigration would be extremely/very important to their vote (Newport, "Top Issues", 2018). When the results were broken down by partisanship, the percentages were 74 percent for Democratic and Democratic-leaning voters, and 84 percent for Republican and Republican-leaning voters (Newport, "Top Issues", 2018).

Democrats and Republicans viewed the issue of immigration very differently, even if they agreed on its importance. According to a poll by the Pew Research Center, 75 percent of Republicans, but only 19 percent of Democrats, regarded illegal immigration as a very big problem ("Little Partisan Agreement", 2018). By contrast, 57 percent of Democrats, but only 15 percent of Republicans, said that the way immigrants who are in the country illegally are treated is a very big problem ("Little Partisan Agreement", 2018).

#### 3.2.4.2 Major News Stories

*DACA*: In June 2012, the Obama administration created a program called Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, or DACA for short (Gonzalez, 2017). DACA allowed young people brought into the United States illegally by their parents "to get a temporary reprieve from

deportation and to receive permission to work, study, and obtain driver's licenses" (Gonzalez, 2017). In order to be eligible, DACA applicants have to meet a number of criteria, including being younger than 31 when the program began and having a clean criminal record (Gonzalez, 2017).

There are far more undocumented immigrants residing in the United States – about 11.3 million – than DACA recipients. Of the 11.3 million, about 3.6 million undocumented immigrants entered the United States before their 18th birthday (Gomez, 2018). This group is commonly referred to as DREAMers (Gomez, 2018). An even smaller group, consisting of 1.8 million immigrants, entered the United States before their 16th birthday and so is eligible to apply for DACA (Gomez, 2018). The smallest group, consisting of 800,000 immigrants, consists of DREAMers who actually received DACA protections (Gomez, 2018). Most DACA recipients are from Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras (Gonzalez, 2017). There are also several thousand immigrants from Asian countries such as South Korea and the Philippines (Gonzalez, 2017). DACA recipients live in every state, but the largest concentrations are in California, Texas, New York, Illinois, and Florida (Gonzalez, 2017).

In September 2017, the Trump administration announced that it would end the DACA program in six months if Congress did not "find a more permanent solution" (Gonzalez, 2017). However, Trump also signaled in a tweet that he supported legalizing DACA and that he would "revisit the issue if Congress [could not] legalize the program" (Gonzalez, 2017). In the six months that followed, Congress considered various immigration bills but failed to pass any, putting the DREAMERs' fate in limbo (Nowicki & Gonzalez, 2018).

*Family separation*: In April 2018, then Attorney General Jeff Sessions announced a "zero tolerance" policy on illegal crossings at the US-Mexico border (John & Epstein, 2018). As John

and Epstein (2018) explain: "Under this policy, adults caught at the border [were referred] to the Department of Justice for prosecution. Any children accompanying those adults [were treated] as unaccompanied minors and temporarily placed in detention centers run by the Department of Homeland Security." Because of this policy, 1,995 children were separated from their parents at the US-Mexico border between mid-April and May 31st (John & Epstein, 2018). Another consequence is that immigration became much more salient of an issue. According to Gallup, only 14 percent of Americans saw immigration as the nation's top issue in June (Newport, "Immigration Surges", 2018). In July, by contrast, a much larger share, 22 percent, saw it as the nation's top issue after family separation received extensive media coverage (Newport, "Immigration Surges", 2018).

The Trump administration sent mixed messages about its policy. Some individuals, such as Homeland Security Secretary Kirstjen Nielsen, falsely claimed that family separation was a "continuation of previous administrations' policies of separating children if the adult has broken a law" (Rhodan, 2018). Others, such as White House senior policy advisor Stephen Miller, directly defended the policy. "[Family separation] was a simple decision by the administration to have a zero-tolerance policy for illegal entry, period," he told The New York Times (Rhodan, 2018). "The message is that no one is exempt from immigration law" (Rhodan, 2018). By contrast, critics from both political parties described the policy as cruel and antithetical to American values (John & Epstein, 2018).

Ultimately, Trump caved to pressure from his critics. On June 20th, he signed an executive order "meant to end the separation of families at the border by detaining parents and children together for an indefinite period" (Shear et al., 2018). "We're going to have strong – very strong – borders, but we are going to keep the families together," Trump said as he signed

the executive order (Shear et al., 2018). "I didn't like the sight or the feeling of families being

separated" (Shear et al, 2018).

*Trump's wall*: During his announcement speech in June 2015, Donald Trump called for a

wall on the U.S.-Mexico border. "I will build a great, great wall on our southern border," the

then presidential candidate proclaimed (Trump, 2015). "And I will have Mexico pay for [it]"

("Announcement Speech", 2015). From the very beginning, the idea of Trump's border wall was

divisive. According to a 2015 poll by the Pew Research Center, 73 percent of Republicans but

only 29 percent of Democrats agreed that the wall should be built (Sakuma, 2015). Subsequently,

Democratic resistance to the idea hardened. A 2018 Gallup poll found that 73 percent of

Republicans but only 13 percent of Democrats supported "significantly expanding the

construction of walls along the U.S.-Mexico border" (Newport, "Border Walls", 2018).

To date, Trump's proposed border wall remains unbuilt. However, it is worth noting that

man-made barriers already cover about a third of the U.S.-Mexico border. As Shoichet & Sands

(2019) explain, the border stretches for 1,954 miles and physical barriers cover 654 of those

miles. More specifically, vehicle fencing covers 280 miles while pedestrian fencing covers 374

miles (Shoichet & Sands, 2019).

### 3.2.5 Russia

#### 3.2.5.1 The Mueller Investigation

In May 2017, Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein appointed Robert Mueller as

special counsel for the U.S. Department of Justice (Lawler, 2017). Since then, Mueller's team

has investigated Russian interference in the 2016 election as well as "any links or coordination

between Russia and Trump campaign-linked individuals" ("What is Robert Mueller doing",

2019). Mueller's probe expanded in June 2017 to investigate Trump for potential obstruction of

justice (Lawler, 2017). So far, Mueller's team has "[netted] 199 criminal charges, 37 indictments or guilty pleas, and five prison sentences" (Lawler, 2017). The list of prosecuted individuals includes several Trump associates who "had Russia-related contacts during the 2016 presidential campaign and transition period", including George Padadopoulos, Paul Manafort, Rick Gates, and Michael Flynn, Michael Cohen, and Roger Stone ("Where the investigations", 2019; Prokop, "Robert Mueller", 2019).

### 3.2.5.2 Public Opinion

Few issues were more polarizing than Russia in 2018. According to a Gallup poll, 45 percent of voters said that the investigation into Russian involvement in the 2016 U.S. election would be extremely/very important to their vote (Newport, "Top Issues", 2018). However, when results were broken down by partisanship, the percentages were 66 percent of Democratic and Democratic-leaning voters, but only 19 percent for Republicans of Republican and Republican-leaning voters (Newport, "Top Issues", 2018). In addition, a majority of Americans believed that Russia interfered on behalf of Trump, according to an Ipsos/Reuters poll (Kirby, 2018). 34 percent strongly agreed with that claim, while another 22 percent somewhat agreed (Kirby, 2018). Broken down further, the results have an unmistakably partisan bent. 58 percent of Democrats strongly agreed that Russia interfered to help Trump and 23 percent somewhat agreed (Kirby, 2018). By contrast, 31 percent of Republicans strongly disagreed and 19 percent somewhat disagreed (Kirby, 2018). In fact, 40 percent of Republicans said that the Justice Department should "immediately end the special counsel's investigation into Russian meddling", compared to only 11 percent of Democrats (Kirby, 2018).

3.2.6 Supreme Court

*3.2.6.1 Brett Kavanaugh's Nomination to the Supreme Court*

On June 27th, 2018, Justice Anthony Kennedy sent shockwaves through the country when he announced his retirement from the Supreme Court (Shear, 2018). Kennedy had been a swing vote on the court for nearly three decades and so his replacement by a more conservative justice had the potential to shift the Supreme Court to the right for years to come, if not decades (Shear, 2018). A few days later, on July 9th, President Trump nominated Brett Kavanaugh, a judge on the D.C. Court of Appeals, to be Kennedy's successor (Shear, 2018). Given how much was at stake, the confirmation process threatened to be vicious. "I will oppose Judge Kavanaugh's nomination with everything I have," vowed Chuck Schumer (D-NY), the Senate Minority Leader (Shear, 2018).

The story became even messier in September, when Christine Blasey Ford, a research psychologist, went public with sexual assault allegations against Kavanaugh (Stolberg & Fandos, 2018). Thirty years earlier, a drunk Kavanaugh had allegedly "pinned her to a bed and had tried to rip off her clothes" (Stolberg & Fandos, 2018). Democrats tended to side with Ford, saying that her allegations were credible and that Kavanaugh was unfit to serve on the Supreme Court (Stolberg & Fandos, 2018). In contrast, Republicans argued that Ford's allegations were unproven and that Democrats' attacks on Kavanaugh were politically motivated (Stolberg & Fandos, 2018). In fact, the nominee himself went as far as to call the allegations as an "embarrassment" and the movement against him "revenge on behalf of the Clintons" (Montanaro, "More Believe Ford", 2018).

Ultimately, Kavanaugh was confirmed to the Supreme Court 50 to 48 in one of the narrowest margins in American history (Stolberg, 2018). President Trump was ecstatic about the

news. "He's going to go down as a totally brilliant Supreme Court justice for many years," he boasted to reporters (Stolberg, 2018). By contrast, Ford's supporters were dispirited, feeling that "their elected representatives [had] not heard their voices" (Stolberg, 2018). In addition, the nomination process "challenged Americans' faith in the Supreme Court as an institution that is above politics" (Stolberg, 2018).

### 3.2.6.2 Public Opinion

Views of Kavanaugh's nomination were highly polarized. According to a Marist poll, 41 percent of respondents supported Kavanaugh's nomination to the Supreme Court, while 48 percent opposed it ("Marist Poll", 2018). Delving deeper into the data, only five percent of Democrats supported Kavanaugh's nomination, while 83 percent opposed it ("Marist Poll", 2018). In contrast, 88 percent of Republicans supported the nomination, while eight percent opposed it ("Marist Poll", 2018). Independents were more evenly split; 42 percent supported Kavanaugh's nomination, while 49 percent opposed it ("Marist Poll", 2018).

In addition, Democrats and Republicans held radically different views on the sexual assault allegations against Kavanaugh. According to the Marist poll, 45 percent of respondents said that Ford was the one telling the truth, while 33 percent said Kavanaugh was the one telling the truth ("Marist Poll", 2018). However, when the results were broken down further, 80 percent of Democratic men and 74 percent of Democratic women believed Ford, whereas 77 percent of Republican men and 73 percent of Republican men believed Kavanaugh ("Marist Poll", 2018).

### 3.2.7 The Trump Presidency

### 3.2.7.1 Public Opinion

In the months leading up to the 2018 midterms, Donald Trump was an unusually divisive president. According to a poll by the Pew Research Center, 38 percent approved of his job

performance, whereas 55 percent disapproved ("Trump Gets Negative Ratings", 2018). When

results were broken down further, 90 percent of Democratic and Democratic-leaning voters

disapproved of Trump's job performance, while only seven percent approved ("Trump Gets

Negative Ratings", 2018). Conversely, 79 percent of Republican and Republican-leaning voters

approved while 14 percent disapproved ("Trump Gets Negative Ratings", 2018). In fact, no

president in modern American history has had a larger gap in partisan approval rating than

Trump (Tyson, 2018).

Another Pew study provides evidence that the 2018 midterms were partially a referendum

on Trump's job performance. The study found that 34 percent of registered voters thought of

their vote as against President Trump, while 26 percent thought of it as for the president (Scott,

2018). In particular, 61 percent of Democratic voters said their vote would be a vote against

Trump (Scott, 2018). This was noticeably higher than the percentage of Republican voters who

said their vote was a vote against Obama in 2010 or 2014 (Scott, 2018).

## 3.3 Concluding Remarks

The existing literature on the 2018 midterms provides several insights. First, Democratic

and Republican voters were divided on almost every major issue in the 2018 midterms, evidence

of mass polarization. Second, there was a partisan intensity gap on several issues, most notably

healthcare. Third, the mainstream media clearly thought that all seven issue areas were

important, given the countless articles written on each topic.

However, several questions remain unanswered. First, were Democratic and Republican

politicians just as divided on all of these issues (i.e. elite polarization) as voters were (i.e. mass

polarization)? Second, did elites show a partisan intensity gap in how much they prioritized

issues? Third, were the issues seen as most important by the mainstream media also important to

politicians' messaging? These questions will be the focus of the next section.

# 4 Quantitative Analysis

Chapter 4 is a quantitative analysis of nearly 700 House candidates' Twitter posts, using the statistical coding language R as the tool to conduct the study. The objective of the analysis was to see how often certain key terms came up and under what context. The data provides overwhelming evidence that Democratic and Republican politicians emphasized different issues on social media and framed them in distinct ways. Partisan differences in Twitter use can potentially be explained by two factors: (a) political polarization, and (b) how the two parties were confronted with unique challenges.

This chapter builds upon Section 3.2 by analyzing the same seven issue areas (i.e. the economy, gun policy, healthcare, immigration, Russia, the Supreme Court, and the Trump presidency). However, the focus is on elite polarization instead of mass polarization. This dataset is also appropriate because Twitter is a major social networking site, used by millions of Americans as well as most congressional candidates. Whereas many other sites more popular (e.g. Facebook), it is much easier to scrape textual data from Twitter, making it a more valuable resource for this project.

## 4.1 Overview of the Data

For this analysis to be possible, three different datasets needed to be merged together: (a) Twitter data from between January 1$^{st}$ and November 6$^{th}$ 2018, (b) a dataset supplied by the website Ballotpedia, and (c) the Cook Political Report's Cook Partisan Voter Index (CVI).

The first data set consists of the Twitter posts of 697 House candidates who ran in the 2018 general election. Independents and third-party candidates were excluded from the sample because they rarely win elections in single-member districts. The sample also only includes personal, not official/government, Twitter accounts. This restriction is made because official

accounts are subject to federal law and House rules and regulations (Woods, 2014). More

specifically, content on official accounts is not supposed to include "personal… or campaign

information" nor "grassroots lobbying or solicit support for a member's position" (Woods,

2014). Overall, the sample includes about 82 percent (697 of 855) of major-party House

candidates who ran in the 2018 general election.

In order to obtain the data, the author had to scrape the Twitter accounts of all 697

accounts the day after the election was over. Several steps went into the text mining process.

First, he had to create a Twitter developer app in order to scrape text from the website. Second,

he used the 'get_timeline' function in R to get each Twitter user's 3,200 most tweets. Third, he

merged the data from all 697 accounts together. Step four was to clean the data, including

removing all tweets from before January 1st 2018 and after November 6th 2018.

The second dataset was supplied by the website Ballotpedia. For context, Ballotpedia is a

nonpartisan political encyclopedia, founded in 2007, that covers American federal, state, and

local politics. This dataset included each congressional candidate's name, party affiliation,

incumbency status, district, primary election date, and Twitter handle.

