Facebook and U.S. Presidential Elections

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Introduction

"You could find music; you could find news; you could find information, but you couldn't find and connect with the people that you cared about, which as people is actually the most important thing," Mark Zuckerberg said about the need to create Facebook as a Harvard student. "So that seemed like a pretty big hole that needed to get filled." Facebook was originally created for users to connect with other people through a digital social networking site (SNS), but soon evolved into a social network that could be used as a powerful political tool.[1] The first presidential election where everyone was able to be a Facebook member occurred in 2008 and was even known as "the Facebook election." According to U.S. News, "roughly 10% said they'd logged on to social networking sites like Facebook and Myspace to engage in the election." One of Barack Obama's strategists, Chris Hughes, was even one of Facebook's cofounders.[2]

While both Barack Obama and John McCain used social media, Obama used it much more effectively – helping him win the presidency by 192 electoral votes with the help of Americans under the age of 25.[3] Shortly after election day, the article "Barack Obama and the Facebook election stated "The Web, a perfect medium for genuine grass-roots political movements, is transforming the power dynamics of politics."[4] This statement has in a sense proved to be true – however, the internet and social media are shaping elections and political viewpoints in a way that might not have been predicted back in 2008. Facebook has evolved from a site in which presidential candidates were able to run grassroots campaigns to a place where misinformation is spread.

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[1] Catherine Clifford, "How Mark Zuckerberg came up with the idea for Facebook," CNBC, January 18, 2018, https://www.cnbc.com/2018/01/17/why-mark-zuckerberg-started-facebook.html.
[2] Soumitra Dutta and Matthew Fraser, "Barack Obama and the Facebook Election," U.S. News, November 19, 2008. https://www.usnews.com/opinion/articles/2008/11/19/barack-obama-and-the-facebook-election.
[3] "2008 Presidential Election," 270 To Win, accessed December 16, 2021, https://www.270towin.com/2008_Election/.
[4] Dutta, "Barack Obama."

As the role of social media in society has evolved, Facebook's role in presidential elections has evolved, as well. This case study seeks to address the question: How has Facebook's role in U.S. presidential elections changed over time?

<div align="center">**About Facebook**</div>

An Overview of Facebook

Facebook (then known as The Facebook) was created in early 2004 by Mark Zuckerberg, Eduardo Saverin, Dustin Moskovitz, and Chris Hughes. When the social network launched in February 2004, it was limited to Harvard students. The Facebook soon expanded to other prestigious schools and by June of that year, over 250,000 students from 34 schools were registered. The site reached one million active users by the end of 2004. At the time, it was the second most popular online social network behind Myspace, which had five million active users. In 2005, The Facebook rebranded to Facebook and expanded its user base to high school students as well as university students outside the United States. By the end of 2005, Facebook boasted six million monthly active users. In 2006, Facebook membership was opened to anyone above the age of 13. In 2008, Facebook became the most-visited social media site and launched the Facebook app for iPhones. Facebook filed to become a public company in 2012 and raised $16 billion from the initial public offering. The total number of Facebook users reached 1 billion later in the year. [5]There are an estimated 302.28 million Americans using the site.[6]

Public Perception of Facebook

Overall, the public perception of Facebook is not positive – especially when it comes to politics. A July 2020 study conducted by the Pew Research Center found that around two-thirds

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[5] Mark Hall, "Facebook," Britannica, last modified November 9, 2021, https://www.britannica.com/topic/Facebook.
[6] "Number of Facebook users in the United States from 2017 to 2026," Statista, August 23, 2021, https://www.statista.com/statistics/408971/number-of-us-facebook-users/

of Americans (64%) said social media sites are mostly negatively impacting the country.

Additionally, 47% of adults supported additional government regulation of technology

companies and only 11% thought technology companies should be regulated less. Despite these

statistics, 69% of American adults have used the Facebook platform.[7]

Additionally, many Americans now believe in the restriction of misinformation.

