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CLICK HERE: THE INFLUENCE OF CANDIDATES' WEBSITES IN THE 2016

PRESIDENTIAL NOMINATION CONTEST

BY

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BA, University of New Hampshire, 2015

THESIS

Submitted to the University of New Hampshire

in Partial Fulfillment of

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Master of Arts

in Political Science

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DEDICATION PAGE

To mom and dad, for not totally understanding what I was spending all this time on, but cheering me on every step of the way.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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ABSTRACT

CLICK HERE: THE INFLUENCE OF CANDIDATES' WEBSITES IN THE 2016

PRESIDENTIAL NOMINATION CONTEST

by

Samantha Friedman

University of New Hampshire, May 2016

This project seeks to answer the question: How did the websites of Republican

presidential candidates change over time in order to frame the overall message a candidate is

sending potential voters? Subsequently, what information cues or shortcuts that are described by

Popkin in *The Reasoning Voter* were being utilized to target voters in their decision making

process? The hypothesis was that Republican candidate websites that employed competitive

messages on hot button issues attracted low information, partisan voters, resulting in more traffic

on their websites and higher standings in the polls. The data was compiled through a content

analysis of the websites of five Republicans who had announced their candidacy for president by

September 2016. The main section that was the focus of this research is each candidate's home

pages. The methodology followed that of Haynes et al. (2002) who evaluated candidate press

releases, dividing the messages into substantive, competitive, and informative. The variables

examined included issues, candidate history/background, campaign announcements, attacks, and

the horse race. GOP candidate standings was determined by public opinion data reported by Real

Clear Politics. Traffic to each website over the indicated time span was determined through the

use of Alexa.com. Google Trends was also consulted to see how much traffic was being funneled

to a particular website over the course of this research.

CHAPTER I: CLICK HERE

The McGovern-Fraser reforms during the 1970's fundamentally changed the way primary contests are won and presidential candidates chosen. As Bartels (1988), a leading scholar in the field of presidential primaries, points out, "Not surprisingly, the most successful candidates were those who both unlearned the past rules more quickly and saw that the electorate could be moved dramatically in systematic ways connected with the inherent dynamics of the new system."[1] With the advent of the Internet and increasing reliance on technology as a way to connect with voters, this has created an even greater challenge, and even greater opportunity, for campaigns. Yet voters do not have the attention span or political inclination to fully investigate candidates before making their ultimate decision.[2] This is where the idea of information shortcuts, or cues, comes into play for low-information voters. Such tools were not necessary when political parties had most of the power in the nominating process; now that voters have a larger role, campaigns need to develop ways to capture their attention.

The current literature on this subject can be broken down into three parts. First, it is important to explain the shift in the nominating process as a result of the McGovern-Fraser reforms. Such reforms have led to the debate as to whether nomination campaigns have shifted from more party-centered to candidate-centered. A second theme is the elusiveness of momentum: what it means, if it truly exists, and how it factors into overall campaign strategy. Finally, much of the literature is devoted to how to capture those low-information voters who would not necessarily turn out on election day, and who use information shortcuts to make

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[1] Bartels, *Presidential Primaries and the Dynamics of Public Choice,* 25.
[2] *Ibid.*

decisions on who to vote for. This will ultimately be a major factor in the subsequent analysis of candidates' websites by examining how the language they utilize sets them apart from their opponents in the primaries.

The average primary voter today has access to a multitude of information about the candidates seeking their respective party's nomination. For candidates, this is both a blessing and a curse. On the one hand, they often have to deal with (potentially) false information from opposing Super PACs, the media, other campaigns, etc. On the other hand, candidates have a unique opportunity to present their own information and project their own image of themselves directly to the voter. When given the opportunity to present unfiltered information to signal to potential voters what their campaign is all about, how do the candidates present their campaigns for president? What is the image they are presenting of their campaign? This study will hopefully build on the work of previous political scientists by putting their research in a modern day context.

Changing the Game: The McGovern-Fraser Reforms

There is much debate in political science over whether campaigns have remained party-centered or become more candidate-centered. "Party-centered" means that the major political parties choose who the eventual nominee will be, regardless of many other factors; "candidate-centered" depends more on the personality and effectiveness of the individuals in the race.[3] Both sides of the argument are explored in this section, ultimately leading to the conclusion that there are a variety of factors at play in modern campaigning. While the influence of parties no doubt

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[3] Cohen, Karol, Noel, and Zaller, *The Party Decides: Presidential Nominations Before and After Reform,* Kindle Locations 371-372.

continues to be strong, with the advent of media and new technology, candidates have a unique opportunity to appeal to voters directly.

Before 1968, the perception was that each party's eventual nominee was chosen in a smoke-filled room by party bosses and elites. As such, political scientists focused on local officials, committee members, and loyal activists that were visible at party conventions every four years.[4] These actors were essentially the national party.[5] With the reform movement of the late 1960s, according to Cohen et al. (2008), everything changed: "When, after the McGovern-Fraser reforms, these actors lost formal control of presidential nominations, most political scientists concluded that parties had similarly lost control."[6] Yet during the 1970s, they argue that there was a resurgent role of party activists. Defined as "intense policy demanders," these individuals form coalitions in order to get their preferred candidate into office, and subsequently, enact their favored policies. Cohen et al. (2008) describe them by three main criteria: "they are (1) animated by a demand or set of demands, (2) politically active on behalf of their demands, and (3) numerous enough to be influential."[7] While these people may not have a formal organizational structure, they may form coalitions in order to gain more influence.[8] Thus for them, "parties are a means to an end, and the end is the group's own policy agenda."[9] In turn, parties must find and elect candidates who will appease these policy demanders, further ensuring their role as a major political force.

How have these reforms worked in a more practical sense? Historically, Republican elites have been better able to capture the correcting effect of the bellwether primary in states such as

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[4] Cohen, Karol, Noel, and Zaller, *The Party Decides: Presidential Nominations Before and After Reform,* Kindle Locations 371-372.

[5] *Ibid.*

[6] *Ibid*

[7] *Ibid,* Kindle Locations 477-478.

[8] *Ibid.*

[9] *Ibid,* 486-487.

Iowa and New Hampshire than their Democratic counterparts.[10] In other words, those in the GOP

establishment have historically been able to learn from the lessons learned from early primary

contests and apply them to future contests. Steger et al. (2004) asks, "What are Republican elites

doing that Democratic elites are not?"[11] In their research, Steger et al. (2004) created forecasts of

the presidential primary vote and compared them with the aggregate primary vote (APV), which

uses pre-primary and New Hampshire primary data.[12] There are certain indicators, such as

Gallup poll position and cash reserves, that revealed a push within the GOP towards

"frontloading" and increases the competition for resources.[13] This is done with the belief that it

will help Republican candidates during primary elections. Thus Republican elite behavior is

much more easily identified, especially during the early stages of the nomination contest.