The third dataset is the Cook Political Report's Cook Partisan Voter Index (PVI). The

Cook PVI is a measure of how each congressional district performed at the presidential level

compared to the nation as a whole in 2012 and 2016. For example, a PVI of D+2 indicates that in

the 2012 and 2016 presidential elections, that district "performed an average of two points more

Democratic than the nation did as a whole" (Wasserman & Flinn, 2017).

## 4.2 Basic Summary Statistics

The Twitter dataset is very large, consisting of 403,508 tweets. Given that there are 697

candidates in the sample, this means that the average candidate sent 579 tweets between January

1st and November 6th 2018. However, the median number of tweets sent by a candidate was only 304. The large difference between the mean and median can be explained by how some candidates tweeted an unusually large number of times, skewing results.

Of the 403,508 tweets, 118,038 are retweets from other accounts, whereas 285,470 are new tweets. When excluding tweets originally from other accounts, the average tweet received 258 likes and 98 retweets. However, the median tweet only received 13 likes and five retweets. These results provide further evidence that the dataset is skewed.

Delving deeper, the dataset shows striking partisan differences in how much candidates tweeted. Overall, 384 of the candidates in the sample (55 percent) are Democrats, whereas 313 (45 percent) are Republicans. However, the data also show that Democratic candidates tweeted much more often than Republican candidates. 295,519 of the tweets (73 percent) in the dataset were sent by Democrats, whereas only 107,989 (27 percent) were sent by Republicans. In addition, the median Democrat tweeted 560.5 times between January 1st and November 6th, whereas the median Republican only tweeted 175 times. Both findings suggest that Democratic politicians were more energized on social media compared to their Republican counterparts.

To further illustrate the skew in the Twitter data, two histograms were plotted, one for Democrats and one for Republicans. The vertical dotted lines show the median number of tweets sent by a Democrat and Republican respectively. As both graphs show, most candidates tweeted fewer than 1,000 tweets between January 1st and November 6th 2018. Only a few candidates tweeted more than 2,000 times and they were clear outliers in the data.
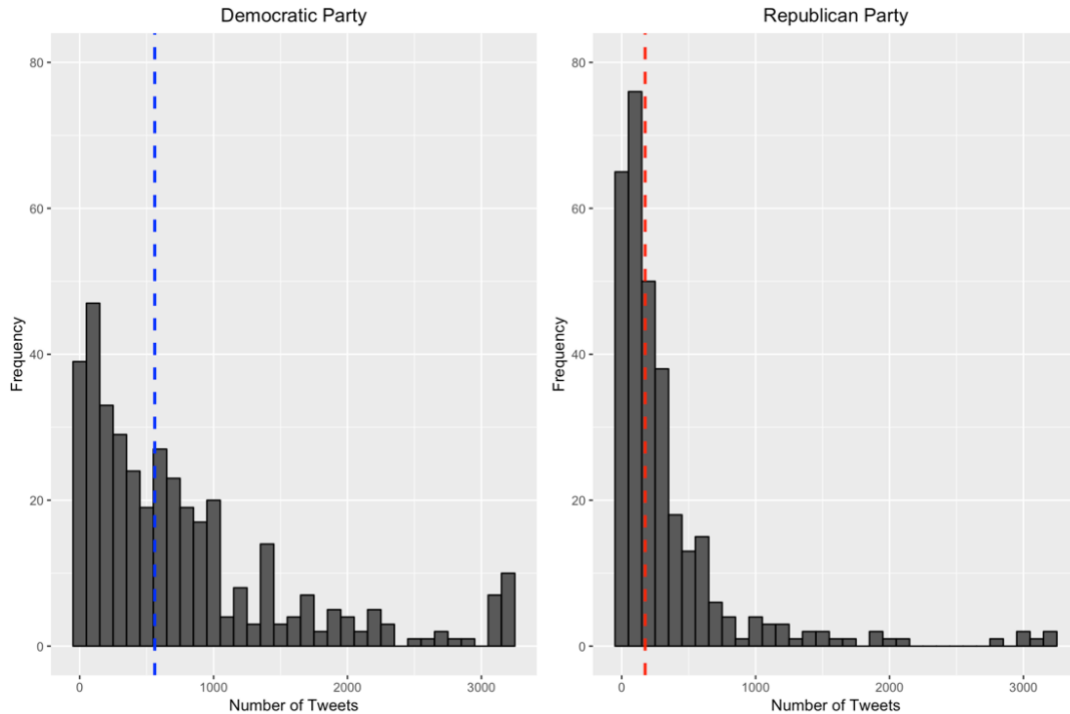
In at least three different ways, Democratic accounts received more engagement on social media compared to Republican accounts. First, Democratic candidates had more followers. The median Democrat had 3,811 followers, whereas the median Republican had only 1,912 followers. Second, Democrats' posts received more likes, when excluding retweets from other accounts. The median Democratic tweet received 18 likes, whereas the median Republican tweet received only seven likes. Third, Democrats' posts were retweeted more, when excluding tweets originally from other accounts. The median Democratic post was retweeted seven times, whereas the median Republican post was only retweeted two times. This evidence suggests Democratic voters, not just politicians, may have been more energized on Twitter compared to their Republican counterparts. However, given how the sample is limited and how it only includes House candidates' tweets, this claim is difficult to prove conclusively.

These results can be further broken down by incumbency status:

| | Democratic incumbent | Democratic nonincumbent | Republican incumbent | Republican nonincumbent |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Number of tweets** | | | | |
| *Mean* | 392.6 | 978.7 | 239.3 | 459.9 |
| *Median* | 164 | 729 | 114 | 267 |
| **Followers** | | | | |
| *Mean* | 20,579.6 | 14,689.6 | 9,427.9 | 5,441.1 |
| *Median* | 2,941 | 4,450 | 2,436 | 1,071.5 |
| **Likes*** | | | | |
| *Mean* | 898.7 | 184.0 | 134.3 | 72.9 |
| *Median* | 13 | 19 | 8 | 6 |
| **Retweets*** | | | | |
| *Mean* | 323.8 | 63.9 | 56.2 | 33.5 |
| *Median* | 4 | 7 | 3 | 2 |

This table provides two major insights. First, notice the huge differences between means and medians. This discrepancy can be explained by some accounts having an unusually large number of tweets and followers, and by some tweets receiving an unusually large number of likes and retweets. The results provides further evidence that the dataset is very skewed. Second, there were notable differences between incumbents and non-incumbents. The average Democratic incumbent tweeted less often than the average Democratic nonincumbent but had more followers. His or her posts also received more likes and retweets on average compared to the average nonincumbent. The same is also true of Republican incumbents versus Republican nonincumbents.

As election date approached, the overall number of tweets per day (by all candidates) increased on average. This finding makes sense for two reasons. First, voter mobilization efforts in general – not just on social media – tend to increase as an election approaches ("Party Affiliation and Election Polls", 2012). Second, some candidates did not declare their candidacies

until part way into 2018 ("Filing deadlines", 2018). Two time series models were used to show the increase in tweeting over time, one for Democrats and one for Republicans.
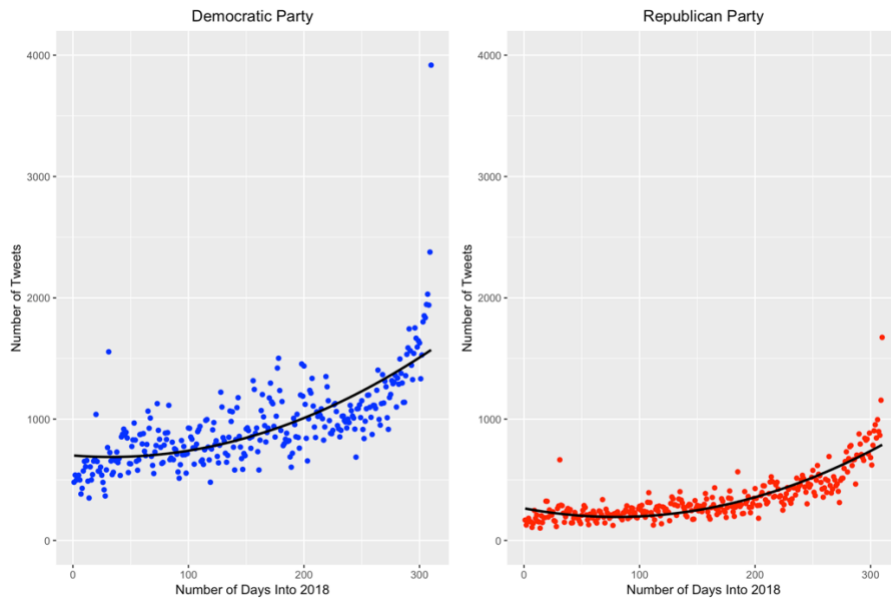


```
Time Series Results (Democrats)           Time Series Results (Republicans)
==========================================  ==========================================
                    Dependent variable:                        Dependent variable:
                 --------------------------                  --------------------------
                    Number of Tweets                            Number of Tweets
------------------------------------------  ------------------------------------------
Time                      -0.751             Time                      -1.785***
                         (0.617)                                      (0.258)

Time Squared              0.011***           Time Squared              0.011***
                         (0.002)                                      (0.001)

Constant                 700.699***          Constant                 265.213***
                         (41.572)                                     (17.403)

------------------------------------------  ------------------------------------------
Observations              310                Observations              310
R2                        0.547              R2                        0.744
Adjusted R2               0.544              Adjusted R2               0.742
Residual Std. Error  242.412 (df = 307)      Residual Std. Error  101.477 (df = 307)
F Statistic      185.536*** (df = 2; 307)    F Statistic      445.299*** (df = 2; 307)
==========================================  ==========================================
Note:        *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01    Note:        *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01
```

*Time Series Model 1*: This model just looked at Democrats, with time and time squared as the independent variables and number of tweets as the dependent variable. An increase of one day is associated on average with a 2.670 increase[1] in the number of tweets. The marginal effect is found by taking the derivative of the linear regression ($y = b_0 + b_1 t + b_2 t^2$) with respect to time and then plugging in the average time. This yields $b_1 + 2b_2 t$.

---

[1] $b_1 + 2b_2 t = -0.751 + (2*0.011*mean(1:310))$

*Time Series Model 2*: This model just looked at Republicans, with time and time squared as the independent variables and number of tweets as the dependent variable. By the same method as before, an increase of one day is associated on average with a 1.636 increase[2] in the number of tweets.

Another question is whether there was a statistically significant relationship between the partisan lean of a district and how much a Democrat or Republican tweeted. One hypothesis is that candidates running in swing districts or districts favoring the other party would be expected to tweet more than their peers. These candidates were less "safe" in the general election and so arguably needed to do more voter outreach.

Since the dataset is so skewed, the natural log was taken of each candidate's number of tweets in order to have a distribution that is closer to a normal distribution. The log number of tweets is shown in the histograms below. Note that the dotted lines show the median log number of tweets sent by a Democrat and Republican respectively.



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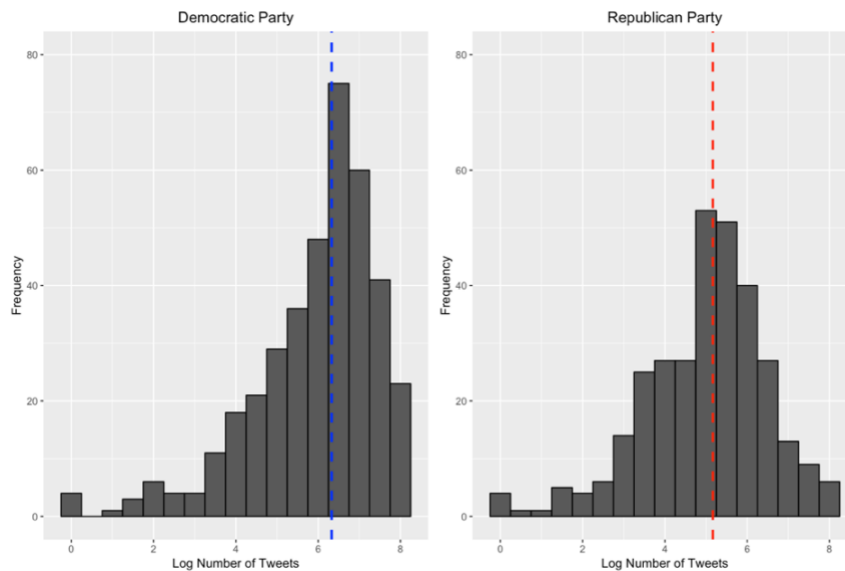
[2] $b_1 + 2b_2t = -1.785 + (2 * 0.011 * mean(1:310))$

Four ordinary least squares models were used to test the hypothesis that there is statistically significant relationship between the partisan lean of a district and how much a Democrat or Republican tweeted, with any p-value less than 0.05 being statistically significant.
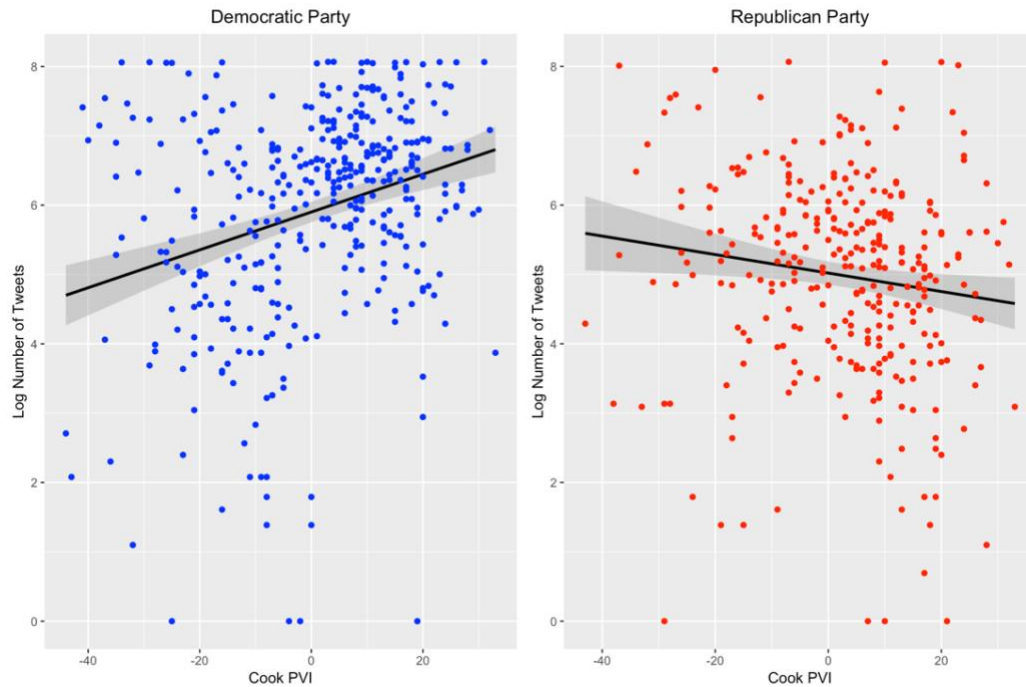


```
OLS Results (Democrats)                                             OLS Results (Republicans)
=============================================================       =============================================================
                          Dependent variable:                                                Dependent variable:
              -----------------------------------------                          -----------------------------------------
                          Log Number of Tweets                                              Log Number of Tweets
                       (1)                    (2)                                         (1)                    (2)
-------------------------------------------------------------       -------------------------------------------------------------
Cook PVI               0.027***              -0.011*              Cook PVI               -0.013**               0.010
                      (0.005)                (0.006)                                    (0.006)                (0.007)

Incumbency                                   -1.806***            Incumbency                                   -0.935***
                                             (0.207)                                                           (0.209)

regionNortheast                               0.115               regionNortheast                              0.432
                                             (0.226)                                                           (0.267)

regionSouth                                   0.016               regionSouth                                 -0.030
                                             (0.186)                                                           (0.212)

regionWest                                   -0.011               regionWest                                   0.047
                                             (0.209)                                                           (0.239)

Constant               5.902***               6.549***            Constant               5.020***              5.377***
                      (0.075)                (0.161)                                    (0.085)                (0.198)

-------------------------------------------------------------       -------------------------------------------------------------
Observations           384                    384                 Observations           313                    313
R2                     0.083                  0.238               R2                     0.018                  0.092
Adjusted R2            0.081                  0.228               Adjusted R2            0.014                  0.077
Residual Std. Error  1.470 (df = 382)     1.347 (df = 378)       Residual Std. Error  1.473 (df = 311)     1.425 (df = 307)
F Statistic       34.638*** (df = 1; 382) 23.671*** (df = 5; 378) F Statistic       5.585** (df = 1; 311) 6.185*** (df = 5; 307)
=============================================================       =============================================================
Note:                      *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01           Note:                      *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01
```

*OLS Model 1 (Democrats)*: This model looked at just Democrats, with Cook PVI as the independent variable and the log number of tweets as the dependent variable. Model 1 found that on average, a one-unit increase in the partisan lean of a district was associated with a 0.027 unit

increase in the log number of tweets (p = 8.69e-09). Put more simply, Democrats running in more conservative districts tweeted slightly more on average.