According to the Pew Research Center, "Roughly half of U.S. adults (48%) now say the

government should take steps to restrict false information, even if it means losing some freedom

to access and publish content." In 2018, only 38% of people felt the same way. Unfortunately,

misinformation is becoming a political party-based issue. Nearly "70% of Republicans say those

freedoms should be protected, even if it means some false information is published. Nearly as

many Democrats (65%) instead say the government should take steps to restrict false

information, even if it means limiting freedom of information. Roughly three-quarters of

Democrats (76%) now say tech companies should take steps to restrict false information online,

even at the risk of limiting information freedoms. A majority of Republicans (61%) express the

opposite view – that those freedoms should be protected, even if it means false information can

be published online." In 2018's survey, these same questions weren't as divisive along party

lines.[8]

Facebook's numerous privacy issues and controversies have also damaged the company's

reputation. In a study conducted by Consumer Reports in January 2019, shortly after news broke

of the Cambridge Analytica scandal, where campaigns used data obtained from Facebook users

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[7] Monica Anderson, "Fast facts on Americans' views about social media as Facebook faces legal challenge," Pew Research Center, December 10, 2020, https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/12/10/fast-facts-on-americans-views-about-social-media-as-facebook-faces-legal-challenge/.
[8] Amy Mitchell and Mason Walker, "More Americans now say government should take steps to restrict false information online than in 2018," Pew Research Center, August 18, 2021, https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/08/18/more-americans-now-say-government-should-take-steps-to-restrict-false-information-online-than-in-2018/.

without their knowledge, almost 25% of people who used Facebook were extremely or very concerned about the amount of personal data collected and stored by the site. Additionally, 63% believed Facebook should not be allowed to collect data unless they were using the site. Despite this major controversy, only one in ten surveyed stopped using Facebook after learning about the data theft.[9]

In 2011, a complaint was filed against Facebook by the Federal Trade Commission. The FTC claimed "it [Facebook] deceived consumers by telling them they could keep their information on Facebook private, and then repeatedly allowing it to be shared and made public." Because of the complaint, Facebook was required to comply with guidelines the FTC set for privacy and to obtain "independent, third-party audits certifying that it has a privacy program in place that meets or exceeds the requirements of the FTC order, and to ensure that the privacy of consumers' information is protected" every two years for the next 20 years.[10]

In 2012, the FTC sued Facebook due to eight privacy-related violations. In the settlement, Facebook agreed to an order that "1) prohibited Facebook from making misrepresentations about the privacy or security of consumers' information, 2) prohibited Facebook from misrepresenting the extent to which it shares personal data, and 3) required Facebook to implement a reasonable privacy program." The FTC claimed Facebook violated the previous order in multiple ways, leading to an additional penalty – one of the largest ever charged by the U.S. government. The $5

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[9] Chris Raymond, "So What Do You Think of Facebook Now?" Consumer Reports, March 15, 2019, https://www.consumerreports.org/social-media/what-do-you-think-of-facebook-now-survey/.
[10] "Facebook Settles FTC Charges That It Deceived Consumers By Failing To Keep Privacy Promises," Federal Trade Commission, November 29, 2011, https://www.ftc.gov/news-events/press-releases/2011/11/facebook-settles-ftc-charges-it-deceived-consumers-failing-keep.

billion penalty was "designed to make all companies – not just Facebook – sit up, take notice, and rethink their practices."[11]

However, despite the many issues Facebook has experienced, people continue to use it – so despite the problems, the company must be doing something that appeals to an audience.

Case Study

How has Facebook's role in U.S. presidential elections changed over time, from the site's earlier days to its role as the largest social media site in America? To examine Facebook's role in the last four presidential elections, this paper will look at peer reviewed articles studying the impact of Facebook on each election, articles from reputable news sources and research data covering Facebook and its influence on presidential campaigns.

2008 Election

The 2008 presidential election was the first in which Facebook was able to be a major part. In the 2004 election, membership was only open to select college students, not everyone over the age of 13. Both major presidential candidates during this election, Barack Obama and John McCain, had a presence on the site. Facebook users could view candidate information, interact with other users about politics and share their opinions.[12]

Previous researchers, such as Putnam, believed political participation was declining due to lower amounts of civic engagement.[13] Other studies, such as Gang Han's "New Media Use, Sociodemographics, and Voter Turnout in the 2000 Presidential Election" suggested that new

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[11] Lesley Fair, "FTC's $5 billion Facebook settlement: Record-breaking and history-making," Federal Trade Commission, July 24, 2019, https://www.ftc.gov/news-events/blogs/business-blog/2019/07/ftcs-5-billion-facebook-settlement-record-breaking-history.