Yet a candidate who can unify the party come November is not necessarily the ideal

candidate. It is a difficult balancing act that involves "two compromises-one among the

conflicting policies and priorities of groups inside the party, and another between preferences of

the party groups and the preferences of voters."[14] In some ways, this gives value to the argument

that elections are increasingly candidate-centered. Voters want to see someone in office who is

closer to their ideological preferences, and they will punish those parties that go too far right or

too far left. While Cohen et al. (2008) would argue that, while convention politics is largely

gone, it does not mean that we have transitioned to a more candidate-centered nomination

system.[15]

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[10] Steger, "The New Hampshire Effect in Presidential Nominations," 375.

[11] *Ibid,* 388.

[12] *Ibid.*

[13] *Ibid.*

[14] Cohen, Karol, Noel, Zaller. *The Party Decides: Presidential Nominations Before and After Reform,* Kindle Locations 1190-1191.

[15] *Ibid,* Kindle Locations 1485-1486.

Aldrich (2009) similarly argues that the reforms of the nomination process "have, in net, served to reduce the influence of the citizen-voter, election cycle after election cycle, since 1984."[16] How does this relate to the claims that party politics is dying? According to Popkin (1991), candidates dropping out of the race has little to do with party politics. In his view, voters change their evaluations of candidates during primaries as they learn more and more about them.[17] "When direct information is hard to obtain, people will find a proxy for it [...]they will accept campaign competence as a proxy for competence in elected office--as an indication of the political skills needed to handle the issues and problems confronting the government."[18] In other words, if a candidate continues to stay in the race and demonstrates a level of skill, voters then translate this into an understanding of how a candidate would act if elected. This perception may have nothing to do with the party structure, and instead relies on voters' initial instinct about a primary candidate.

The Elusiveness of Momentum

"Momentum," or as President George H.W. Bush famously called it, the "Big Mo," is often utilized by candidates to explain their rising popularity or surge in the polls.[19] Does momentum play a large role in campaigns? If so, to what extent? How do campaigns capitalize on this momentum and turn it into electoral success? While scholars are often divided on whether momentum or the "invisible primary" is more influential in candidate selection, these two factors are not separate entities, and in fact complement each other in meaningful ways.

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[16] Aldrich, "The Invisible Primary and Its Effect on Democratic Choice," 33.
[17] Popkin, *The Reasoning Voter,* 147.
[18] *Ibid.,* 213.
[19] Bartels, *Presidential Primaries and the Dynamics of Public Choice,* 27.

While there are a variety of definitions of "momentum," largely scholars agree on the overall concept and what it means in a primary contest. Bartels (1988) identifies the definition of momentum that was solidified in the 1980s: "a neat encapsulation of 'the demonstration effect of important primary victories.'"[20] Bartels also points to three factors that determine momentum: candidate strategies, "horse race" journalism, and party rules changes. The way strategists ran campaigns transformed completely in the 1980s: "with more primaries and tighter connections between primary results and actual delegate selection, it became increasingly difficult for candidates to pick and choose which primaries to enter."[21] Bartels claims that this leads to candidates making more decisions based on the increased attention and publicity such contests now receive.[22] The horse race refers to the way in which journalists cover campaigns, focusing more heavily on the competitive aspects than substantive issues.[23] Finally, party rule changes allowed for the growth in the number of presidential primaries among both Democrats and Republicans.[24] Plus, more candidates could enter the race and potentially win delegates.[25]

The "momentum model," as described by Aldrich (2009), is "a simple positive feedback account, in which success in one primary spirals upward, through more positive media coverage, access to greater resources, and therefore more favorable reception by the public in the next primary or caucus."[26] The ability for a candidate to gain momentum largely depends on the public's perception of their performance, in other words, whether they are meeting, exceeding, or failing to meet expectations.[27] Similarly, Abramowitz (1989) suggests that "by winning or doing

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[20] Bartels, *Presidential Primaries and the Dynamics of Public Choice,* 26.
[21] *Ibid.,* 25.
[22] *Ibid.,* 25.
[23] *Ibid.,* 31.
[24] *Ibid.,* 22.
[25] *Ibid.,* 24.
[26] Aldrich, "The Invisible Primary and Its Effect on Democratic Choice," 35.
[27] *Ibid.*

'better than expected' in Iowa or New Hampshire, a presidential candidate is said to gain momentum in subsequent contests."[28]

This refers to what scholars have coined "the invisible primary," or the time period before the major primaries that, in the eyes of some scholars, actually determines the eventual nominee.[29] Consistent with their view of a party-centered campaign process, Cohen et al. (2008) states that "party leaders, associated groups, activists, and other insiders are the main drivers of the invisible primary. Candidates put themselves forward, but the party coalition chooses among them, now as in the past."[30] The invisible primary thus provides a "test" period in which candidates can build up their resources, name recognition, and general support for their candidacy.

In the debate over momentum versus the invisible primary, Steger (2013) employs a Bayesian updating model in order to explain the convergence of these two phenomena. The Bayesian model is a statistical model which takes into account people's prior expectations into how they make decisions.[31] In this article, Steger (2013) compares information known at the end of the invisible primary period and compares it with forecast modeling data from early caucuses and primaries from 1980 to 2012.[32] He concludes that two patterns exist in different presidential nomination campaigns.[33] One such pattern is "evidenced by substantial coalescence of party elites and mass partisans during the invisible primary behind a front runner who goes on to win

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[28] Abramowitz, "Viability, Electability, and Candidate Choice in a Presidential Primary Election: A Test of Competing Models," 977.
[29] Cohen, Karol, Noel, Zaller. *The Party Decides: Presidential Nominations Before and After Reform,* Kindle Location 1429.
[30] *Ibid,* 208-209
[31] Steger, "Polls and Elections: Two Paradigms of Presidential Nominations," 378.
[32] *Ibid.*
[33] *Ibid.*

the nomination."[34] On the other hand, the impact of momentum is greater when party insiders do not unite behind a front runner during the invisible primary.[35]

The overall conclusions by Steger (2013) is the basis for this research. Instead of discounting one over the other, I acknowledge that both momentum and the invisible primary have influence over voters, and thus, the eventual nominee of each party. As will be discussed in the next section, voters make decisions based on the small amount of information they already know, plus the addition of information that is most closely aligned with their preferences.

The Race for [Low Information] Voters

"Independent voters" are seen as the Holy Grail of politics. Yet research has shown that there are very few true Independents, as most lean towards one party or another. Their lack of political engagement on a regular basis, however, makes them prime targets for a primary contest. These authors examine how such voters use information shortcuts or cues to make a final decision.