*OLS Model 2 (Democrats)*: This model was similar to Model 1 but controlled for incumbency status and region. Model 2 found that on average, incumbency was associated with a 1.806 unit decrease in the log number of tweets (p < 2e-16). In other words, Democratic non-incumbents tweeted much more than Democratic incumbents on average. However, neither the partisan lean of a district (p = 0.0925) nor region was statistically significant in this model.

*OLS Model 3 (Republicans)*: This model looked at just Republicans, with Cook PVI as the independent variable and log number of tweets as the dependent variable. Model 3 found that on average, a one-unit increase in the partisan lean of a district was associated with a 0.013 unit decrease in the log number of tweets (p = 0.0187). Put more simply, Republicans running in more liberal districts tweeted slightly more on average.

*OLS Model 4 (Republicans)*: This model was similar to Model 3 but controlled for incumbency status and region. Model 4 found that on average, incumbency was associated with a 0.935 unit decrease in the log number of tweets (p = 1.08e-05). In other words, Republican non-incumbents tweeted much more than Republican incumbents on average. However, neither the partisan lean of a district (p = 0.192) nor region was statistically significant in this model.

As expected, Models 1 and 3 suggest that candidates running in swing districts or districts favoring the other party would be expected to tweet more than their peers. However, these models have very small adjusted $R^2$ values of 0.081 and 0.014, meaning that they explain little of the variability in the dependent variable (the log number of tweets). By comparison, models 2 and 4 are better, as they have larger adjusted $R^2$ values and so capture more of the variability in the log number of tweets. According to models 2 and 4, the partisan lean of a

district did *not* have a statistically significant relationship with how much a Democrat or Republican tweeted.

## 4.3 Major Issues

### 4.3.1 Economy

#### *4.3.1.1 Tariffs*
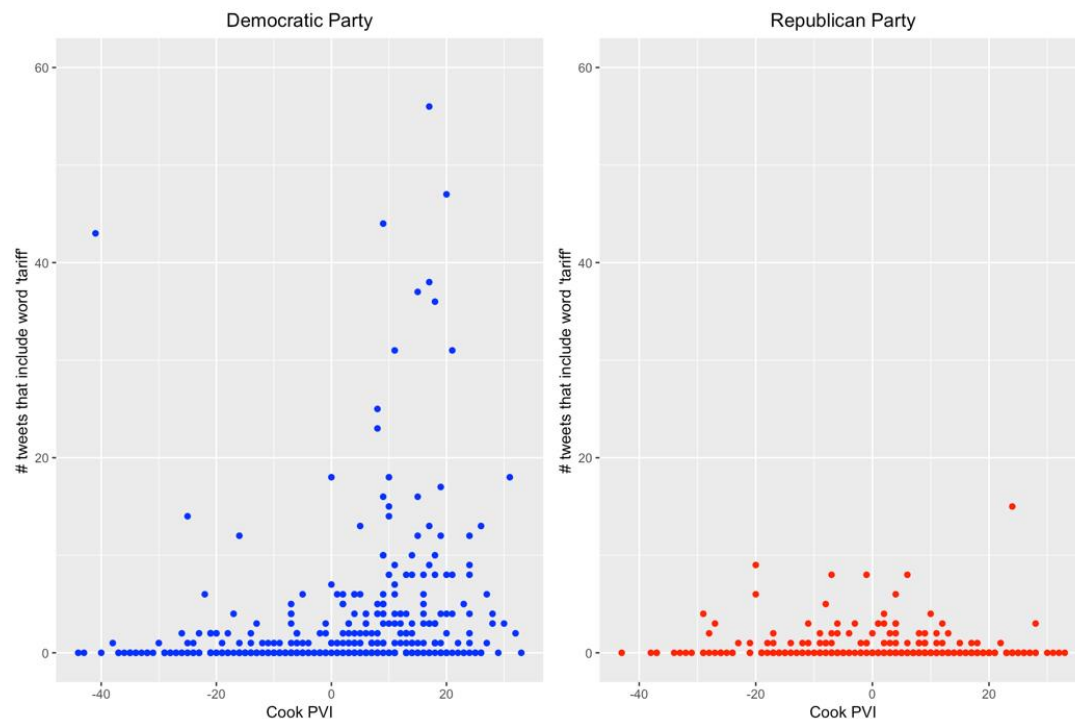


Democrats were much more likely than Republicans to discuss Trump's tariffs. Of the 1,314 tweets that included the word "tariff"[3], 87 percent (1,149) were sent by Democrats while only 13 percent (165) were sent by Republicans.

However, most candidates hardly discussed tariffs at all. Only 55 Democrats and seven Republicans mentioned tariffs in more than five tweets. Only 27 Republicans and one Republican mentioned tariffs in more than ten tweets. Four Democrats – Dwight Evans (D-PA), Justin Kanew (D-TN), Renee Haagenson (D-MO), and Ryan Watts (D-NC) – were clear outliers

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[3] Searched for (a) "tariff" and (b) "Tariff".

in the data, sending more than 40 tweets about tariffs. In fact, the median Democrat and median Republican did not include the word "tariff" in a single tweet.

Most Democratic candidates were opposed to Trump's tariffs, citing their negative effect on the U.S. economy and jobs. One candidate, Mark DeSaulnier (D-CA), described them as "dangerous and short-sighted behavior" that hurt workers and businesses. Similarly, Lori Trahan (D-MA) described tariffs as a "burden to the American people." In her tweet, Trahan also emphasized that the United States should work with allies "to enforce global trade norms" and not "let escalating tensions spiral out of control."

In contrast, Republicans were divided into pro-tariff and anti-tariff camps. Some candidates, such as Rudy Peters (R-CA) and Danny Tarkanian (R-NV), emphasized how other countries were not playing by the "rules" of international trade. Peters highlighted the theft of U.S. trade secrets and how that eroded American firms' competitive edge. Similarly, Tarkanian emphasized how other countries used their own tariffs and non-monetary trade barriers at the expense of American workers. To candidates such as Peters and Tarkanian, tariffs were a way to have other countries comply with the "rules". Other Republicans, meanwhile, were opposed to Trump's trade policy. Carlos Curbelo (R-FL) argued that the tariffs should be "modified to target bad actors" and not "allied nations like Canada, Mexico, and the E.U. Justin Amash (R-MI) went further, decrying Trump's tariffs as corporate welfare that benefitted "the few through a tax imposed on all Americans." In another tweet, he also called the policy "protectionist" and "economic incompetence."

These results provide two major insights. First, Republican elite opinion was more split than Republican popular opinion on the issue of tariffs. Whereas a large majority – over 70 percent – of Republican voters said tariffs were a good thing for the United States (Watson,

2018), some candidates such as Carlos Curbelo (R-FL) and Justin Amash (R-MI) took issue with

Trump's trade policy. Second, candidates of both parties discussed tariffs less than one might

expect, given their news coverage and impact on U.S. trade relations with other countries

(Gonzalez, 2018).

*4.3.1.2 Tax cuts vs. tax reform*
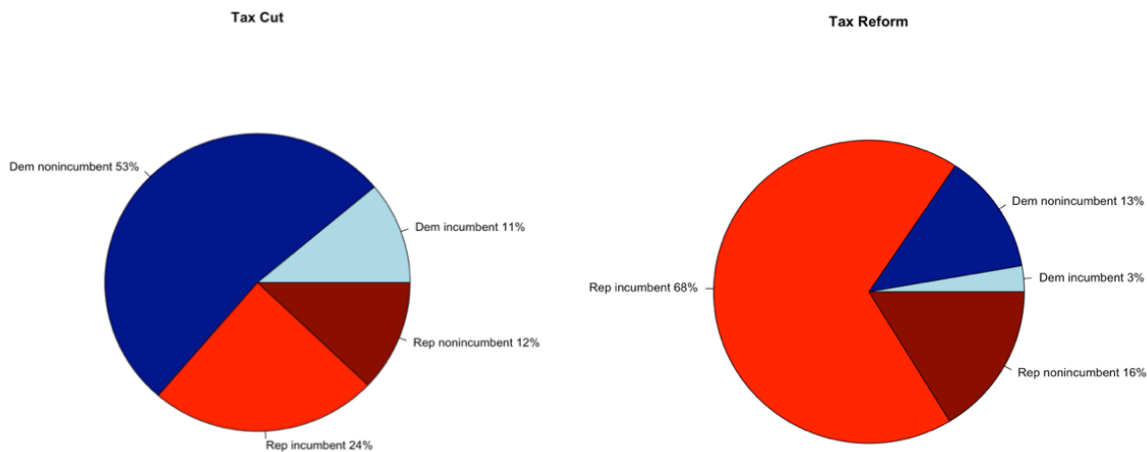


Democrats and Republicans used very different diction to describe Trump's tax cuts. Of

the 2,873 tweets that included the term "tax cut"[4], most – 64 percent (1831) – were sent by

Democrats, while only 36 percent (1042) were sent by Republicans. By comparison, only 16

percent (142) of the 909 tweets that included the term "tax reform"[5] were sent by Democrats,

while 84 percent (767) were sent by Republicans. In short, the two parties framed the issue very

differently, providing evidence of language polarization.

However, most candidates hardly discussed Trump's tax cuts. The median Democrat only

mentioned the term "tax cut" in two tweets, while the median Republican only used the term in

one tweet. More strikingly, the median Democrat and median Republican did not include the

term "tax reform" in a single tweet. These results are unexpected, given that tax reform was the

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[4] Searched for (a) "tax cut", (b) "Tax Cut", (c) "Tax cut", (d) "TAX CUT", and (e) "taxcut".
[5] Searched for (a) "tax reform", (b) "Tax Reform", (c) "tax reform", and (d) "taxreform".

Trump administration's biggest legislative accomplishment to date (Soffen & Fischer-Baum, 2017).

Democratic candidates were strongly opposed to Trump's tax cuts, calling them fiscally irresponsible for increasing the size of the federal deficit. Many candidates, including current House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-CA), speculated that the GOP would then use the rising deficit as an excuse to "cut" Social Security and Medicare benefits. Another critique, raised by David Brill (D-AZ), is that the tax cuts were regressive. As he put it, most of the benefits would go to billionaires and then "our children and grandchildren will pay the balance." One last argument, raised by Julie Oliver (D-TX), is that the tax cuts were hypocritical. Oliver questioned the need to give billions in tax cuts to corporations when the United States "apparently can't afford to feed every needy child or family."

In comparison, Republican candidates spoke very positively of Trump's tax cuts. Robert Aderholt (R-AL) said that 90 percent of Americans would see bigger paychecks as a result of the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act (TCJA). He also claimed that tax cuts boosted economic growth, leading to the U.S. economy hitting three percent growth in 2018. Bill Flores (R-TX), meanwhile, argued that tax cuts allowed employers to "hire more workers, open new facilities, and offer their employees increased benefits."

4.3.2 Gun Policy

*4.3.2.1 Gun Violence*
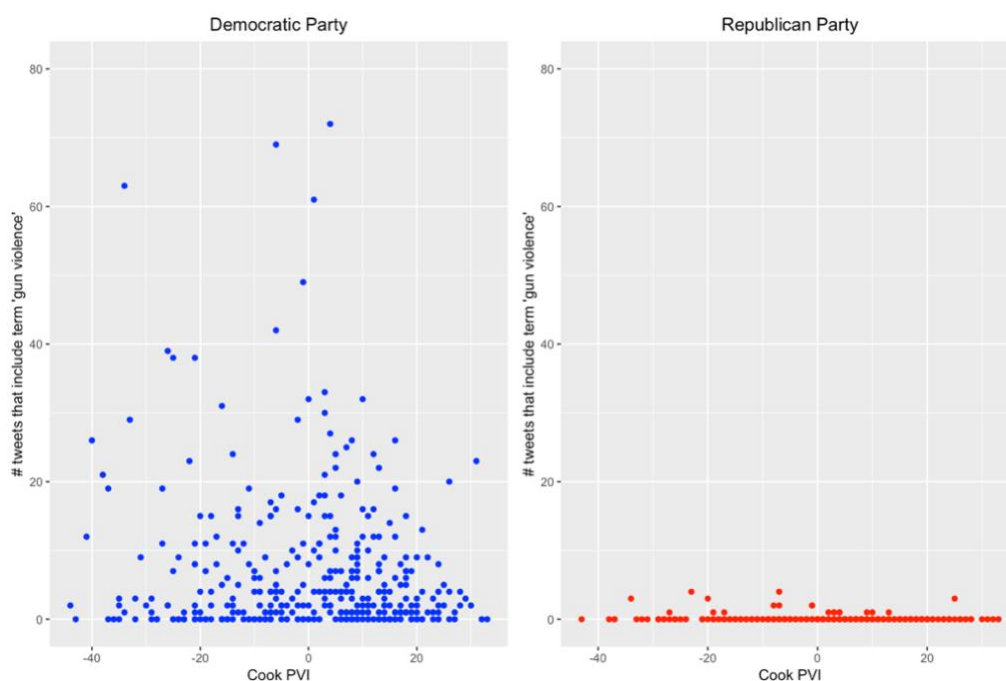


Democrats were far more likely than Republicans to discuss gun violence. Of the 2,574

tweets that included the term "gun violence",[6] essentially all of them – 99 percent (2,537) – were

sent by Democrats. The median Democrat used the term in three tweets, whereas the median

Republican did not use the term at all. Note, though, that some candidates were unusually vocal

on this issue. 31 Democrats used the term "gun violence" in more than 20 tweets. In fact, six

Democrats – Ayanna Pressley (D-MA), Debbie Mucarsel-Powell (D-FL), Harley Rouda (D-CA),

Jennifer Wexton (D-VA), Mike Levin (D-CA), and Theodore Deutch (D-FL) – used the term in

more than 40 tweets.