[12] Dutta, "Barack Obama."

[13] Jessica Vitak et al. "It's Complicated: Facebook Users' Political Participation in the 2008 Election," *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking* 14, no. 3 (2011): 107-114, DOI: 10.1089/cyber.2009.0226

media could positively impact voter turnout – even though this study took place before Facebook existed.[14]

The Pew Research Network reported that 65% of SNS users between 18-29 did at least one of five potential political activities using an SNS during the 2008 election. These actions ranged from joining a politically-focused group to using the SNS to find information on a candidate. At the time of the survey, not much research had been done on SNS user activity and politics. This information helped Vitak et al. shape their research around the concept of Facebook leading to increased political participation. During Vitak et al.'s research, participants believed it was appropriate for candidates to be on Facebook and for users to share political beliefs on Facebook, but did not agree with using Facebook to persuade others to vote.

Overall, Vitak et al. found a complex relationship between SMS, such as Facebook, and political participation among young people. The researchers found young people overwhelmingly engaged in political actions that did not require much time or effort. The researchers also suggested that the increase of civic skills with age is a major factor behind political participation and that Facebook gave young people the opportunity to develop those skills without using much time or effort.[15]

Even during 2008, journalists took note of how the site could play a role in future presidential elections. In "Barack Obama and the Facebook Election," published shortly after the election, authors Soumitra Dutta and Matthew Fraser stated "The Web, a perfect medium for genuine grass-roots political movements, is transforming the power dynamics of politics. There are no barriers to entry on sites like Facebook and YouTube. Power is diffused because

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[14] Gang (Kevin) Han, "New Media Use, Sociodemographics, and Voter Turnout in the 2000 Presidential Election," *Mass Communication and Society* 11, no. 1 (2008): 62-81. DOI: 10.1080/15205430701587644
[15] Vitak et al. "It's Complicated."

everybody can participate."[16] This proved to be true as Facebook's role continued to increase in significance during subsequent elections.

2012 Election

In Rebecca J. Rosen's article "Did Facebook Give Democrats the Upper Hand?" for *The Atlantic*, she states "Nothing seems to come even close to a Facebook message's efficacy in increasing voter turnout." James Fowler and other researchers at the University of California, San Diego conducted a study suggesting an automatic Facebook "election day" message and relevant voting-related posts from friends on the site directly increased voter turnout by around 60,000 voters and indirectly increased voter turnout by around 280,000 voters.[17] This content was shown to 94% of randomly selected Facebook users 18 and older on election day. Out of the remaining users, 2% saw the automatic message but not voting-related posts, 2% saw the posts but no automatic message and the final 2% saw nothing. The researchers found the informal "election day" message to be ineffective, but using friends' post helped increase turnout by providing social pressure. Additionally, for each person who was influenced to vote by the messages, four close friends on Facebook were also influenced to vote.[18]

Despite Fowler and his team attributing the increase in young people voting to Facebook, Peter Levine of Tufts University attributed it to a generational change rather than a social media site. Levine mentioned reaching out to young voters specifically as a potential factor, stating that past campaigns ignored young people in favor of those more likely to vote.

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[16] Dutta, "Barack Obama."
[17] Rebecca J Rosen, "Did Facebook Give Democrats the Upper Hand?" The Atlantic, November 8, 2012, https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2012/11/did-facebook-give-democrats-the-upper-hand/264937/.
[18] Hristio Boytchev, "Facebook friends' voting has impact on Election Day turnout, study finds," Washington Post, September 12, 2012, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/health-science/facebook-friends-voting-has-impact-on-election-day-turnout-study-finds/2012/09/12/92024dd2-fce3-11e1-a31e-804fccb658f9_story.html.