On average, voters have limited information on a variety of subjects. Therefore, "political campaign communications matter precisely because voters do not regularly pay much attention to political news, and because they do not know many of the things [...] candidates have done in the past."[36] Popkin (1991) is largely credited with creating the idea of information shortcuts and cues as a way to explain how voters acquire information about who should be president.[37] An information shortcut is a "second-best" way for voters to learn information about a candidate.[38] Despite little information about politics or candidates voters "know about past division within

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[34] Steger, "Polls and Elections: Two Paradigms of Presidential Nominations," 378
[35] *Ibid.,* 385.
[36] Popkin, *The Reasoning Voter,* 43.
[37] *Ibid.,* 146.
[38] *Ibid.,* 44.

the party, and they pick up information in the campaign about endorsements and a candidate's relations to groups within the party [...] the demographics of the candidates and where the campaigns are looking for voters."[39] For a front-runner candidate, this can be a double-edged sword. In such a scenario, a voter would be more likely to compare all other candidates with the front-runner.[40] While this perpetuates the notion that a candidate is the frontrunner, it also allows the other candidates to focus their attacks on that one person, and make every effort to seem "new" and "different."[41] Yet as Bartels (1988) points out, "information is positively related to support even among those prospective voters who have already crossed the minimal threshold of basic familiarity. Other things being equal, voters prefer the devil they know more about to the devil they know less about."[42] Bartels (1988) is arguing that voters will often look towards the candidate they are more familiar with, and already have basic knowledge of, over a new candidate they know little about.

The push to tap into low information voters using a variety of new methods described here is what sets up the research design of this project. As Haynes et al. (2002) point out, "the decline in partisanship among the electorate and low participation rates in American elections combine to provide a pool of untapped voters making an effective marketing strategy essential to any campaign."[43] Thus the true winner is the candidate who is able to capitalize on this voting bloc of people less engaged in the political process, especially through information shortcuts.

One of the greatest advancement for campaigns in terms of accessing previously inaccessible voters is the Internet. By examining a variety of social media sites as well as the websites of primary candidates, Haynes and Pitts (2009) looked at how new platforms of

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[39] *Ibid.*
[40] *Ibid.,* 93.
[41] *Ibid.*
[42] Bartels, *Presidential Primaries and the Dynamics of Public Choice,* 79-80.
[43] Haynes et al., "Getting the Message out: Candidate Communication Strategy During the Invisible Primary" 634.

communication on the Internet increased voter knowledge during the 2008 presidential

primaries. Specifically, Haynes and Pitts (2009) examined the traffic candidates' websites

received during the primary nomination campaign by comparing each website's rank.[44] Their

research concludes: "the typical individual who uses the Internet for campaign information is

generally using this platform to find out where candidates stand on issues and to research their

voting records."[45] They also cite a 2007 study by the Pew Research Center that found that, "30%

of likely voters in Iowa and 29% in New Hampshire said they have visited candidate Web sites."

However, they did not research the content of the websites themselves. This leaves room for

further research as to what the websites contained when voters visited such a website.

Why Websites?

According to a study about the Internet's role in the 2008 campaign by the Pew Research

Center, "three-quarters (74%) of internet users went online during the 2008 election to take part

in, or get news and information about the 2008 campaign."[46] Based on the findings outlined in

this chapter, many scholars consider the Internet to be an emerging factor in campaigns. Still, a

valid question arises: *why websites?* With all of the new technology available to candidates,

including social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, are websites still a

relevant tool for campaigns? The point of this study is not to minimize the importance of such

sites and their role in modern political campaigning. Studies about their effectiveness have been

well documented in the 2008 presidential cycle, arguably one of the first to truly capitalize on the

social media age.[47]

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[44] "Rank" is defined as "the number of unique pages viewed per user per day for the site," 54.
[45] "Making an Impression: New Media in the 2008 Presidential Nomination Campaigns," 53.
[46] Smith, Aaron, "The Internet's Role in Campaign 2008."
[47] Smith, Aaron, "The Internet's Role in Campaign 2008."

As Haynes and Pitts (2009) indicate, social media can be a relatively cheap and efficient way of targeting voters. However, a message in 160 characters or less, or a 30 second video ad doesn't provide the same space and substance for voters to truly grasp the full scope of a candidate's platform. Websites, however, allow campaigns to point to specific issues and policies they deem important, with the added bonus of being unfiltered by both social media constraints and the news media. As such, candidate websites provide the opportunity for campaigns to "pull every known form of communication into a central location [such as] the opportunity to sign up for emails and give direct access to press releases or any other form of information distribution."[48]

A subsequent study by the Pew Research Center looked at Internet activity by both the Romney and Obama campaigns, and concluded that "campaign websites remain the central hub of digital political messaging. Even if someone starts on a campaign's social network page, they often end up back on the main website-to donate money, to join a community, to volunteer or to read anything of length."[49] As this research points out, campaign websites do not exist in a vacuum. Therefore, this study will also be employing two outside resources, Google Trends and Alexa.com, to determine the level of traffic and relative impact these messages have on the electorate. By combining these two sources, we can paint a clearer picture as to why websites are still relevant in a modern campaign.

Moving Campaign Research into the 21st Century

The challenge with studying the Internet is that it is a medium that is constantly changing. How do we translate what is on a campaign website into a tangible indication of their message?

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[48] *Ibid.*
[49] Pew Research Center, "How the Presidential Candidates Use the Web and Social Media."

A more antiquated form of campaigning is analyzed for messaging strategies by Haynes et al.

(2002). In their research, they conducted a content analysis of press releases of Republican

presidential candidates during the 1996 invisible primary in order to "identify and explore the

use of specific messaging strategies."[50] The content of each press release was coded on a variety

of indicators, and scores were assigned to measure two main categories: competitive positioning

and substantive positioning.[51] These two categories are defined as:

> Substantive strategies attempt to frame a candidate's campaign by defining policy
>
> positions and administration goals; competitive strategies attempt to define the
>
> campaign environment by ranking the contenders and handicapping the race.[52]

Substantive messages may "take the form of announcing a policy position, responding to

a particular event within the framework of a policy orientation, or even a group

endorsement."[53]In contrast, competitive messages attempt to frame the candidate as "either the

frontrunner or the challenger to the frontrunner" in order to limit the field.[54] These are the two

dominant frameworks that campaigns utilize when projecting an image of the campaign.[55]

Haynes et al. (2002) also put messages into a third category: informative messaging.[56]

These messages are mostly considered to be "neutral" or "non-strategic."[57] On the whole,

informative messages are simply essential details to running a campaign, such as event

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[50]Haynes et al., "Getting the Message out: Candidate Communication Strategy During the Invisible Primary," 634.
[51]*Ibid.,* 639.
[52]*Ibid.,* 633.
[53] *Ibid.,* 633.
[54] *Ibid*, 632.
[55] *Ibid.,* 633.
[56]*Ibid*, 635.
[57] *Ibid,* 635.

schedules.[58] However, such details can also be considered substantive or competitive; for example, identifying a key endorsement can be viewed as a competitive message.

Haynes et al. (2002) also predict which types of candidates will engage in certain types of messaging. For instance, the frontrunner or "first-tier" candidate, generally someone with the most funds and name identification, will stick to a more substantive messaging strategy unless provoked by a lower tier candidate.[59] "Second-tier" candidates, those who have a chance against the frontrunner based on finances or organizational structure, will utilize a competitive messaging strategy.[60] This is because such candidates need to gain support from potential voters by promoting themselves.[61] However, they also tend to offer substance, such as policy positions, in an attempt to knock the frontrunner off message.[62] Finally, third-tier candidates are "those with poll numbers in the single digits and no upward movement."[63] They offer few competitive messages and instead focus on substance, representing a more fringe or peripheral aspect of the party in an attempt to get the frontrunners to address their issues.[64]

In order to determine this ranking of the candidates, Haynes et al. (2002) used the public opinion surveys of Gallup Poll Monthly and the amount of money raised as reflected in Federal Election Commission (FEC) disclosures.[65] Their research suggests that "the messaging strategies that candidates engage in during the invisible primary are mixed rather than pure. In the early months before the start of the official campaign, candidates begin to focus on the competitive

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[58] *Ibid,* 635.