Democrats overwhelmingly agreed that gun violence was a huge problem in the United

States, even if they disagreed about potential solutions. As Mallory Hagan (D-AL) and Jim

Lagevin (D-RI) separately pointed out, over 30,000 Americans lose their lives to gun violence

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[6] Searched for (a) gunviolence, (b) gun violence, (c) Gun violence, and (d) Gun Violence.

each year. To both candidates, many of these deaths were potentially preventable if stronger gun control measures were in place. Other Democrats, such as Chintal Desai (D-AR), highlighted school shootings, arguing that Congress should "work to create a country where it's not necessary to have lockdown jingles posted in kindergarten classrooms." Elite opinion is consistent with popular opinion, as Democratic voters were also much more concerned than Republican voters about the threat of gun violence (Oliphant, 2017).

### 4.3.2.2 National Rifle Association
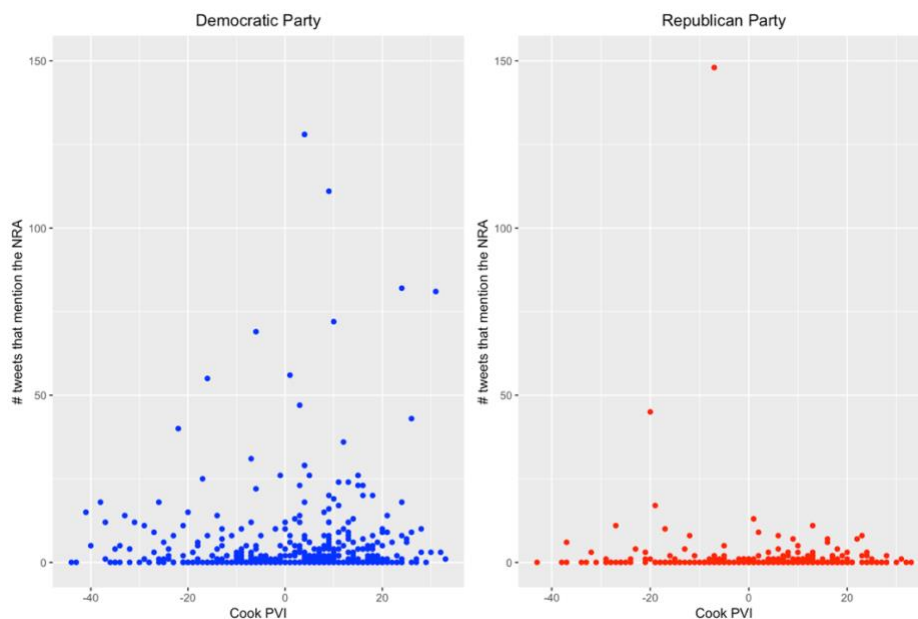


Democrats were more likely than Republicans to discuss the National Rifle Association. Of the 2,661 tweets that included the term "NRA"[7], a large majority – 83 percent (2,661) – were sent by Democrats while only 17 percent (444) were sent by Republicans. This result is surprising, given how delicately Democrats treaded on the issue of guns in past election cycles (McDaniel, 2018).

Another unexpected finding that most candidates barely tweeted about the NRA, given how much news coverage the organization received. The median Democrat only mentioned the

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[7] Searched for: (a) NRA, (b) National Rifle Association

NRA in a single tweet while the median Republican did not mention the organization at all. Rather, a few candidates from both candidates were unusually vocal on the issue. 24 Democrats and two Republicans mentioned the NRA in over 20 tweets. In fact, two Democrats – Harley Rouda (D-CA) and Julia Peacock (D-CA) – and one Republican – Janice Arnold-Jones (R-NM) – mentioned the NRA in over a hundred tweets.

Compared to in previous election cycles, Democrats were much more outspoken in opposing the NRA. Many candidates, such as Peter Joffrion (D-AL), refused to accept money from the NRA, claiming that "the people of this country wanted elected officials who protect them, not special interest groups." Others, such as Ann Kirkpatrick (D-AZ), expressed pride in earning a F rating from the NRA. Democrats also questioned the NRA's motives in opposing "even small reforms." Jared Huffman (D-CA) argued that their ultimate goal was not protecting Americans' constitutional rights but to "sell as many guns as possible." Democratic elite opinion is consistent with how most Democratic voters wanted to stand up to the NRA (Igielnik & Brown, 2017).

By contrast, most Republican candidates supported the NRA, a group they perceived as defending the Second Amendment. As Travis Wines (R-MI) put it: "I don't understand the beef with the @NRA. They are literally dedicating their entire existence to protect our rights." Whereas Democratic candidates flaunted F ratings from the NRA, Republican candidates such as Martha Roby (R-AL) and Mike Bost (R-IL) emphasized their endorsements from the group. In addition, Republicans questioned Democrats' assumption that the presence of weapons is to blame for gun violence. As Gerhard Gressmann (R-NC) argued: "Guns don't kill people… people who don't value life kill people!" Republican elite opinion is consistent with how most Republican voters supported the NRA (Igielnik & Brown, 2017).

*4.3.2.3 Second Amendment*
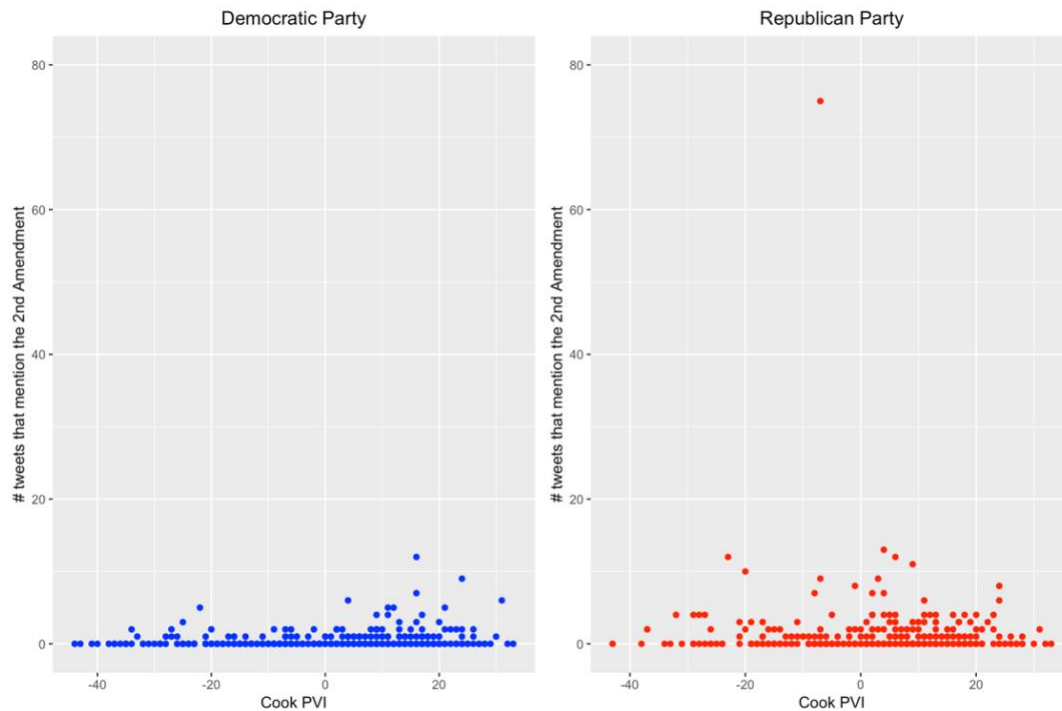


Republicans were more likely than Democrats to discuss the Second Amendment[8]. Of the 599 tweets that mentioned the amendment, 69 percent (414) were sent by Republicans while only 31 percent (185) were sent by Democrats. This discrepancy exists despite Democrats tweeting more overall.

One surprising finding is that most candidates hardly mentioned the amendment, if at all. The median Democrat and the median Republican did not mention the Second Amendment in a single tweet. In addition, only one Democrat and five Republicans mentioned the Second Amendment in over ten tweets. One candidate is a clear outlier: Janice Arnold-Jones (R-NM), who mentioned the Second Amendment in 75 tweets. One possible explanation for the lack of tweets is that the Second Amendment is a complicated topic that cannot be adequately expressed in 280-character tweets.

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[8] Searched for: (a) 2nd Amendment, (b) 2nd amendment, (c) second amendment, (d) Second Amendment.

Democratic candidates argued on Twitter that it was possible to pass gun control legislation while still honoring the Second Amendment. As Lee Ann Dugas (D-LA) put it: "I 100% support the 2nd Amendment. I am certain that the vast majority of other Democrats support it as well." However, there was internal disagreement over what gun control measures were permissible under the Second Amendment. Some candidates, such as Jim Himes (D-CT) and Vangie Williams (D-VA), advocated in favor of relatively moderate legislation, such as universal background checks. Others, such as Jared Huffman (D-CA), went further, arguing that an assault weapons ban was constitutional. However, many candidates, such as James Thompson (D-KS), disagreed with Huffman, claiming that the Supreme Court's *Heller* decision made such a ban unconstitutional.

In contrast, most Republicans took an absolutist position on the Second Amendment, arguing that few, if any, restrictions should be placed on Americans' gun rights. As Danny Tarkanian (R-NV) put it: "I don't support gun control. I fully support the 2nd Amendment. As upstanding citizens, we have the right to own guns. I'll protect that right and fight against attempts to water down or take away our rights." Elise Stefanik (R-NY) was even more blunt: "I support the 2nd Amendment. My opponent does not." Candidates such as Ross Spano (R-FL) also argued that guns ultimately made Americans safer when they were in the "hands of good people."

### 4.3.3 Healthcare

#### 4.3.3.1 Healthcare
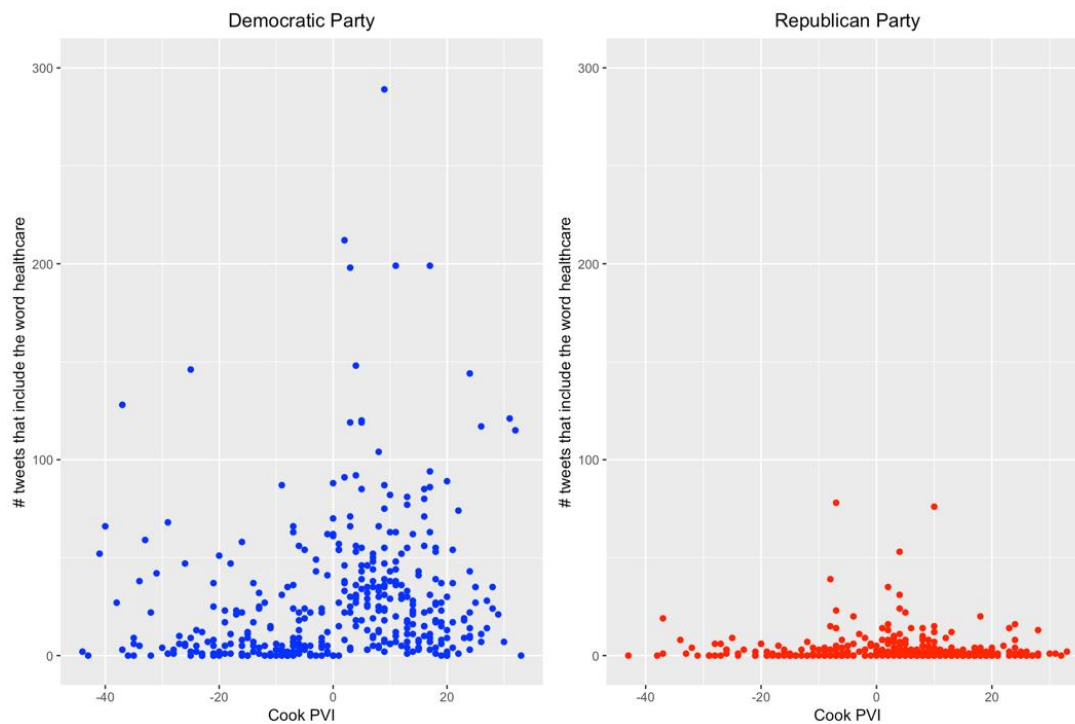


Between the two parties, Democrats were far more likely to tweet about healthcare. Of the 11,982 tweets that included the word "healthcare"[9], 90 percent (10,806) were sent by Democrats while only 10 percent (1,176) were sent by Republicans. The median Democrat used the word "healthcare" in 17 tweets, whereas the median Republican only used it in one tweet. The data provides strong evidence of a partisan intensity gap on the perceived importance of the issue, given that Democrats tweeted much more than Republicans about healthcare.

One caveat is that some candidates, mainly Democrats, used the word an unusually large number of times. 68 Democrats and three Republicans used the word "healthcare" in more than 50 tweets. In fact, five Democrats – Antonio Delgado (D-NY), Julie Oliver (D-TX), Liuba

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[9] Searched for a) healthcare, b) Healthcare, c) health care, d) HealthCare, e) Health Care, f) Health care.

Grechen Shirley (D-NY), Renee Hoagenson (D-MO), and Rob Davidson (D-MI) – used the word in more than 150 tweets.

Practically all Democratic candidates agreed with the assumption that healthcare is a basic right that everyone – including the poor and the chronically ill – should have access to. However, there was internal disagreement about which specific policies pursue. Some candidates, such as Joffrion (D-AL), advocated for bipartisan fixes to the Affordable Care Act. Others, such as Danner Kline (D-AL), said there should be a Medicare buy-in option at age 55. Some, such as David Brill (D-AZ), argued for a public option, a government-run health insurance plan to compete with private plans. The most progressive policy, advocated by candidates such as Ro Khanna (D-CA), was to implement a single-payer healthcare system, in which one entity collects all health care fees and pays for all healthcare costs" ("Single-payer system"). Khanna also questioned why universal healthcare is "too expensive for the United States, when every other industrialized country on earth can guarantee healthcare to every person."

In comparison, Republicans advocated for "free market" solutions to healthcare rooted in capitalism. As Michael Guest (R-MS) put it: "We need to find free market solutions that [give] people options to choose the type of healthcare services that best suit them." However, besides committing to free market solutions, candidates framed the issue of healthcare in a range of ways. Some, such as Debbie Lesko (R-AZ), focused on the shortcomings of single-payer healthcare. She claimed that a single-payer healthcare system would "cost American taxpayers an estimated $32 trillion while diminishing the quality of care they receive." Similarly, Tom McClintock (R-CA) attacked such a program as "one size fits all" and said that "families should have the right to choose whatever plan best suits them." Other candidates, such as Elise Stefanik

(R-NY), criticized the Affordable Care Act for failing to stop the rise of healthcare costs. A third approach was to stress bipartisanship. Stefanik (R-NY) emphasized her work in renewing the Children's Health Insurance Program for ten years. Steve Von Loor (R-NC) advocated for health savings accounts as a "bipartisan solution" to healthcare.