While Facebook influenced certain people to vote, these tended to skew towards women and young people. Rosen's article suggests that while Facebook can have an influence, that influence largely affects the margins instead of all voters. Rosen also states "it's not far-fetched to say that, down the road, Facebook's efforts to improve voter participation could swing an election, if they haven't already."[19]

During the 2012 Election, Ashik Shafi and Fred Vultee conducted a study involving the Facebook posts of each candidate. Shafi and Vultee state "Facebook was used strategically to resonate with the real-life campaign, and disseminate instant messages, rather than engaging in discussion with the public." The two also reported the candidates only had minor differences in the content shared on each's page. The Pew Center for Internet Research found only 4% of people used the internet as a resource for political information, but in the most recent data, 2008, that number had increased to 46%. In the 2012 election, about 22% of voters shared the candidate they voted for on a SNS, 30% had friends or family encouraging them to vote and 20% used social media to encourage other people to vote. Shafi and Vultee hypothesized Barack Obama and Mitt Romney's posts would differ in the rhetorical elements used. The two found Obama took a more statistically-based approach to content on his page while Romney focused more on emotions and values.

The study found that Obama and Romney did not reflect common news issues or align with the "mainstream media agenda." Instead of discussing issues, the candidates mostly used Facebook pages to "show their presence, uphold their personality, appeal to the audience or engage in cyber-rallying." The study also found the candidates did not use Facebook pages in an attempt to make issues important to the media.

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[19] Rosen, "Did Facebook."

2012 was known as the Data Election by researchers – strategists used Facebook and

databases as tools to reach individual voters. Shafi and Vultee's findings agreed with the concept

of using social media to not only reach possible supporters, but to interact with and organize

existing supporters. Not only did people use Facebook in a slightly different way involving

political engagement, but candidates and their teams adapted their use of the platform as well.[20]

2016 Election

In 2016, Robinson Meyer published an article on *The Atlantic* discussing how Facebook

could impact the 2016 election. Meyer's article, "How Facebook Could Tilt the 2016 Election,"

suggested "By selectively presenting the 'I Voted!' button to some voters, for instance, it could

juice turnout among reliably Democratic demographics without increasing it among their

Republican counterparts." However, in response to previous articles suggesting Facebook could

influence the election, a spokesperson stated "We as a company are neutral—we have not and

will not use our products in a way that attempts to influence *how* people vote."[21]

2016's presidential election was heavily shaped by the Cambridge Analytica scandal.

During 2015, Cambridge Analytica, a political data analytics firm, gathered information from

over 87 million Facebook users through a personality quiz. Approximately 270,000 people were

paid to participate in the quiz, which harvested data from their accounts as well as their friends'

accounts. The data included information on where users lived and what Facebook pages they

liked. Because of this, Cambridge Analytica was able to construct psychological profiles that

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[20] Ashik Shafi and Fred Vultee, "One of many tools to win the election: A study of Facebook posts by presidential candidates in the 2012 election," *Revolutionizing Political Communication through Social Media* (2016). https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Ashik-Shafi-2/publication/289572432_One_of_Many_Tools_to_Win_the_Election_A_Study_of_Facebook_Posts_of_Presidential_Candidates_in_the_2012_Election/links/56907ec308aee91f69a17083/One-of-Many-Tools-to-Win-the-Election-A-Study-of-Facebook-Posts-of-Presidential-Candidates-in-the-2012-Election.pdf
[21] Robinson Meyer, "How Facebook Could Tilt the 2016 Election," The Atlantic, April 18, 2016, https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2016/04/how-facebook-could-tilt-the-2016-election-donald-trump/478764/.

analyzed the responses of participants and their friends. The company was then hired by 2016 candidate Donald Trump to create highly targeted ads for his campaign using the psychological profiles as a basis.[22]

In addition to the highly targeted ads using information obtained by Cambridge Analytica, targeted advertising in general was highly popular – perhaps due to Facebook's capability to reach specific audiences and geographic areas. German Alvarez, Jaewon Choi and Sharon Strover's study, "Good News, Bad News: A Sentimental Analysis of the 2016 Election Russian Facebook Ads," analyzed IRA ads that over 11.4 million Facebook users were exposed to. These advertisements targeted specific groups of people, with the issues shown in the ad varying between demographic. For example, low-income people received ads about immigration and racial conflict while middle-income people received ads about nationalism. Alvarez et al. analyzed the metadata and text in all 3,519 ads placed by the Russian IRA.