[59] Haynes et al., "Getting the Message out: Candidate Communication Strategy During the Invisible Primary" 638.

[60] *Ibid.*

[61] *Ibid.*

[62] *Ibid.*

[63] *Ibid.*

[64] *Ibid.*

[65] *Ibid.,* 640.

nature of the process."[66] As the campaign continues and front runners emerge, the messaging

strategies begin to more distinctly represent the ranking of the candidate.[67]

Conclusion

As the end of Popkin's (1991) book, he points out that the problem with political

campaigns in America is that campaign activities no longer are effective at overcoming the "lack

of social stimulation."[68] He asks, "What kind of electronic and/or social stimulation are possible

today?"[69] This research hopes to address this fundamental question. In the growing age of

technology, it is arguably easier to reach out to voters. Yet the same challenge in capturing their

attention in a short period of time still remains. The Internet is still a relatively new medium for

campaigns, and continues to play a growing role in grassroots efforts.

Still, further research is needed on how candidate websites influence the overall

nomination campaign success. By drawing on the more modern methods of Haynes and Pitts

(2009) with the messaging strategies outlined by Haynes et al. (2002), a better picture of how

candidates use their websites in the primaries will emerge. Therefore, the research question I

will seek to answer is: How did the websites of Republican presidential candidates change over

time in order to frame the overall message a candidate is sending potential voters? Subsequently,

what information cues or shortcuts that are described by Popkin in *The Reasoning Voter* are

being utilized to target voters in their decision making process?

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[66]*Ibid.,* 640.
[67]*Ibid.* 648.
[68] Popkin, *The Reasoning Voter,* 227.
[69] *Ibid.,* 228.

CHAPTER II: RESEARCH PROPOSAL

The overall purpose of this research is to update the work done by Haynes et al. (2002). Instead of conducting a content analysis of candidate press releases, this research will use a more modern platform, the campaign website. The decision to adapt this research was based on the idea that a campaign website is a modern press release. The websites contained all of the same information that a typical press release contained, but on a more accessible format. Such information provided clues to how candidates change their issue strategies according to the current events at the time as well as their reactions to their opponents. As Haynes et al. (2002) points out, candidates are more likely to be concerned about framing their campaigns during the invisible primary.[70] Therefore, this research was conducted at precisely the time in which candidates were attempting to sway low-information voters in a crowded candidate field. This study will hopefully provide new information about what candidates are doing in the technological age to capture and inform voters, as well as respond to important issues in real time.

This study is relevant to the field of political science in a number of ways. For one, the Internet is still a relatively new platform in political campaigning. This research helped determine the effectiveness of this new media by evaluating not only who was actually viewing these messages, but what types of messages were having the most impact. Such data could prove useful to campaign strategists designing and maintaining their websites in the future. Second, low-information voters are the target voting bloc for many campaigns. Identifying the messages that resonated well with such voters is a key part of building a useful campaign website. Finally, Haynes et al. (2002) asks in the conclusion of their research, "How can we use this information

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[70] Haynes et al., "Getting the Message Out: Candidate Communication Strategy During the Invisible Primary," 633.

to enhance the quality of our presidential selection?"[71] This same question is applied to the research proposal here. Ultimately, this project reinforced the need for candidates to inform voters of their positions in an effort to attain their vote. Websites provide a unique opportunity for candidates to display their goals directly, completely free of outside influences. This gives candidates the opportunity to send an overall message about their campaign for president.

Research Questions

There were a number of questions that this research seeks to answer about the Internet campaign. These questions lead to the overall research question that this research was based upon. For one, how did campaigns utilize both competitive and substantive issue messaging on their websites? This was really the central question of this research. By examining the home pages of each of the candidates selected, the goal was to discern what message the individual campaigns were trying to send.

In addition, did the candidates' standing in the polls dictate what was on their website, or did what was on their website influence their standing in the polls? This study rested on the assumption that the poll numbers were, in fact, the influencer of candidate overall messaging strategy. This theory was tested by comparing the nature of the messages on the website to each candidate's relative polling numbers.

The greatest challenge in this research was to measure how many potential voters were actually viewing these web pages and receiving these messages. One initial question was to calculate what percentage of views of a website were a direct result of a person using a Google search to subsequently get to their website. This question was based on the premise that low-

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[71] Haynes et al., "Getting the Message Out: Candidate Communication Strategy During the Invisible Primary," 633.

information voters used search engines like Google to find out more information about a candidate they were considering voting for in a primary.

Another question was, what were the total number of page views a candidate received in a typical week? While there was a good chance that, if you are running for president, someone has viewed your campaign website, the question here was how much impact that website truly has on voter information. Since this data was not public, proxy measurements were used. While imperfect, these measurements provided an overall picture of the size of the audience. They also provided a broad picture of the demographic groups that are viewing each website, which gave even more information about the types of people accessing campaign information.

Combining these questions created the overall research question: How did the websites of Republican presidential candidates change over time in order to frame the overall message a candidate is sending potential voters? Subsequently, what information cues or shortcuts that are described by Popkin in *The Reasoning Voter* are being utilized to target voters in their decision making process?

The hypothesis at the onset of this research was that Republican Presidential candidates who are leaders in the polls will employ primarily competitive messaging strategies focused on their homepages. Those candidates that are considered more fringe or third-tier candidates will focus on more substantive messages. In order to determine this, a content analysis was conducted of the home pages of each of the candidates' websites. The null hypothesis was that the messages portrayed on the candidates' websites did not reflect their standing in the polls. The independent variable in this research was each candidate's standing in the polls. The dependent variable was the messaging strategies (substantive, competitive, or informative) employed by each of the candidates.

Methods

  This project combined two sources of data, mixing both qualitative and quantitative research methods, to reach an overall conclusion. First, the website Alexa.com was consulted once a week to determine the amount of traffic each candidate's website received from September 5, 2015 to January 2, 2016. Second, a content analysis was conducted to compare how the websites changed over time, and if changes were made to reflect the current political environment. This will largely be inspired by the research design of Haynes et al. (2002) in "Getting the Message out: Candidate Communication Strategy During the Invisible Primary." While Haynes et al. (2002) focused on press releases, this research instead looked at websites as the "modern" press release. In their research design, they divide candidate messages into three categories: competitive, substantive, and informative positioning.[72] The content analysis of the "Home Pages" will follow the steps shown in Diagram 1. Looking at the websites, one can visually section off the content into "blocks." Each block contains either text or an image combined with text. Each block is then coded based on a set of criteria.