These results are not surprising for a couple of reasons. First, elite opinion is consistent with popular opinion. Democratic voters placed much more emphasis on healthcare as an issue and were also much more supportive than Republican voters of government intervention in the healthcare sector (Kiley, 2018). Second, healthcare was one of the main topics discussed in the dataset, which is consistent with the perceived importance of the issue in news coverage (Newport, "Top Issues", 2018).

*4.3.3.2 Affordable Care Act vs. ObamaCare*
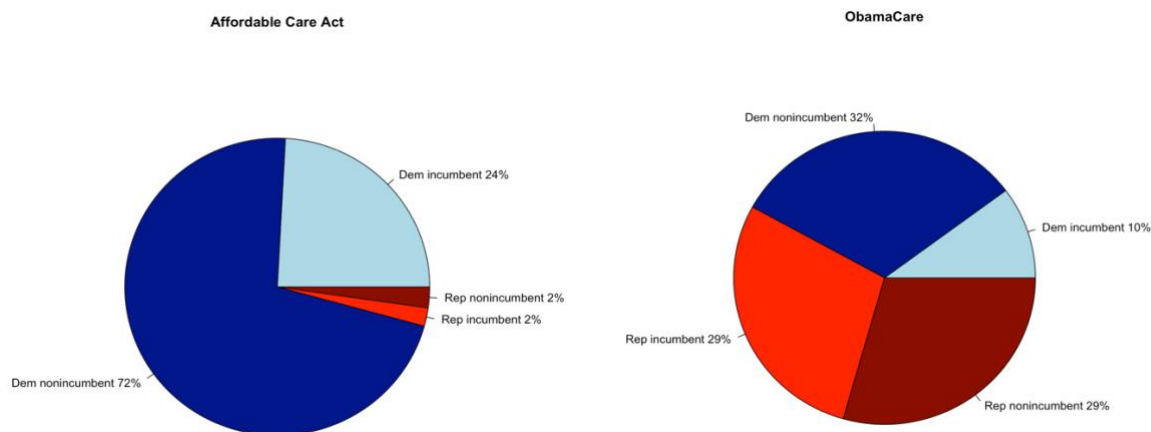


Democrats and Republicans used very different diction to describe the Affordable Care Act. Of the 1503 tweets that included the term "ACA"[10], an overwhelming majority – 96 percent (1439) – were sent by Democrats, while only four percent (64) were sent by Republicans. By comparison, 58 percent (217) of the 374 tweets that included the term "Obamacare"[11] were sent

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[10] Searched for: (a) Affordable Care Act, and (b) ACA. Excluded: (a) DACA, and (b) D.A.C.A.
[11] Searched for (a) ObamaCare, (b) Obamacare, and (c) Obama Care.

by Republicans, while only 42 percent (157) were sent by Democrats. These findings provide further evidence of language polarization between the two parties. In addition, the data suggest a partisan intensity gap, given how Democrats tweeted more than Republicans about the ACA.

Democratic candidates spoke positively of the Affordable Care Act, even as they acknowledged the need for bipartisan fixes. Peter Joffrion (D-AL) argued that Congress should work together to "stabilize programs for the exchanges, support Medicaid expansion, retain the individual mandate, and retain the cost-sharing subsidies." Democrats also emphasized how the ACA improved healthcare for millions of Americans. Raul Grijalva (D-AZ) stressed how the ACA led to "millions of people [being] able to get affordable health insurance for the first time." Grijalva (D-AZ) also claimed that patients "gained critical protections for things like pre-existing conditions." Democratic candidates also blasted Republicans for undermining the Affordable Care Act. For example, Grijalva (D-AZ) warned that "Trump's ACA sabotage could make insurance premiums spike by 90 percent over the next three years."

In comparison, Republicans were critical of the Affordable Care Act. Carlos Curbelo said that the ACA was designed to serve "big special interests" instead of patients. Elise Stefanik (R-NY) faulted the ACA for "mandated purchase, rising costs, increased deductibles, and decreasing choices." Joe Vitollo (R-NY) claimed that the ACA resulted in many Americans losing their doctors and their insurance plans.

Politicians of both parties argued that people with preexisting conditions should be able to get medical coverage. However, Democrats claimed that Republicans were being disingenuous by making this case. Ruben Gallego (D-AZ) said that "if you voted to repeal the ACA, you voted to take away protections for preexisting conditions." Similarly, Clarke Tucker (D-AR) claimed that the AHCA, a bill to partially repeal the Affordable Care Act, would have

"removed critical protections for people with preexisting conditions." In contrast, Republicans

such as John Faso (R-NY) argued that these attacks were misleading and motivated by politics.

### 4.3.3.3 Medicare and Medicaid
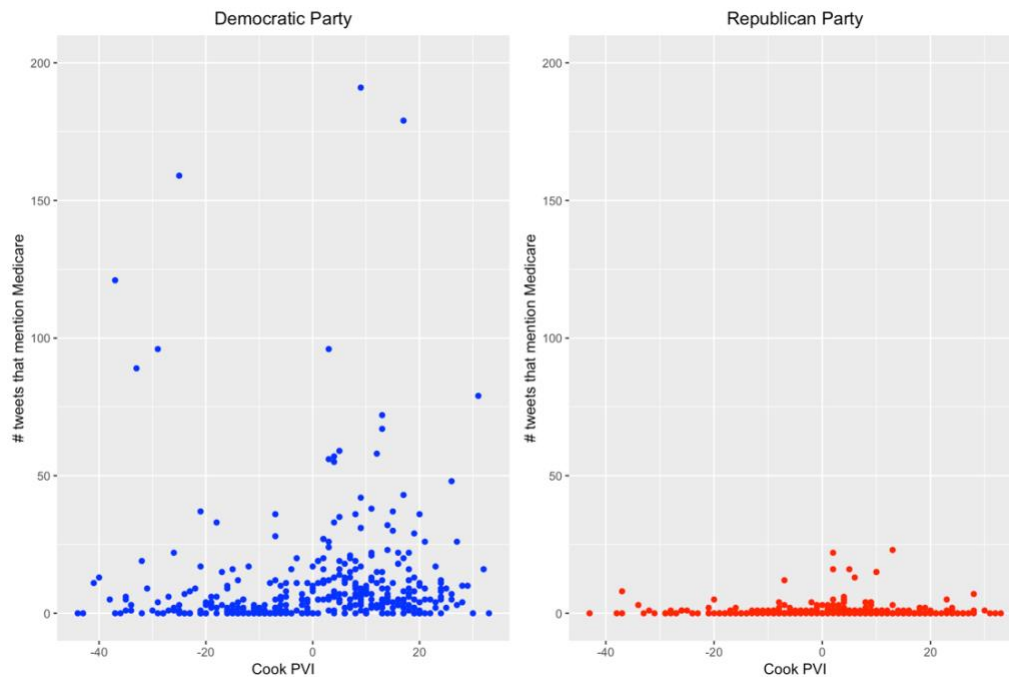


Democrats were also significantly more likely than Republicans to tweet about Medicare

and Medicaid. Of the 4,457 tweets that mentioned Medicare[12], 93 percent (4,135) were sent by

Democrats while only seven percent (322) were sent by Republicans. The median Democrat

mentioned Medicare in five tweets while the median Republican did not mention it at all,

evidence of a partisan intensity gap.

Note, though, that some candidates mentioned Medicare in an unusually large number of

tweets. 15 Democrats mentioned the federal program in over 50 tweets. In fact, four candidates –

Renee Hoagenson (D-MO), Ro Khanna (D-CA), Nancy Pelosi (D-CA), and Rob Davidson (D-

MI) – are clear outliers for mentioning Medicare in over a hundred tweets.

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[12] Searched for (a) Medicare, and (b) medicare.
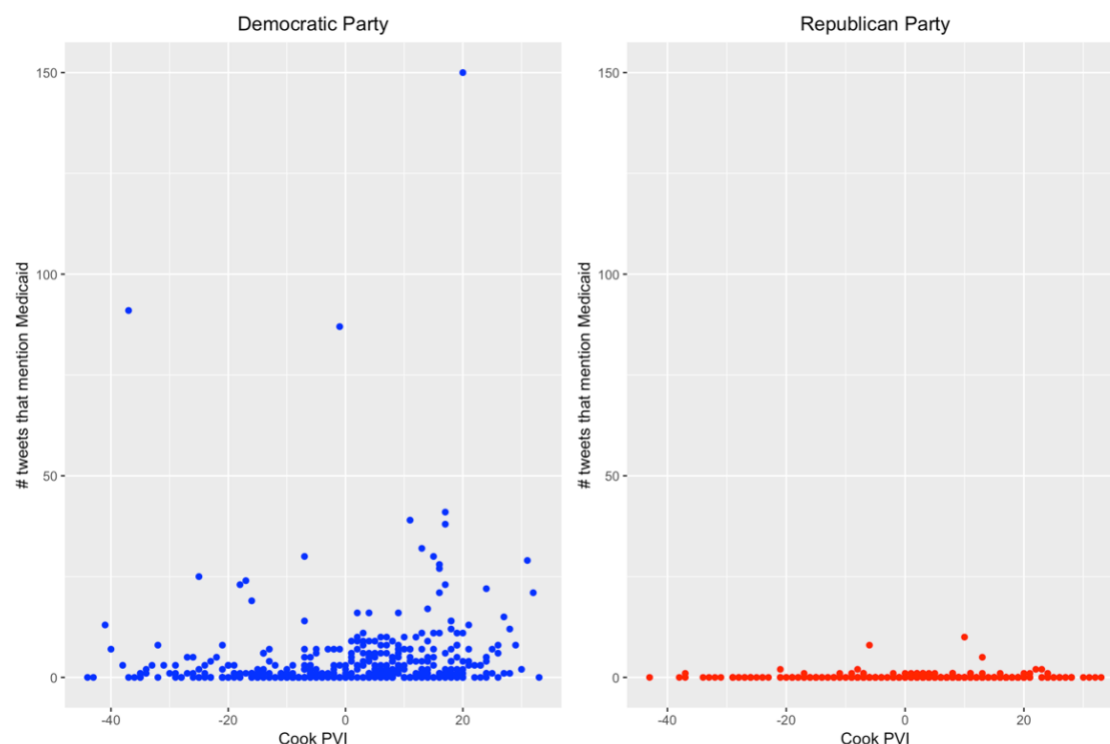
Of the 1,872 tweets that mentioned Medicaid[13], almost all – 97 percent (1816) – were

sent by Democrats while only three percent (56) were sent by Republicans. Once again, this

finding provides evidence of a partisan intensity gap in the perceived importance of the issue.

However, most candidates hardly discussed Medicaid on Twitter, regardless of their political

party. The median Democrat only mentioned Medicaid in a single tweet while the median

Republican did not mention it at all.

Another caveat is that some candidates talked about Medicaid in an unusually large

number of tweets, skewing results. For example, 19 Democrats mentioned the federal program in

over 20 tweets. In fact, four Democrats – Jennifer Wexton (D-VA), Justin Kanew (D-TN), Renee

Hoagenson (D-MO), and Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) – mentioned Medicaid in more than 40 tweets.

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[13] Searched for: a) Medicaid, and b) Medicaid.

### 4.3.4 Immigration

#### 4.3.4.1 Illegal immigrant vs. undocumented immigrant
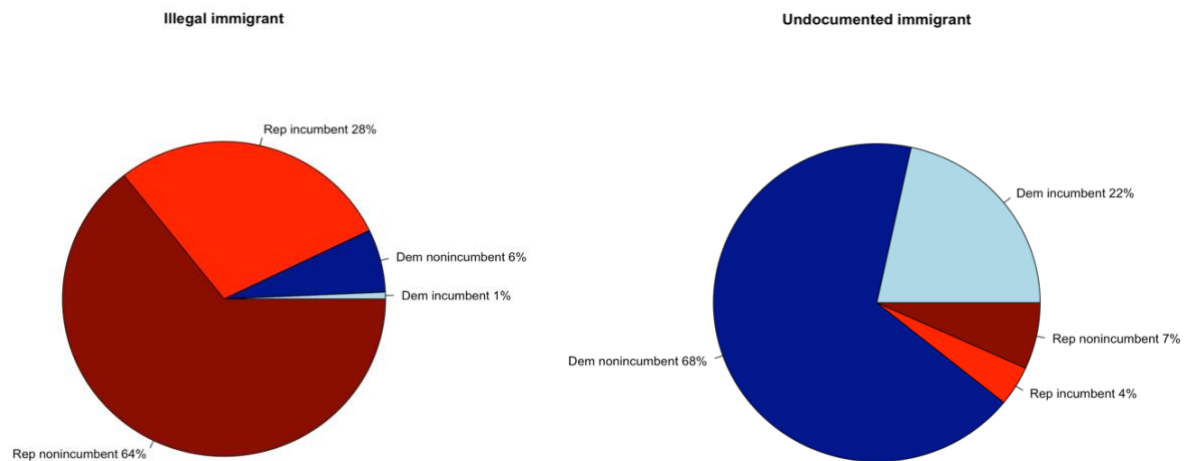


Democratic and Republican politicians used very different diction to describing immigrants unlawfully residing in the United States. Of the 432 tweets that included the term "illegal immigrant"[14], 93 percent (401) were sent by Republicans while only seven percent (31) were sent by Democrats. In comparison, 89 percent (66) of the 74 tweets that included the term "undocumented immigrant"[15] were sent by Democrats while only 11 percent (8) were sent by Republicans. These findings provide strong evidence of language polarization between the two parties.

Many Democrats argued that undocumented immigrants are not being treated with enough compassion. Gil Cisneros (D-CA) faulted Trump for "comparing undocumented immigrants to animals" and so showing a "blatant lack of empathy, understanding, and compassion." Ryan Watts (D-NC) claimed that the "idea that 'illegal immigrants' contribute to drugs/human trafficking is a bad stereotype and tactic to spread fear." Julia Peacock (D-CA)

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[14] Searched for: (a) illegal immigrant, (b) Illegal immigrant, (c) Illegal Immigrant, (d) illegals, and (e) Illegals.
[15] Searched for: (a) undocumented immigrant, (b) Undocumented immigrant, and (c) Undocumented Immigrant.

faulted Trump's family separation policy for being needlessly cruel. As she saw it, the migrants are "human beings fleeing violence and persecution" who should be treated with compassion. She went as far as accusing the Trump administration of "committing crimes against humanity." As section 3.2.4 illustrates, Democratic elite opinion is consistent with Democratic popular opinion. Most Democratic voters also wanted the federal government to treat undocumented immigrants with more compassion ("Little Partisan Agreement", 2018).