Overall, the researchers found the majority of the ads to be positive. These ads received more impressions than negative or neutral ads. Alvarez et al. theorized the positive ads may have been used as a tool to legitimize and grow the groups being promoted by the Russian IRA and that positive ads were more likely to be shared on Facebook.

During the 2016 election, Facebook's primary role transitioned away from a place to learn about candidates and collaborate with other supporters into a space where candidates and the Russian IRA attempted to reach voters with highly targeted advertising.

2020 Election

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[22] Alexandra Ma and Ben Gilbert, "Facebook understood how dangerous the Trump-linked data firm Cambridge Analytica could be much earlier than it previously said. Here's everything that's happened up until now," Business Insider, last modified August 23, 2019, https://www.businessinsider.com/cambridge-analytica-a-guide-to-the-trump-linked-data-firm-that-harvested-50-million-facebook-profiles-2018-3#where-did-it-come-from-3.

Social media sites have increasingly been viewed by Americans as a news source. According to the Pew Research Center, around two-thirds of Americans obtain some news through social media sites, During the 2020 Election, Stephen R. Neely conducted research involving the likelihood of unfriending or unfollowing someone on Facebook due to political content. In 2012, the Pew Research Center found 18% of Americans using SNS had unfriended, blocked or "hidden" someone due to political posts. A similar study conducted during the 2016 Election showed almost 40% of Americans had done the same. While not quite the same topic, another survey showed 22% of American SNS users unfriended or unfollowed someone due to COVID-19 related content. Other researchers conducting similar studies found that non-US users were less likely to unfriend or block in similar politically charged situations.

Neely's study found around 29% of American Facebook users unfriended or unfollowed someone due to political posts in the three months before the election. This percentage aligns more with the COVID-19 related data opposed to 2012 or 2016 data.

Researchers have suggested that unfriending or blocking users can cause "partisan echo-chambers." In Neely's study, he mentions research conducted by Metzger et al. that suggests this is done not to cause an echo-chamber, but to regulate boundaries and allow users to view credible information. Neely also found study participants who identified strongly leaning one way or another politically were over twice as likely to unfriend or unfollow someone due to political posts. Overall, the research states that political opinions are likely not the only factor in someone choosing to unfriend or unfollow another user. By removing a user's posts from the feed, people are able to feel like they are obtaining more reliable news, especially those who use Facebook as a news source. Neely concludes that further research is necessary to determine the

extent of politically motivated avoidance and how it impacts society, especially as people continue to depend on it.[23]

Looking Ahead

In October 2021, Facebook announced the parent company was changing its name to Meta. In an interview with Zuckerberg, he stated that the plan for Facebook's next few years was to "effectively transition from people seeing us as primarily being a social media company to being a metaverse company."[24] The name change provoked mixed reactions from the public. Some claimed it was simply a distraction from the company's numerous allegations and controversies.

While Facebook has been a powerful tool for candidates to share their views and reach potential voters, its future role likely depends on how the platform evolves. Using social media as a tool requires adapting to the platform's changes and in order to use Facebook effectively, candidates will have to stay up-to-date on potential changes. The public perception of Facebook as a whole will also impact its role in elections – if the trust level for the platform is low, then it won't be worthwhile to invest time, money and energy into using it as a campaign tool. Further research, especially on politically-motivated unfriendings or unfollowings, will also determine if Facebook is a viable option to reach voters.

Facebook has not only enabled connections among people interested in certain political candidates, but also it has caused disconnection. There is potential for Facebook to be a non-partisan tool that influences people to vote, but the public perception of the site may make it impossible. Potential government restrictions on Facebook may lead to a minimalized or

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[23] Stephen R. Neely, "Politically Motivated Avoidance in Social Networks: A Study of Facebook and the 2020 Presidential Election," *Social Media + Society* 7, no. 4 (2021). DOI: 10.1177/20563051211055438.
[24] Casey Newton, "Mark in the Metaverse," The Verge, July 22, 2021, https://www.theverge.com/22588022/mark-zuckerberg-facebook-ceo-metaverse-interview.

different role for the site, as well. The site has had a positive influence on how candidates connect with potential voters, but only time will tell how that changes along with Facebook itself and society as a whole.

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9a17083/One-of-Many-Tools-to-Win-the-Election-A-Study-of-Facebook-Posts-of-

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