  The first step was establishing to which category the block fits into in the grey section of Diagram 1. Did the block contain a message about an issue, the candidate's history or background, a campaign announcement, an attack, or a reference to the "horse race"?

  The second step was establishing to which subcategory that message belonged. Each of the grey categories has a subsection identified in orange. For example, if the block were to be identified as a message related to an issue, there are two subcategories: issue detail and issue mention. Issue detail would mean that the message indicated a longer policy description,

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[72] based on Scammell (1998), *Ibid.*

whereas an issue mention would mean that the "issue" was a part of a broader message.[73] Under

the category campaign announcements, the three subcategories included: staffing (hiring

decisions), schedule (such as an event), group endorsements, and politically prestigious

endorsement.   The attacks category also had two subcategories, issue-oriented attack and

campaign/candidate-oriented attack.

Once it was determined which category and subcategory a message block belonged to,

the next step was to determine the nature of the message. Most of the categories were inherently

substantive, competitive, or informative in nature, making their classification more

straightforward. For the subcategory "issue mention," it was determined whether the broader

context in which the issue was mentioned   was positioned more substantively or competitively.[74]

In terms of the subcategory "staffing," announcements of prominent endorsements were

considered competitive (for example, a member of the executive branch), while less prominent

endorsements were classified as informative (such as a local state representative).[75]

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[73] Haynes et al., "Getting the Message out: Candidate Communication Strategy During the Invisible Primary," 641.
[74] *Ibid.*
[75] *Ibid.*

Diagram 1: The steps followed to analyze each "block" of the websites.

Source: Adapted from Haynes et al. (2002)

For example: if Candidate A were to say, "My plan for defeating ISIS is better than Candidate B's plan" that would be considered an issue-oriented attack, and therefore competitive. Put another way, if Candidate A were to say "Here is my 20-point plan on how to defeat ISIS," that would be considered a detailed issue statement, and therefore substantive. Yet if Candidate A were to say "Come to Manchester High School Tomorrow to Learn More about my Plan to Defeat ISIS!" that would be considered a schedule detail, and therefore an informative message. Horse race statements are often the most difficult to discern. They would follow the pattern of "Watch Candidate A Dominate the GOP Debate" or "Candidate A is Winning in New Hampshire in the Latest CNN Poll." They refer back to the contested, competitive nature of the primary race, while elevating the status of their candidate over another. Endorsements are also a challenging message to code. If the message were to read, "Voters of NH Support Candidate A!" this would be a campaign announcement of a group endorsement, and therefore substantive. However, if the message read "Senator X Endorses Candidate A for President!", that would be a campaign announcement of a politically prestigious endorsement, and thus competitive.

There were certain "blocks" that for the purposes of this study were excluded. Blocks where the candidates ask the user exclusively to "donate" or "join the email list" were not counted as a part of the messaging strategy. This is because it is a standard fundraising feature of all the candidates' websites, and could not be placed into a specific messaging strategy category. However, creative tactics to solicit donations or email subscriptions were counted as part of the overall "horse race."[76] For example, Senator Marco Rubio's website often featured a "Join 325,000 Conservatives Today and Join our Email List." This creates a feeling of competition,

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[76] Haynes et al., "Getting the Message out: Candidate Communication Strategy During the Invisible Primary," 641

inviting visitors to get on the bandwagon and (presumably) create momentum for the campaign. Items listed in Twitter feeds were also not coded or included as a part of this study. There are too many different, individual tweets that would have needed to be coded. More importantly, social media was not the focus of this study.

In order to determine the ranking of the candidates, Haynes et al. (2002) used the public opinion surveys of Gallup Poll Monthly and the amount of money raised as reflected in FEC disclosures.[77] The same format was followed in this research with minor adjustments. Instead of the Gallup Poll Monthly, the Real Clear Politics "2016 Republican Presidential Nomination Polling Data" were used to present a more comprehensive view of candidate standings across a wide variety of polling data. Real Clear Politics is a poll aggregator website that takes all of the public opinion polling during the primary race and creates one polling indicator.[78] An additional dimension to this study was added by using Google Trends. Each candidate was compared to see how often his name appeared in a Google search. Theoretically, voters may "Google" a candidate when they know little about that person and are seeking more information about them, whether it be their professional or personal history. For most of the candidates researched, their websites are one of the first search results that is shown. It is worth noting that this preferential treatment for campaigns is a product of campaigns essentially buying these results.[79] Either way, a candidate needs to be able to attract the attention of a potential voter within seconds of being transferred to their website, thus where this research comes into play.

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[77] Haynes et al., "Getting the Message out: Candidate Communication Strategy During the Invisible Primary," 640.
[78] Information about Real Clear Politics can be found at http://www.realclearpolitics.com/about.html.
[79] Epstein, "How Google Could Rig the 2016 Election" POLITICO Magazine.

Home Pages

Within each block, content was subdivided for further analysis. What is important to note here is that any blocks that included social media (including, but not limited to, Twitter feeds) were omitted. Videos, including links to YouTube, were included, as they fall into the grey category of both property of the website and the video hosting site.

The data were gathered once a week from September 5, 2015, to January 2, 2016, a total of 18 weeks. Every week, a content analysis was conducted of the following Republican candidates' websites:[80]

1. Ben Carson

2. Donald Trump

3. Jeb Bush

4. Marco Rubio

5. Rand Paul

These candidates were chosen in an attempt to study a representative sample of the different ideologies of the GOP. Jeb Bush was chosen as the more moderate center, with Marco Rubio at the more conservative end and Rand Paul at the opposite, more libertarian end. Ben Carson and Donald Trump represent new ideologies within the GOP, as both had not previously run for political office. An Excel sheet was kept for each candidate, broken up into spreadsheets for each day that data was collected. Data collection itself was conducted and classified according to the steps outlined in Diagram 1.

Using Google Trends

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[80] This list includes those who announced their candidacy on or before August 1, 2015.

This research relied on a relatively new resource for information, Google Trends. In theory, a potential voter searched ("Googled") a candidate in order to get more information about that person. This theory is supported by data from Alexa.com, which indicates what percentage of visits to a site come from a search engine (and even further, what percentage of such inquiries are on Google). Google Trends shows the frequency with which a candidate is searched, relative to fellow Republican presidential hopefuls, over time. As this is a new way to use data from Google, there is not current research available describing the link between voters and the use of Google. However, we can look to Popkin (1991) to make the connection between low information voters and information shortcuts. Here, Google was used as its own "information shortcut" that allows voters to gain pertinent knowledge about a candidate. When "Googling" each of the candidates, it becomes apparent that the campaign's website is one of the first results, or even a suggested result (suggesting some level of advertising, but that will be left to another study).

Using Alexa.com

In addition to the data on clicks to Google, Alexa.com can provide valuable data on the candidates' websites individually. The sample metric used is the rank of the website in the United States (on average and over time). In addition, how engaged users are on the website on average was examined using bounce rate data, daily page views per visitor, and daily time on the site. Alexa.com defines bounce rate as "percentage of visits to the site that consist of a single page view."[81] In addition, what website a user had visited previously to the campaign website

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[81] Alexa.com.

was also identified. This ties into the research on Google explained above, but expands to include the breakdown of other search engines and top keywords from the search engines.