In comparison, the average Republican took a much more hardline stance on immigration. Omar Navarro (R-CA) stated that illegal immigrants are a financial drain, costing the state of California tens of millions of dollars. Gerhard Gressman (R-SC) argued that illegal immigrants pose a safety risk to American citizens, as they commit thousands of assaults, murders, rapes, and robberies each year. Peter G. Olson (R-TX) claimed that illegal immigrants are committing voter fraud. In fact, some candidates went so far as to accuse their opponents of caring more about "illegals" than about native-born Americans. For example, John Fitzgerald (R-CA) tweeted to his opponent: "Unlike you, I will fight for the legal citizens of America by stopping the unabated flow of illegal immigrants into the U.S." As section 3.2.4 illustrates, Republican elite opinion is consistent with Republican popular opinion. Most Republican voters also considered illegal immigration to be a very big problem ("Little Partisan Agreement", 2018).

*4.3.4.2 DACA and DREAMers*
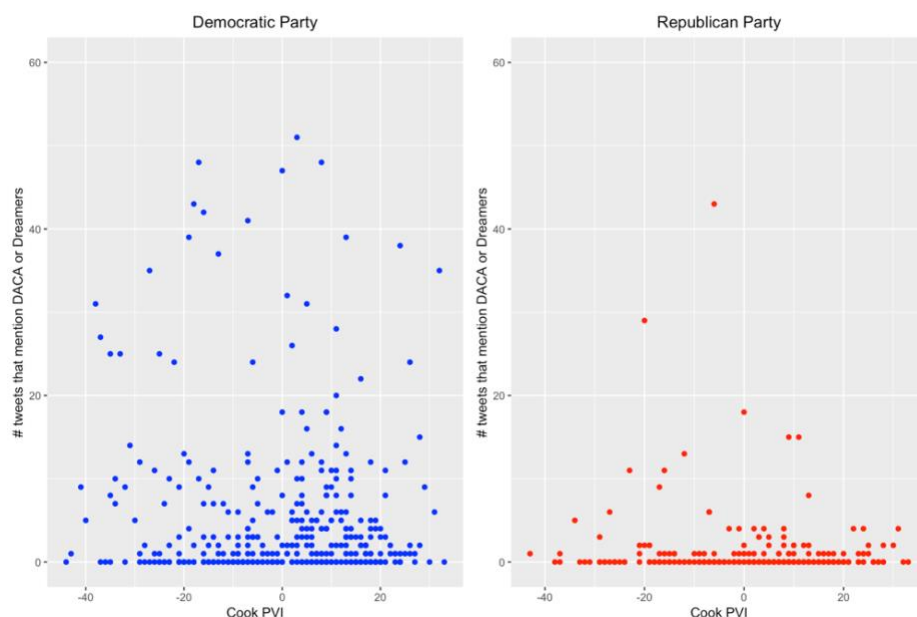


Democrats were much more likely to discuss DREAMers. Of the 1,912 tweets that include either the words "DREAMer" or "DACA"[16], a large majority – 86 percent (1969) – were sent by Democrats while only 14 percent (314) were sent by Republicans, providing evidence of an intensity gap on the perceived importance of the issue.

One surprising finding, though, is that most candidates hardly discussed the issue, given how much news coverage DACA received. The median Democrat only sent one tweet that included the words DREAMer or DACA; the median Republican sent no tweets with one of those two words. However, a few candidates, almost all Democrats, were unusually vocal about the DREAMers. 26 Democrats and two Republicans used either the term Dreamer or DACA in more than 20 tweets. In fact, seven Democrats – Debra Haaland (D-NM), Grace Meng (D-NY), Jan Schakowsky (D-IL), Josh Harder (D-CA), Katie Porter (D-CA), Lisa Brown (D-WA), and

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[16] Searched for: (a) Dreamer, (b) dreamer, (c) DREAMer, and (d) DACA.

Veronica Escobar (D-TX) – and one Republican – Carlos Curbelo (R-FL) – used either the term

DREAMer or DACA in over 40 tweets.

There was a consensus among Democrats that DREAMers needed to be protected. As Ian

Todd (D-MN) said: "Dreamers are people are living in the only home they've ever known. It

would be beyond cruel to deport them." Many candidates, such as Raul Grijalva (D-AZ), argued

that the "crisis" was ultimately President Trump's fault, as he terminated the DACA program in

September 2017. Others, such as Andrew Janz (D-CA) and John Michael Galbraith (D-OH),

advocated for a "Clean Dream Act", which would grant legal status to DREAMers.

In contrast, Republicans were divided on the issue of DREAMers. Some candidates, such

as Jeff Denham (R-CA), advocated for immigration reform, which would strengthen border

security but also "provide [a] permanent fix for dreamers." Others, such as Steve King (R-IA),

called DACA "amnesty" and said that "no civilized nation should be held hostage to amnesty as

a requirement to secure its border." In fact, some candidates, such as Steve Von Loor (R-NC),

blasted their opponents for "[choosing] DACA recipients over [their] constituents."

*4.3.4.3 Family Separation*
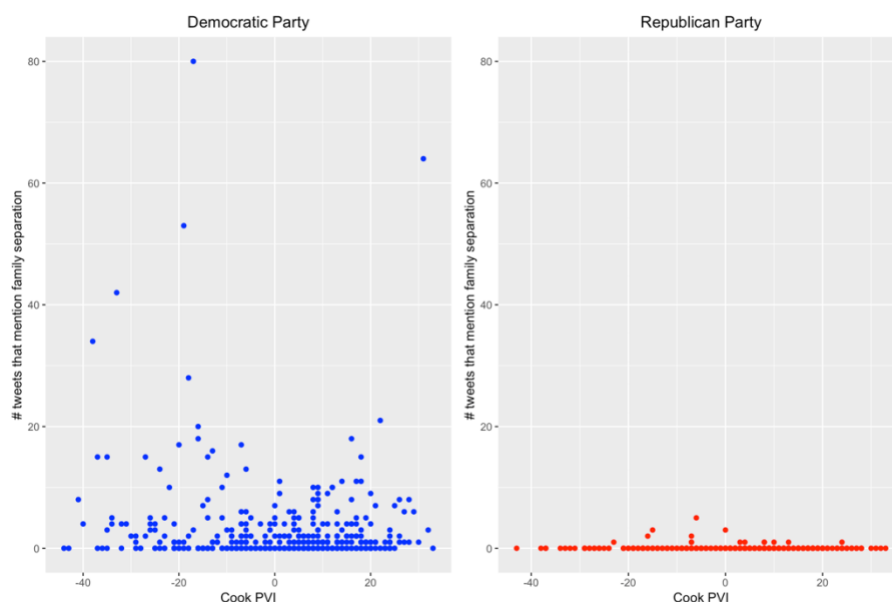
Democrats were much more likely to discuss family separation. Of the 1,523 tweets that mention the issue[17], almost all – 97 percent (1,482) – were sent by Democrats, while only three percent (41) were sent by Republicans. Even more so than in the DACA example, the family separation results provide evidence of a partisan intensity gap.

One caveat is that most candidates of both parties barely discussed family separation. The median Democrat only mentioned it in one tweet and the median Republican mentioned it in none. The lack of tweets about family separation is surprising, given how news coverage of the Trump administration's policy raised the salience of immigration as an issue. As already discussed, only 14 percent of Americans saw immigration as the nation's top issue in June 2018 (Newport, "Immigration Surges", 2018). In July 2018, by contrast, a much larger share – 22 percent – saw it as the nation's top issue (Newport, "Immigration Surges", 2018).

A few candidates were unusually vocal about family separation. 25 candidates, all Democrats, mentioned family separation in more than ten tweets. In fact, seven candidates – Jennifer Zimmerman (D-FL), Jan Schakowsky (D-IL), Josh McCall (D-GA), Pramila Jayapal (D-WA), Nydia Velazquez (D-NY), Sylvia Garcia (D-TX), and Veronica Escobar (D-TX) – mentioned it in more than 20 tweets.

Democrats were unanimously opposed to President Trump's family separation policy. Mallory Hagan (D-AL) said what he was "committing against innocent children [was] nothing short of child abuse." Ro Khanna (D-CA) blasted the "brutality and inhumanity" of the policy. Ted Lieu (D-CA) argued that family separation was "inconsistent with the teachings of Jesus Christ." In addition, candidates suggested that Trump was using the children as "pawns." As

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[17] Searched for (a) family separation, (b) familyseparation, (c) Family separation, (d) Family Separation, (e) FamiliesBelongTogether, (f) FamiliasUnidas, (g) ReuniteFamilies, (h) separating children, (i) Separating children, (j) separating families, (k) Separating families, and (l) Separating Families.

Ruben Gallego (D-AZ) put it, children were being used as "leverage to get Democrats and others in Congress to vote for a border wall." Democratic elite opinion is consistent with how 91 percent of Democratic voters opposed the policy (Matthews, 2018).

In comparison, the few Republicans who tweeted about family separation were split on the issue. Some joined Democrats in condemning the policy. Carlos Curbelo (R-FL) called the policy "reckless", and said that Congress' priority should be "dealing with this in a comprehensive way" and "showing kindness." Roger Marshall (R-KS) described family separations at the border as a "terrible situation." By contrast, others questioned Democrats' credibility on the issue. According to Jeffrey Anthony Dove Jr. (R-VA), Democrats "knew family separations were happening for years" and yet his opponent did not "say or do anything about it." Renee Zeno (R-NY) claimed that the news about family separation was "misinformation" and that the Trump administration "did not create a policy of separating families at the border." Gerhard Gressmann (R-SC) claimed that Democrats originally created the family separation policy but did not "like their own law" and so blamed Republicans. The split in Republican elite opinion is consistent with how Republican voters were also divided on the issue. According to one poll, 46 percent approved of family separation, whereas 32 opposed it (Matthews, 2018).

## 4.3.4.4 Trump's Wall
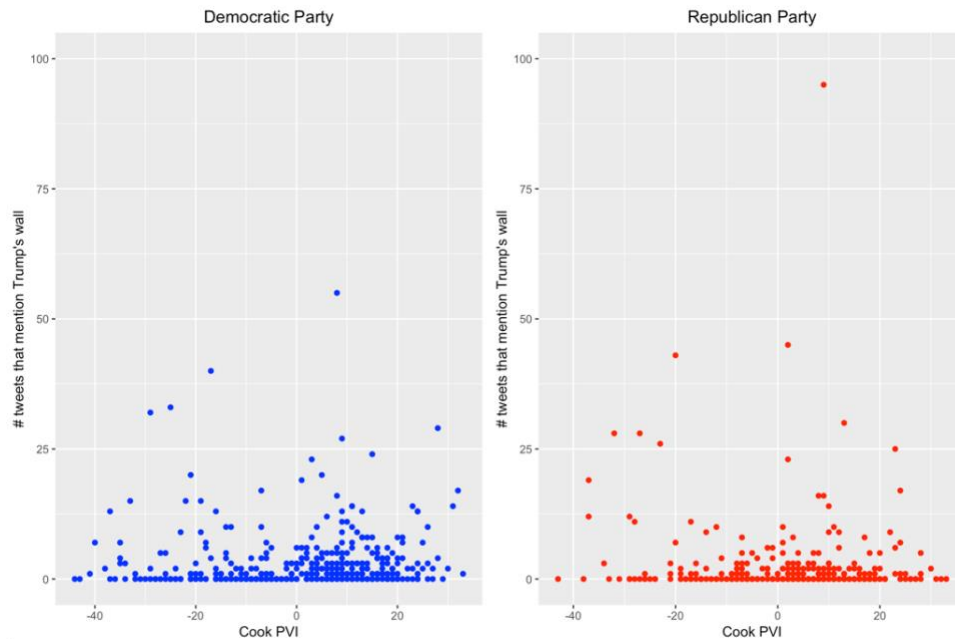


Democrats were slightly more likely than Republicans to discuss Trump's wall. Of the 2,043 tweets that mention the issue[18], 61 percent (1,241) were sent by Democrats while 39 percent (802) were sent by Republicans.

However, most candidates of both parties hardly mentioned Trump's wall. The median Democrat only mentioned it in one tweet and the median Republican mentioned it in none. These findings are surprising, given how Trump's proposed border wall was one of the key parts of his 2016 presidential campaign (Trump, 2015). However, a few candidates were unusually vocal about Trump's wall. Eight Democrats and nine Republicans mentioned the wall in more than 20 tweets. In fact, two candidates – Lisa Brown (D-WA) and Tim Donnelly (R-CA) – mentioned it in over 50 tweets.

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[18] Searched for: (a) wall, (b) Wall, and (c) WALL. Excluded: (a) wallpaper, (b) Wallpaper, (c) firewall, (d) Firewall, (e) wallet, (f) Wallet, (g) swallow, (h) Swallow, (i) wallace, (j) Wallace, (k) stonewall, (l) Stonewall, (m) drywall, (n) Drywall, (o) wallow, and (p) Wallow.

Most Democrats were opposed Trump's border wall proposal. Tabitha Isner (D-AL) described it as "an irresponsible use of […] money", her justification being that two-thirds of undocumented people enter the United States with a visa. Raul Grijalva (D-AZ) claimed that a wall along the U.S.-Mexico border would "irreparably damage delicate ecosystems and border communities." He also called the Trump administration's "attempt to use DREAMers as 'leverage' to build a border wall disgusting." Mike Levin (D-CA) accused President of hypocrisy, as the President went from saying Mexico would pay for the wall to saying that taxpayers would. Flynn Broady Jr. (D-GA) said that "the thought of building a wall only our southern border speaks to racism" and appeals to Trump's base. Elite opinion is consistent with popular opinion, given that Democratic voters were strongly opposed to Trump's border wall (Newport, "Border Walls", 2018).

In comparison, most Republicans supported Trump's proposal. Rick Crawford (R-AR) said that the wall would "keep our borders secure" from international drug cartels. Johnny Nalbandian argued that "constructing a wall [was] an imperative step to protect [American] sovereignty." Steve King (R-IA) claimed that border security was necessary to protect the United States from an "invasion" of migrants. Some candidates also accused Democrats of flip-flopping on the issue of the wall. For example, Kevin Yoder (R-KS) claimed that Senate Minority Leader was "for border security before he was against it." Elite opinion is consistent with popular opinion, as most Republican voters also supported Trump's border wall (Newport, "Border Walls", 2018).