Using Real Clear Politics

Real Clear Politics is a polling data aggregator website.[82] It includes many of the most reliable polls in politics. This website was chosen over one individual poll to give a greater picture of each candidate's relative standing. Since each individual poll is conducted based on different methods of measurement, it would be too one-sided to just use one poll. Therefore, by expanding the reach to all of the major polls, a better sense of where the candidates are in the race emerges. National polling was chosen over local or state-specific polling in an attempt to represent a larger population of voters. Polling data was complied the same day as the websites were coded from September 5, 2015, to January 2, 2016 and can be seen in Figure 1.

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[82] Information about Real Clear Politics can be found at http://www.realclearpoli\tics.com/about.html.

Figure 1: Real Clear Politics GOP Presidential Nomination polling from September 5, 2015, to January 2, 2016
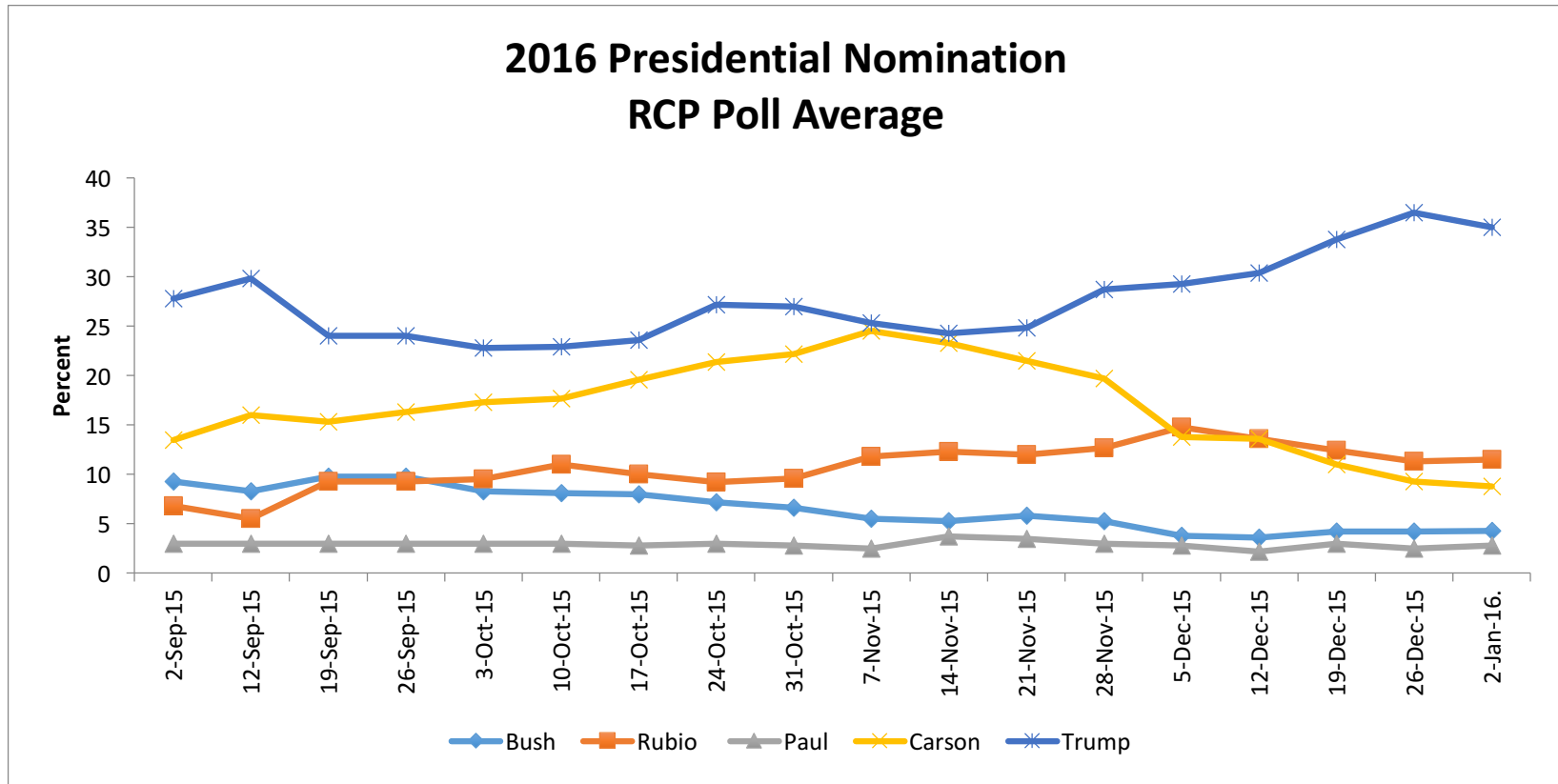
Source: Real Clear Politics

Limitations

This research accepts the conclusions of Steger (2013) regarding the debate between momentum and the invisible primary. At the onset of this research, a front runner was not yet known. However, soon after the research began, it became more and more apparent that Donald Trump had achieved front runner status in the polls. Yet, it was difficult to determine if the chicken came before the egg, that is, was it momentum or the invisible primary that propelled Trump into this position. Steger (2013) suggests that a combination of both had an influence, but further research would be required to say this definitively.

As Haynes et al. (2002) acknowledges in their research, this proposal is limited to a finite number of candidates from one party in one presidential nomination campaign.[83] The Democratic field was limited to only a few candidates, with former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton the clear front runner. Therefore, the GOP field had a much wider pool of data to draw upon, and more potential for analysis.

The time frame of this study is relatively short and relatively early in the campaign season. If more time was available, more data could have been collected and analyzed. Replications of this study could examine the entire "invisible primary" season leading up to the Iowa caucus and the New Hampshire primary.

The candidates chosen represent different factions of the Republican party, ranging from religious conservative to moderate. Narrowing the scope of this research reflects a practical reality; there were too many candidates in the Republican field to assess with the time and resources available. The conclusions drawn from this research will hopefully shed some light on how campaigns are utilizing websites, but there is certainly room for further study and analysis.

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[83] Haynes et al., "Getting the Message out: Candidate Communication Strategy During the Invisible Primary," 642

Haynes et al. (2002) also examines campaign fundraising as part of their study. This aspect of that study is not included because there is no accurate way of knowing how much money was spent on maintenance of each candidate's website, and what proportion of a campaign's operating budget went to this activity.

Finally, using a poll aggregator website versus one poll could also pose problems. Real Clear Politics (and similar poll aggregators) have been criticized by scholars for mixing "good" polls with "bad" polls, and thus muddying the results.[84] The limitations of this measurement have been accepted for the purposes of this study.

Conclusion

The ultimate goal of this project is to help better inform candidates of the impact their websites have on low-information, partisan voters, and how to better utilize this relatively new platform to capture voters in the invisible primary. For political scientists, this research not only builds upon work by other researchers, but updates and expands the scope to allow for a framework that can be used in the future. Such research could have an impact on theory, policy, and practice by building on the work of Popkin (1991) and Haynes et al. (2002), placing it in a more modern context. In addition, because this research was conducted before the nominating conventions of both parties, it could help the parties' respective nominees in framing their messages for the general election.

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[84] Hillygus, "The Evolution of Election Polling in the United States," 969

CHAPTER III: Google Trends

Figure 2 measures "interest over time" for each of the candidates searched.[85] For the time period shown, the average number of daily searches for "Donald Trump" was 47. While this number seems low, it was actually much higher than any of the other candidates. When looking at this chart, assume that 100 searches on Google were about these five candidates. On average, 47 of those searches were about Donald Trump. The next highest candidate was Carson, with about 10 searches. The rest of the candidates, Rubio, Bush, and Paul, were around the same level of search interest, with Rubio averaging slightly higher with about four.

Figure 2: Google Trends web search from September 6, 2015 to January 3, 2016
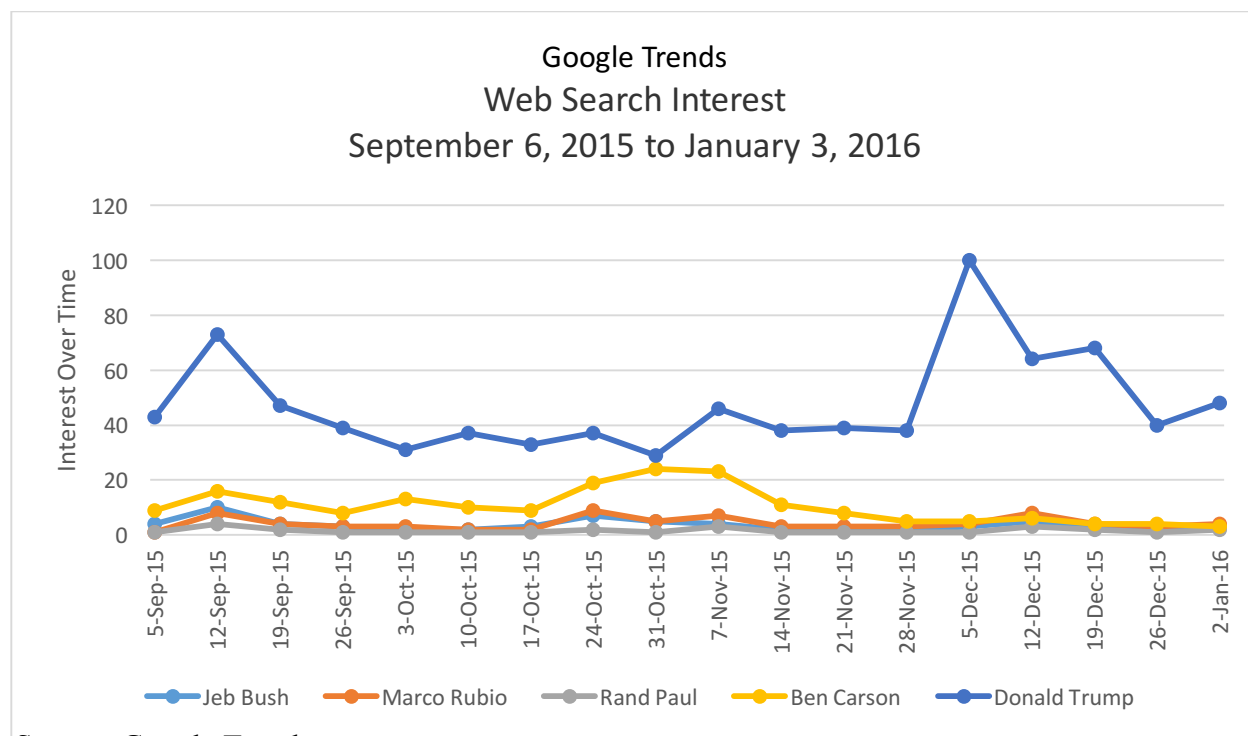
Source: Google Trends

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[85] Google Trends definition of this term: "Numbers represent search interest relative to the highest point on the chart. If at most 10% of searches for the given region and time frame were for "pizza," we'd consider this 100. This doesn't convey absolute search volume."

There are two interesting points to be made about this graph. First, what was initially striking was that it looks very similar to the RCP Polling Average (Figure 1). Between October 31 and November 14, Carson and Trump's poll numbers inched closer together. In Figure 2, both candidates also reached close levels of Google search interest: 29 for Trump and 24 for Carson. After this initial rise, both Carson's polling averages and Google search interest decreased.

The other takeaway from this graph is a theme brought up previously in this research, "outsider versus insider" candidate status. The three establishment candidates (meaning they have held public office previously), Bush, Rubio, and Paul, all had relatively low Google searches. One reason for this may be that these candidates have held public office before. All three candidates were shortlisted for the GOP nomination; thus none of their candidacies were really much of a surprise. However, Carson and Trump were newcomers to the political scene. While people may know Carson as a surgeon and author, they may not know much beyond that. In Trump's case, he made a point of drawing substantial media attention. Google is often the first stop people go when searching a video or article about a candidate. Trump's substantial media attention translated to the high volume of Google searches about him.

CHAPTER IV: Alexa.com

Alexa.com was able to provide the best available metrics on Internet traffic to the candidates' websites for the purposes of this research. Such data was not openly available from individual campaigns; thus the data was estimated. However, this was a valid way to get a sense of how many people were accessing their websites, where they were coming from (as in what site was linking them to the candidates' websites), how much time was spent on the website, and their basic demographic groupings. It should be noted that there was no way to gauge whether or not the people viewing these sites were eligible voters, or if they were low-information voters seeking to expand their knowledge of the candidates. However, these metrics were still useful for determining the popularity of candidates' websites in a quantifiable way. With social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter, there is a tangible way to "see" the number of people engaged with the site, whether by "friends" or "followers." The metrics from Alexa.com took the place of such information when looking at websites.

Alexa.com asked four questions: "How popular is [website A]?", "How engaged are visitors to [website A]?", Where do [website A]'s visitors come from?", and "Who visits [website A]?"

Engagement Metrics

By looking at Figure 3, the impact of Jeb2016 became more evident. The first question, "How popular is Jeb2016.com?" looked at the rank of the website globally and within the United States. Bush's website ranked 7,144 in the country.[86] Bush's website started off stronger in September, but decreased throughout the fall and winter, and surged again at the end of January. The second question, "how engaged are visitors to Jeb2016.com?" was broken down into three statistics: bounce rate, daily page views per viewer, and daily time on site.[87] The bounce rate on Bush's campaign website was 47.5%. This means that approximately 47.5% of visitors to the site only viewed one page (which could, in theory, be the home page). In addition, the daily page views per visitor was 1.6 and the daily time on the site was about one minute and 51 seconds (the lowest of all the candidates studied). Finally, "where do Jeb2016.com's visitors come from?" looked at the previous website the visitor was at before reaching Bush's website or the search engine used to get to the site. As such, 15.9% of visits to Jeb2016.com were the result of a search engine inquiry. Most of the search engine inquiry came from the keyword "Jeb Bush" (63.3%). The top websites visitors used before going to Jeb2016.com were Google (35.5%), followed by Facebook (8.6%), Twitter (7.1%), and YouTube (two percent).