## 4.3.5 Russia

### 4.3.5.1 Putin or Russia
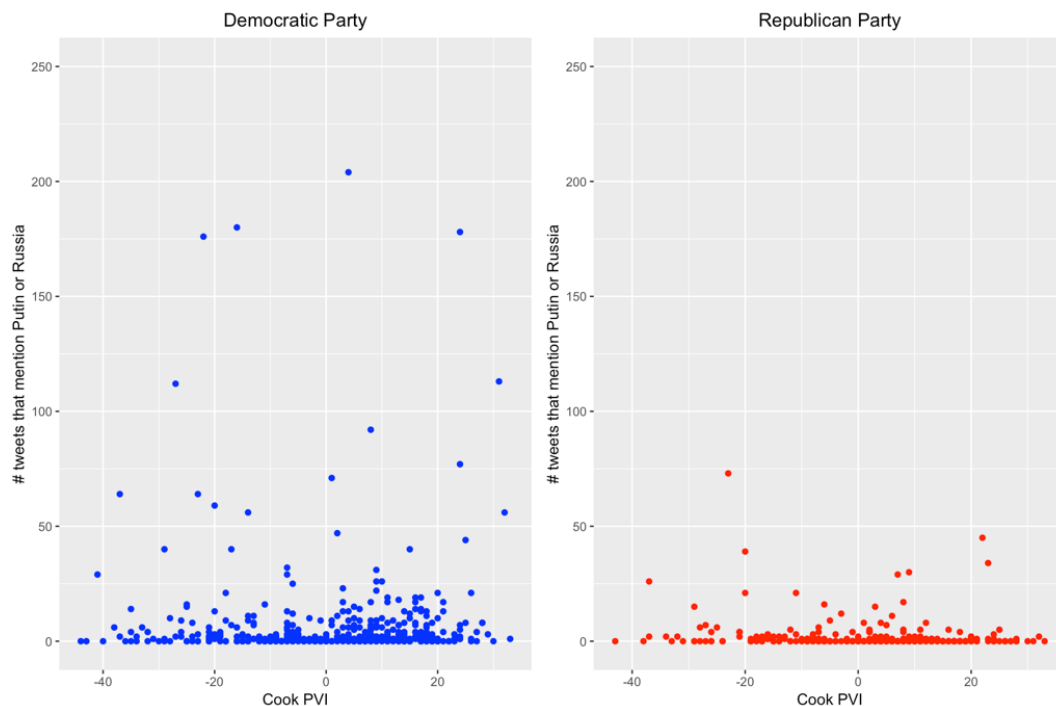


Democrats were far more likely than Republicans to discuss the issue of Russia. Of the 3,818 tweets that include either the words "Putin" or "Russia"[19], most – 3,183 (83 percent) – were sent by Democrats and only 635 (17 percent) were sent by Republicans. The partisan intensity gap on the perceived importance of this issue is not surprising, given that Democratic campaigns, such as Hillary Clinton's, were targeted by Russia in the 2016 cycle. By comparison, Russia posed much less of a risk to Republican campaigns.

However, most candidates barely discussed Russia. The median Democrat only sent two tweets that included the words "Putin" or "Russia", and the median Republican sent no tweets including one of those words. This finding is surprising, as Russian interference in the 2016 election was often a front-page story in newspapers (Lawler, 2017). In other words, there appears

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[19] Searched for: (a) "Putin", (b) "putin", (c) "Russia", (d) "russia", (e) "Russian", and (f) "russian".

to have been a disconnect between how important the mainstream media considered the Russia story and how important the average politician considered it.

A few candidates, mostly Democrats, were unusually vocal about the issue of Russia. 62 Democrats and 15 Republicans used either the term "Putin" or "Russia" in more than 10 tweets. In fact, six Democrats – Harley Rouda (D-CA), Sheila Jackson Lee (D-TX), Jared Huffman (D-CA), Lee Ann Dugas (D-LA), Josh McCall (D-GA), and Ted Lieu (D-CA) – used one of the two terms in over a hundred tweets.

Democratic candidates argued that Russia must be held accountable for interfering in the 2016 election. In addition, Democrats had a broad consensus that Special Counsel Robert Mueller's investigation into Russian interference should be unimpeded. Several candidates, including current House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, also expressed concern about Russia meddling in the 2018 midterms. Pelosi said it was "insane" that Russians "[refused] to strengthen… states' [election] systems that could be vulnerable to Russian attacks." Elite opinion is consistent with popular opinion, as Democratic voters also expressed concern about Russian interference in the 2018 midterms (Kirby, 2018).

In comparison, Republican candidates were more split on the issue of Russia. Among the candidates who tweeted about the issue, the majority viewed the Mueller investigation with skepticism. Johnny Nalbandian (R-CA) argued that Democrats were "wasting millions… of taxpayer dollars on a useless, baseless Russia investigation" with the ultimate goal of impeaching President Trump. Devin Nunes claimed that the "Clinton machine [was] spreading disinformation to continue Russia conspiracy theories." Tim Donnelly (R-CA) even tweeted that there was a "better chance of Mueller ending up in jail than of [Trump] being impeached on account of Russia collusion." Other Republicans, meanwhile, were vocally opposed to Trump's

Russia policy. Carlos Curbelo (R-FL) said that "any effort to undermine the Special Counsel's investigation into Russian efforts to interfere with [American] elections [was] unacceptable." Elise Stefanik (R-NY) tweeted that "Russia is an adversary" and that United States "must continue to work with [its] allies to counter Russia's influence around the world." If anything, Republican elites were more divided than Republican voters on the issue of Russia, most of whom expressed skepticism about the impartiality and usefulness of the Mueller investigation (Kirby, 2018).

### 4.3.6 Supreme Court

#### 4.3.6.1 Brett Kavanaugh
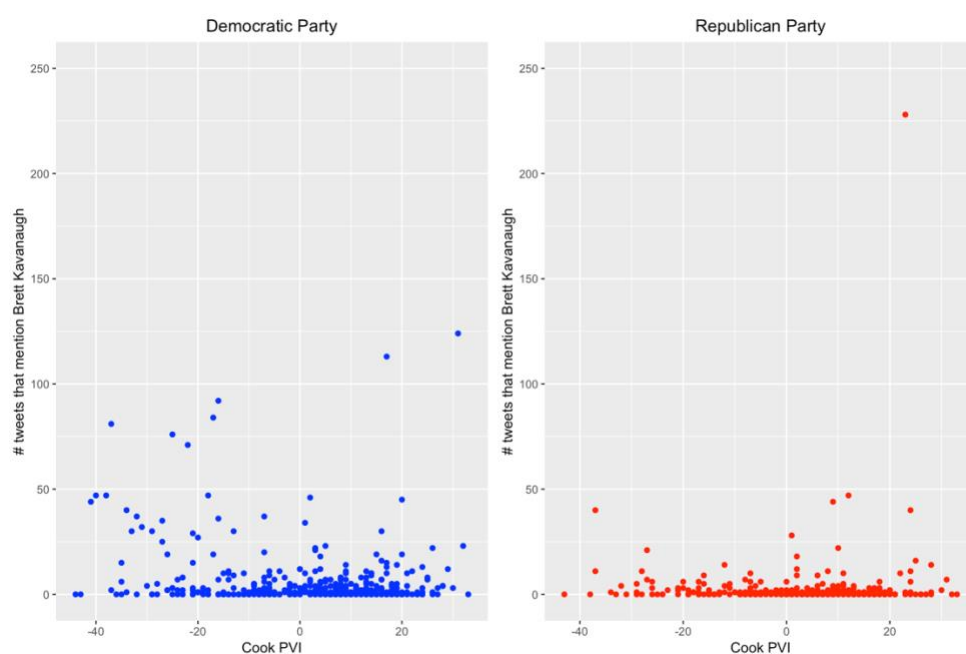


Democrats were more likely than Republicans to mention Brett Kavanaugh on Twitter. Of the 3,424 tweets that include the word "Kavanaugh"[20], 73 percent (2,486) were sent by Democrats while only 27 percent (938) were sent by Republicans.

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[20] Searched for (a) Kavanaugh, and (b) kavanaugh.

However, most candidates hardly talked about the Supreme Court nominee at all. The median Democrat only mentioned him in two tweets, and the median Republican mentioned him in zero. These results are surprising, given how heated the Kavanaugh hearings became and how much news coverage they received (Stolberg & Fandos, 2018). Another finding is that some candidates discussed Kavanaugh an unusually large number of times, skewing results. For example, 32 Democrats and eight Republicans used the term "Kavanaugh" in more than 20 tweets. In fact, two Democrats – Josh McCall (D-GA) and Renee Hoagenson (D-MO) – and one Republican – Billy Long (R-MO) – used the term "Kavanaugh" in over a hundred tweets. One possibility as to why most candidates stayed away from the topic may be that the hearing was a complex topic that could not be adequately explained in 280-characters. Another possibility is that there might not have been much political gain in criticizing a Supreme Court nominee.

Democratic candidates were largely opposed to Kavanaugh's nomination to the Supreme Court, one reason being his conservative judicial record. As current House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) put it: "With a SCOTUS nominee threatening to undo decades of progress and do away with some of our most fundamental rights, the need to continue the movement that won us the right to vote 80 years ago could not be clearer or more pressing." A second, more frequently cited, reason was sexual assault allegations against him. Sara Dady (D-IL) cited this as a reason why "the GOP can't hear women" and why Kavanaugh's appointment would bring a "tarnish" to the Supreme Court. A third reason was Kavanaugh's fiery temperament during his confirmation hearing. David Brill (D-AZ) said that the nominee's "behavior at the hearings was unprofessional and not someone who should be a [Supreme] Court justice." Elite opinion is consistent with popular opinion, as Democratic voters also opposed Kavanaugh's confirmation ("Marist Poll", 2018).

In comparison, nearly all Republican candidates supported Kavanaugh's nomination. Martha Roby (R-AL) summed up the consensus when she said: "Judge Kavanaugh is an excellent choice for the Supreme Court. He is a qualified, conservative jurist who I believe will serve the American people with dignity." In contrast to Democrats, Republicans argued that the sexual assault allegations against Kavanaugh were unfair. Wendy Rogers (R-AZ) argued that the Democrats were playing a "high level con game in their vicious effort to destroy a fine person." Cristina Osmena (R-CA) questioned whether Democrats believed in due process, given that the allegations against Kavanaugh were unproven. Lisa Remmer (R-CA) said that Democrats would "do anything to get back into power, and use the demagogue, lying, smear tactics to stir up their mob." Elite opinion is consistent with popular opinion, as Republican voters also supported Kavanaugh's confirmation ("Marist Poll", 2018).

### 4.3.6.2 Christine Blasey Ford
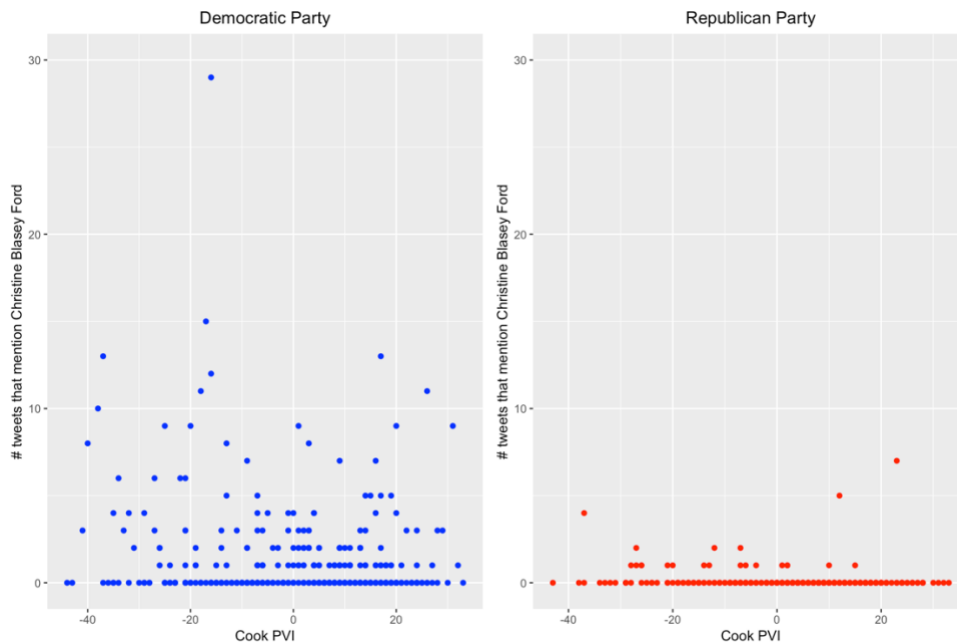
Democrats were considerably more likely than Republicans to mention Christine Blasey Ford. Of the 515 tweets that directly reference her[21], 93 percent (477) were sent by Democrats while only seven percent (38) were sent by Republicans.

Note, though, that most candidates hardly talked about Ford on Twitter. Only seven Democrats – Dayna Steele (D-TX), Grace Meng (D-NY), Jan Schakowsky (D-IL), Renee Hoagenson (D-MO), Nancy Pelosi (D-CA), Ted Lieu (D-CA), and Veronica Escobar (D-TX) – and no Republicans said her name more than 10 times. In fact, the median Democrat and the median Republican did not say her name on Twitter a single time. Again, the lack of tweets is surprising, given how much media coverage the Kavanaugh hearings received.

Overall, Democrats believed Ford's allegations of sexual assault. Mallory Hagan (D-AL) described her as "credible and courageous." Barbara Lee (D-CA) said that "survivors should be heard, believed, and be given justice and respect." Josh McCall said that Ford had "[sacrificed] her privacy and her safety to tell the truth."

In comparison, Republicans were divided by how much Ford was telling the truth. Some, such as Cristina Osmena (R-CA), described her as "likable and trustworthy" but said the same was also true of Kavanaugh. Osmena speculated that Ford was experiencing a false memory and that someone besides Kavanaugh was responsible for the sexual assault. Other candidates, though, were skeptical that her story was credible at all. Charlotte Bergmann (R-TN) said that the holes in Ford's story were "glaring." Ron Bassilian (R-CA) questioned Ford's character by calling her an "anti-Trump leftist who participated in the Women's March and donated to the DNC." In his view, attempts to delay Kavanaugh's nomination looked "increasingly like a
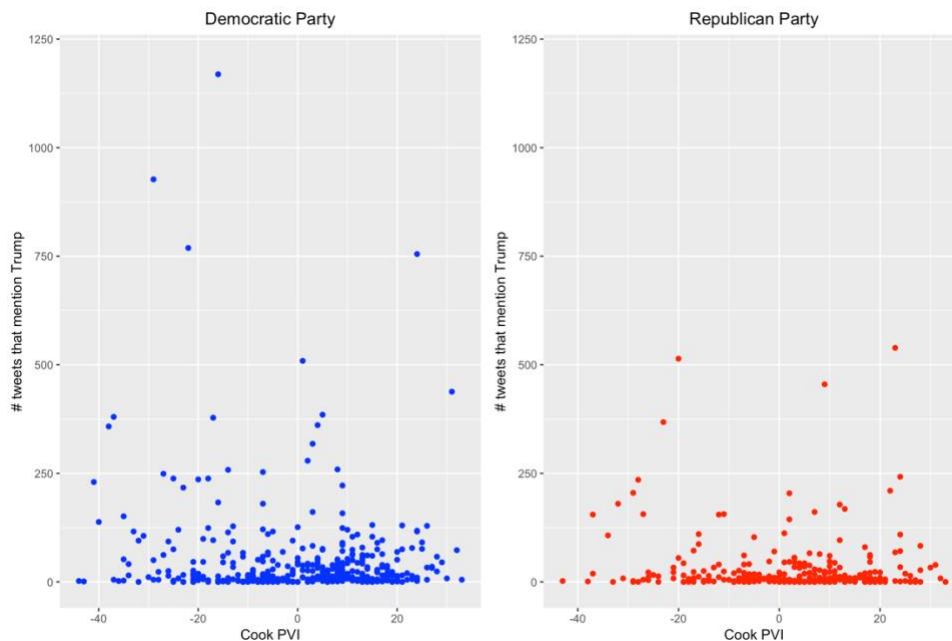
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[21] Searched for (a) Dr. Ford, (b) Christine Ford, and (c) Christine Blasey Ford.

desperate political ploy." Joe Vitollo (R-NY) called the allegations an "isolated, unsubstantiated story."

### 4.3.7 The Trump Presidency

#### *4.3.7.1 Donald Trump*



Democrats were more likely than Republicans to mention Donald Trump. Of the 29,043 tweets that either say "Trump" or "POTUS"[22], 70 percent (20,341) were sent by Democrats while 30 percent (8,702) were sent by Republicans. The median Democrat mentioned Trump in 16 tweets, while the median Republican only mentioned him in six tweets. These findings are not surprising, given Trump's unpopularity. As already discussed, the President's net approval was nearly 10 points underwater throughout all of 2018 ("How popular is Donald Trump", 2018). As a result, Republicans, especially those running in swing districts, may have been wary of mentioning Trump's name.

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[22] Searched for (a) Trump, (b) trump, and (c) POTUS. Note that the search results did not include the word "President", as many of the results would have been about other individuals besides Donald Trump.

One caveat is that some candidates of both parties tweeted about Trump an unusually large number of times, skewing results. 49 Democrats and 23 Republicans said either "Trump" or "POTUS" in over a hundred tweets. In fact, five Democrats – Jared Huffman (D-CA), Lee Ann Dugas (D-LA), Maxine Waters (D-CA), Mike Levin (D-CA), and Ted Lieu (D-CA) – and two Republicans – Billy Long (R-MO) and Gerhard Gressmann (R-SC) – said either "Trump" or "POTUS" in over *five hundred* tweets.

Democratic candidates presented their party as a check on the executive branch. As Mallory Hagan (D-AL) put it: "Democrats must flip 23 seats to take back the House and hold Trump accountable." Another common argument is that Trump and his cabinet were abusing their power. As Raul Grijalva (D-AZ) argued: "Trump's cabinet has a concerning penchant for wasting taxpayer money on their own luxurious lifestyles, only to turn around and demand cuts to programs that help people." Grijalva also claimed that the Trump presidency was a "corrupt exercise in making the Trump family very rich." A third argument, raised by Grijalva, is that Trump had poor moral character. Not only did Trump have authoritarian tendencies, but "racism [was] engrained in his character." Elite opinion is consistent with popular opinion, as Democratic voters also held very negative views on the President.

In comparison, Republican candidates cast the Trump presidency in a positive light. Andy Biggs (R-AZ) argued that Trump's "agenda of strong borders, free-market healthcare, lower taxes [and] regulations, and a superior military force [would] #MAGA." Martha Roby (R-AL) claimed that the Trump administration had delivered "meaningful results for Americans" over the past two years. Another argument, raised by Roby, is that Trump was an outsider "[willing] to shake things up in Washington" and "step over entrenched partisan lines." Johnny Nalbandian (R-CA) said that Trump was the "only President willing to fight off […] corrupt

establishment politicians" who put "big money backers" first and the American people last. Elite

opinion is consistent with popular opinion, as most Republican voters supported the President.

### 4.3.7.2 Impeachment
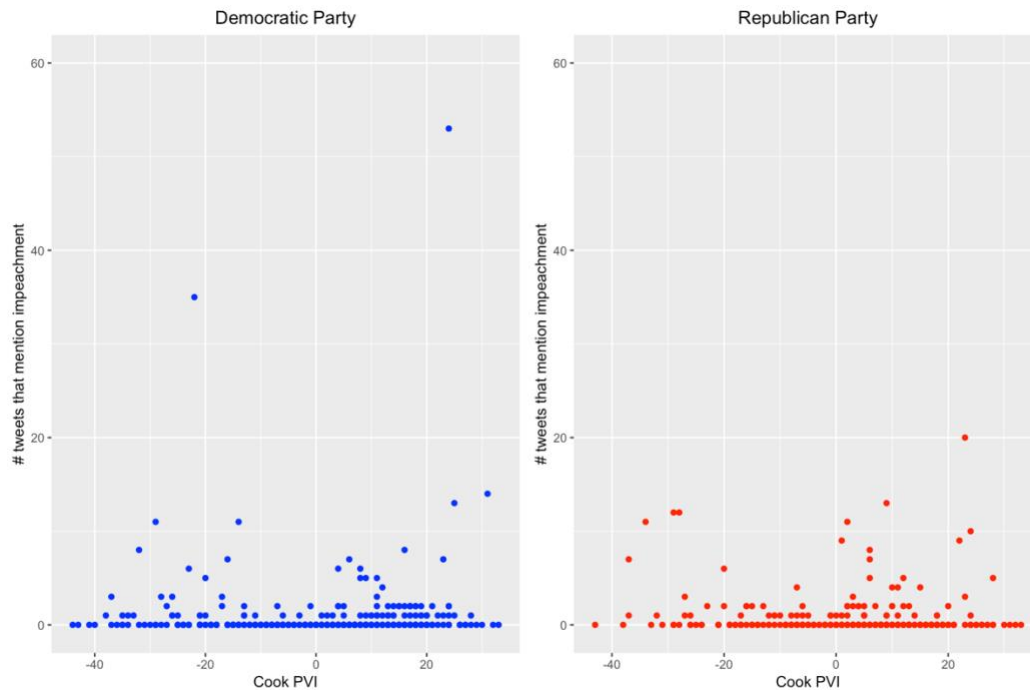


Democrats were slightly more likely than Republicans to mention impeachment. Of the

563 tweets that include the word "impeach"[23], 57 percent (322) were sent by Democrats while 43

percent (241) were sent by Republicans. One caveat is that most candidates hardly talked about

impeachment, if at all. The median Democrat and the median Republican did not include the

word "impeach" in a single tweet. In fact, only two candidates – Jared Huffman (D-CA) and Lee

Ann Dugas (D-LA) – used the word "impeach" in more than 30 tweets.

Democratic candidates were divided over what grounds to impeach President Trump.

Some, such as Julia Peacock (D-CA), advocated impeaching Trump as well as Vice President

Mike Pence as soon as Democrats retook the House of Representatives. Similarly, James

Thompson (D-KS) argued that Trump could already be impeached on the grounds of corruption

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[23] Searched for: (a) impeach, (b) Impeach, and (c) IMPEACH

and abuse of power. Other candidates, though, were much more cautious when making recommendations about impeachment. Lee Ann Dugas (D-CA) promised to introduce an article of impeachment if Trump fired Rod Rosenstein, the Deputy Attorney General. Ruben Gallego (D-AZ) considered firing Special Counsel Robert Mueller an impeachable offense. Sean Carrigan (D-SC) said that Congress should impeach Trump if he "[dared] to pardon himself."

In short, Democratic politicians tended to be cautious when discussing impeachment on Twitter, qualifying their statements or avoiding the topic altogether. They were considerably less enthusiastic than Democratic voters about wanting to impeach Trump. According to a Quinnipiac poll from April 2018, 71 percent of Democratic politicians supported impeaching the President, versus only 38 percent of the public as a whole ("U.S. Voters Believe Comey", 2018). One reason for politicians' relative caution is that they feared the impeachment would be a political loser. Not only did impeachment poll poorly among the general public but it might be impossible to carry out (Prokop, "Impeachment", 2019). As Prokop (2019, "Impeachment") explains, even if the House approved impeachment, about 20 Senate Republican votes would be required to actually remove Trump from office, which would not happen unless "damning new information emerged."

Similarly, most Republican politicians barely discussed impeachment on Twitter, if at all. However, a few candidates tried to use the threat of impeachment to fire up their base to vote. Ron Bassilian (D-CA) cautioned that Democrats would impeach Trump on day one if they retook the House. Billy Long (R-MO) said that Democrats would do "everything in their power to impeach Kavanaugh from the Supreme Court if they [took] control of Congress in November." For this reason, both candidates said it was imperative for Republicans to vote on Election Day.

## 4.4 Discussion

Section 4.2 (Basic Summary Statistics) provides a few interesting insights. First, the Twitter dataset is very skewed. Whereas the average candidate sent 579 tweets between January 1st and November 6th 2018, the median candidate only sent 304. Similarly, the average tweet received about 258 likes and 93 retweets, when excluding tweets originally from other accounts. However, the median tweet only received 13 likes and five retweets.

Second, Democratic politicians were more active on social media than Republican politicians. 295,519 of the tweets (73 percent) in the dataset were sent by Democrats, whereas only 107,989 (27 percent) were sent by Republicans. The median Democrat tweeted 560.5 times between January 1st and November 6th 2018, whereas the median Republican only tweeted 175 times. All of this suggests that Democratic politicians were more energized on social media, or at least on Twitter, compared to their Republican counterparts.

Third, Democratic accounts received more engagement compared to Republican accounts. The median Democrat had 3,811 followers, whereas the median Republican had only 1,912 followers. In addition, Democrats' posts received more likes and retweets, when excluding posts originally from other accounts. The median Democratic tweet received 18 likes and seven retweets, whereas the median Republican tweet received only seven likes and two retweets. This evidence suggests Democratic voters, not just politicians, may have been more energized on Twitter compared to their Republican counterparts. However, given how the sample is limited and how it only includes House candidates' tweets, this claim is difficult to prove conclusively.

In theory, one might expect candidates running in competitive districts or districts favoring the other party to tweet more. These candidates were less "safe" and so arguably needed to do more voter outreach on social media. OLS regression models from section 4.2 contradict

this hypothesis. When controlling for incumbency and region, the partisan lean of a district did *not* have a statistically significant relationship with how much a Democrat or Republican tweeted. However, the same regression models suggest that incumbency was a strong predictor of how much candidates tweeted. Democratic non-incumbents tweeted much more than Democratic incumbents on average; the same is true of Republican non-incumbents versus Republican incumbents.

Section 4.3 (Major Issues) provides overwhelming evidence of political polarization. From the economy, to healthcare, to immigration, there were hardly any issues in which Democratic and Republican candidates' views had significant overlap. And even their word choices are revealing; often, Democrats and Republicans used very different diction to refer to the same issues (e.g. ACA vs. Obamacare). In addition, elite opinion was consistent with public opinion. Democratic politicians shared similar views with Democratic voters on most issues, and the same was true of the relationship between Republican politicians and voters. However, it remains an open question, outside of the scope of this paper, how much politicians took cues from voters when deciding which issues to emphasize.

As expected, healthcare was mentioned frequently on Twitter. 11,982 tweets include the word "healthcare", 4,457 mention Medicare, 1,872 mention Medicaid, and 1,503 mention the Affordable Care Act. These results come as no surprise, as healthcare was a major – if not the top – issue for voters (Newport, "Top Issues", 2018). Another issue that came up often was the Trump presidency. 29,043 tweets include either the terms "Trump" or "POTUS". Given how the 2018 midterms were partially a referendum on Trump, these results are also unsurprising (Scott, 2018).

The biggest surprise in the data was how little particular issues were mentioned, such as the Kavanaugh hearings, Russia, and tax reform. Some of these stories received considerable news coverage, suggesting a disconnect between which issues were prioritized by politicians and the mainstream media. Another possibility is that candidates found these issues too complex to discuss in 280 characters or less (Perez, 2017).

Importantly, the results from this study should not be overgeneralized. One reason is that the sample consists of just House candidates. Most likely, local politicians and Senate candidates discussed a distinct set of issues. A second reason is that the sample just consists of candidates' personal Twitter accounts, not their official accounts. Official accounts are subject to federal law and House rules, and are not supposed to include campaign information (Woods, 2014). Third, the scope of the study is January 1st to November 6th 2018. Each election cycle is different and so these results should not be used to predict congressional candidates' behavior in 2020 or beyond.

In addition, Twitter's impact on election outcomes should not be overstated. After all, only 24 percent of American adults used the site in 2018 and they were not necessarily representative of the U.S. population ("Social Media Fact Sheet", 2018). In addition, only a minority of Americans actually follow politicians on social media (Anderson, 2015). Nevertheless, this study was useful to see how Democratic and Republican politicians framed issues.

## 4.5 Strengths and Weaknesses of the Methodology

This thesis might be the first academic paper to analyze Twitter data from the 2018 midterm elections. In this sense, the findings in the paper are novel and could be used to guide future research. The dataset is also very large, consisting of over 400,000 tweets, providing a comprehensive snapshot of the 2018 midterms.

However, the methodology comes with shortcomings. First, January 1st 2018 is an imperfect start date to the study, as candidates declared their candidacies at very different times ("Filing Deadlines", 2018). Second, many Democratic and Republican candidates lacked a personal Twitter account and so were excluded from the sample. Third, some candidates used Twitter much more than others, skewing results. Fourth, this study only looks at Twitter data, while politicians were also active on other social media platforms (e.g. Facebook). Most likely, politicians used different social media sites in distinct manners and so these results should not be overgeneralized. Fifth, irrelevant search results sometimes came up when looking for key terms. For example, when searching for the word "wall", most but not all of the results had to do with President Trump's proposed border fence on the U.S.-Mexico border.

# 5 Areas for Future Research

## 5.1 Issue Saliency

The Twitter analysis clearly shows that some issues were more salient than others. For example, politicians of both parties talked a lot about healthcare but not so much about Russia.

However, it is unclear from the data to what extent politicians took cues from voters or vice versa when deciding which issues to emphasize in the 2018 midterms. There are two predominant theories that could explain issue saliency on Twitter: issue ownership theory and riding the wave theory. Under issue ownership theory, parties highlight issues on which they have an advantage "to increase the salience of these issues among voters", and by doing so, "reap electoral gains" (Kluver & Sagarzazu, 2015, p. 380). This is a top-down process in which voters take cues from political parties (Kluver & Sagarzazu, 2015, p. 384). In contrast, an opposing hypothesis is riding the wave theory, which assumes that parties "primarily respond to voters by highlighting political issues that are salient in the minds of citizens" (Kluver & Sagarzazu, 2015, p. 380). Their goal is to "benefit electorally from being responsive to the electorate" (Kluver & Sagarzazu, 2015, p. 383). In short, this a bottom-up process in parties take cues from voters (Kluver & Sagarzazu, p. 384).

## 5.2 Other Social Media Platforms

In 2018, other social media platforms were much more popular than Twitter. Whereas only 24 percent of American adults used Twitter, 73 percent used YouTube, 68 percent used Facebook, 35 percent used Instagram, 29 percent used Pinterest, and 27 percent used Snapchat ("Social Media Fact Sheet", 2018). In future studies, researchers may want to study how Democratic and Republican candidates used these other sites in the 2018 midterms.

## Conclusion

Social media was a fundamental part of political campaigning in the 2018 midterms. Politicians used it as a platform to persuade and mobilize voters, and ultimately win elections. However, Democratic and Republican candidates otherwise used social media very differently. On sites such as Facebook and Twitter, they emphasized different issues and framed them in distinct ways. Partisan differences in social media use can potentially be explained by political polarization and how each party was confronted with unique challenges.

Thinking ahead, it will be interesting to see how congressional candidates use social media in the 2020 election cycle. One question is whether Democratic candidates will continue to use Twitter more often than Republican candidates. A second is whether the same issues will remain salient. There is no question, however, that social media will remain important to political campaigns, given that seven in ten Americans use some sort of social networking site ("Social Media Fact Sheet", 2018). In short, the lessons from the 2018 midterms, as well as from earlier cycles, will continue to guide how campaigns interact with potential voters online.

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