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[86] Rank is determined by Alexa.com as a combination of total visitors and total page views.

[87] Bounce rate is defined by Alexa.com as "Percentage of visits to the site that consist of a single page view."

Figure 3: Alexa.com metrics of Jeb2016.com

How popular is jeb2016.com?

Alexa Traffic Ranks
How is this site ranked relative to other sites?

Global Rank ?
🌐 **62,599** ▲ 67,248

Rank in United States ?
🇺🇸 **7,144**

How engaged are visitors to jeb2016.com?

Bounce Rate
47.50% ▼ 11.00%

Daily Pageviews per Visitor
1.62 ▼ 7.95%

Daily Time on Site
1:51 ▼ 22.00%

Where do jeb2016.com's visitors come from?

Search Traffic
What percentage of visits to this site come from a search engine?

Search Visits
23.50% ▲ 61.00%

Top Keywords from Search Engines
Which search keywords send traffic to this site?

Keyword	Percent of Search Traffic
1. jeb bush	63.25%
2. jeb	5.03%
3. jeb bush for president	4.55%
4. jeb bush website	4.00%
5. jebbush.com	3.31%

🔒 Upgrade to View

Upstream Sites
Which sites did people visit immediately before this site?

Site	Percent of Unique Visits
1. google.com	35.5%
2. facebook.com	8.6%
3. t.co	7.1%
4. twitter.com	2.0%
5. youtube.com	2.0%

Source: Alexa.com

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Figure 4 examines the popularity of marcorubio.com, the website for Marco Rubio's presidential campaign. Rubio's website ranked 3,600 in the country. In contrast to Bush's website, Rubio's website started off with a lower ranking, but steadily increased after September. The bounce rate for Rubio's campaign website was 39.7%, the daily page views per visitor was 2.72, and the daily time spent on the site was about three minutes and twenty-one seconds. The percentage of visits to the website that were the result of a search engine was 11.7%, most using the keyword "Marco Rubio" (15%). The top websites visitors used before immediately going to macrorubio.com were Google (36.2%), then Facebook (11.4%), Twitter (5.2%), Yahoo (2.3%), and YouTube (1.8%).

Figure 5 examines the traffic to randpaul.com. Paul's website ranked 24,201 in the country. The opposite of Rubio, Paul's website rank started off high, and steadily decreased throughout the year. The bounce rate on Paul's campaign website was 53.4%, the daily page views per visitor was 2.43, and the daily time on the site was about three minutes and twelve seconds. 15.9% of visits to the website were the result of a search engine, most likely using the keyword "Rand Paul" (89.7%). The top websites visitors used before immediately going to randpaul.com are Google (38.1%), then Facebook, Reddit (the only candidate to have had mentions of a link to this site in their top five), YouTube, and Twitter.

Figure 4: Screenshot of Alexa.com metrics of marcorubio.com
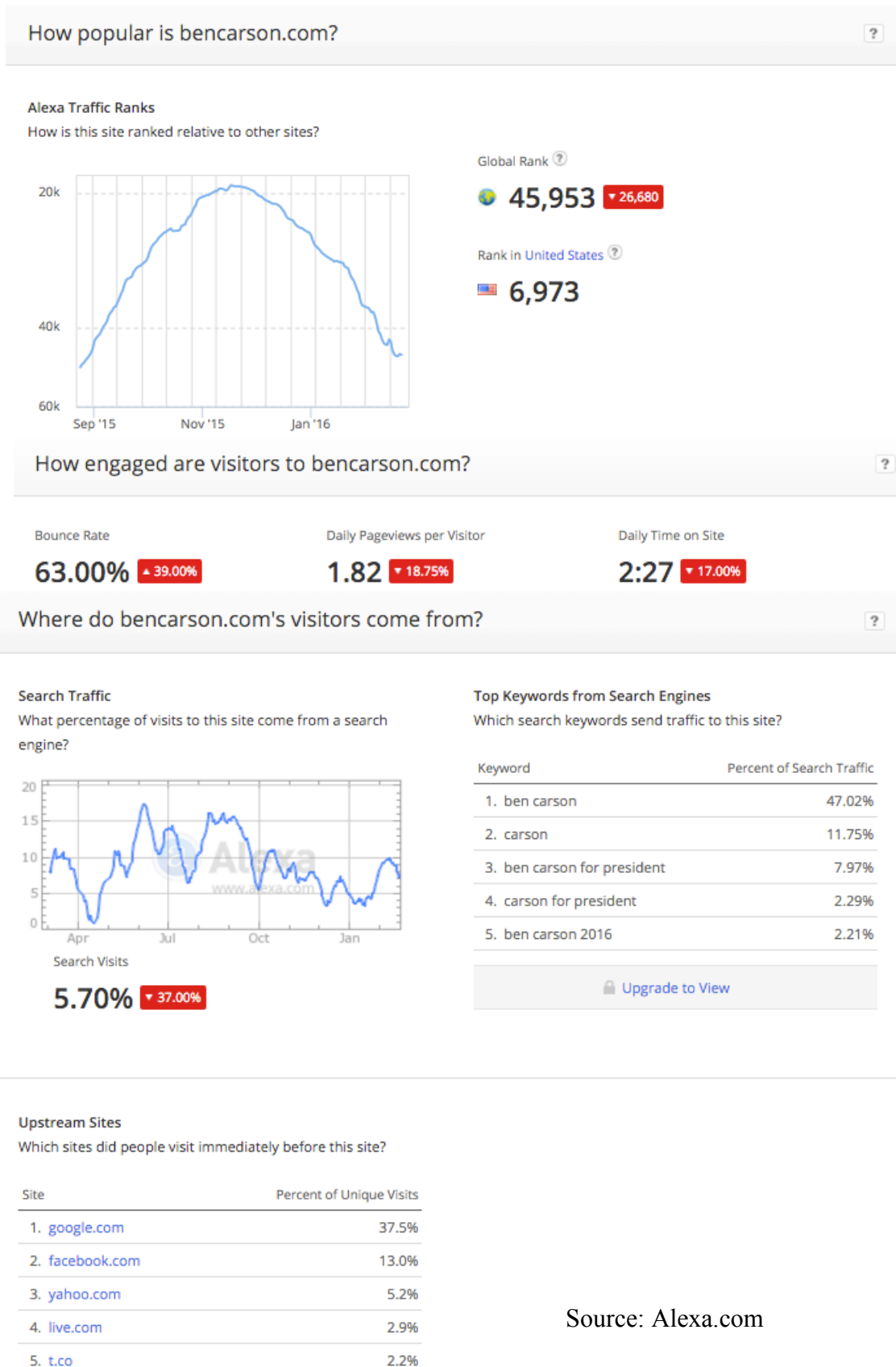

Source: Alexa.com

Figure 5: Screenshot of Alexa.com metrics of randpaul.com
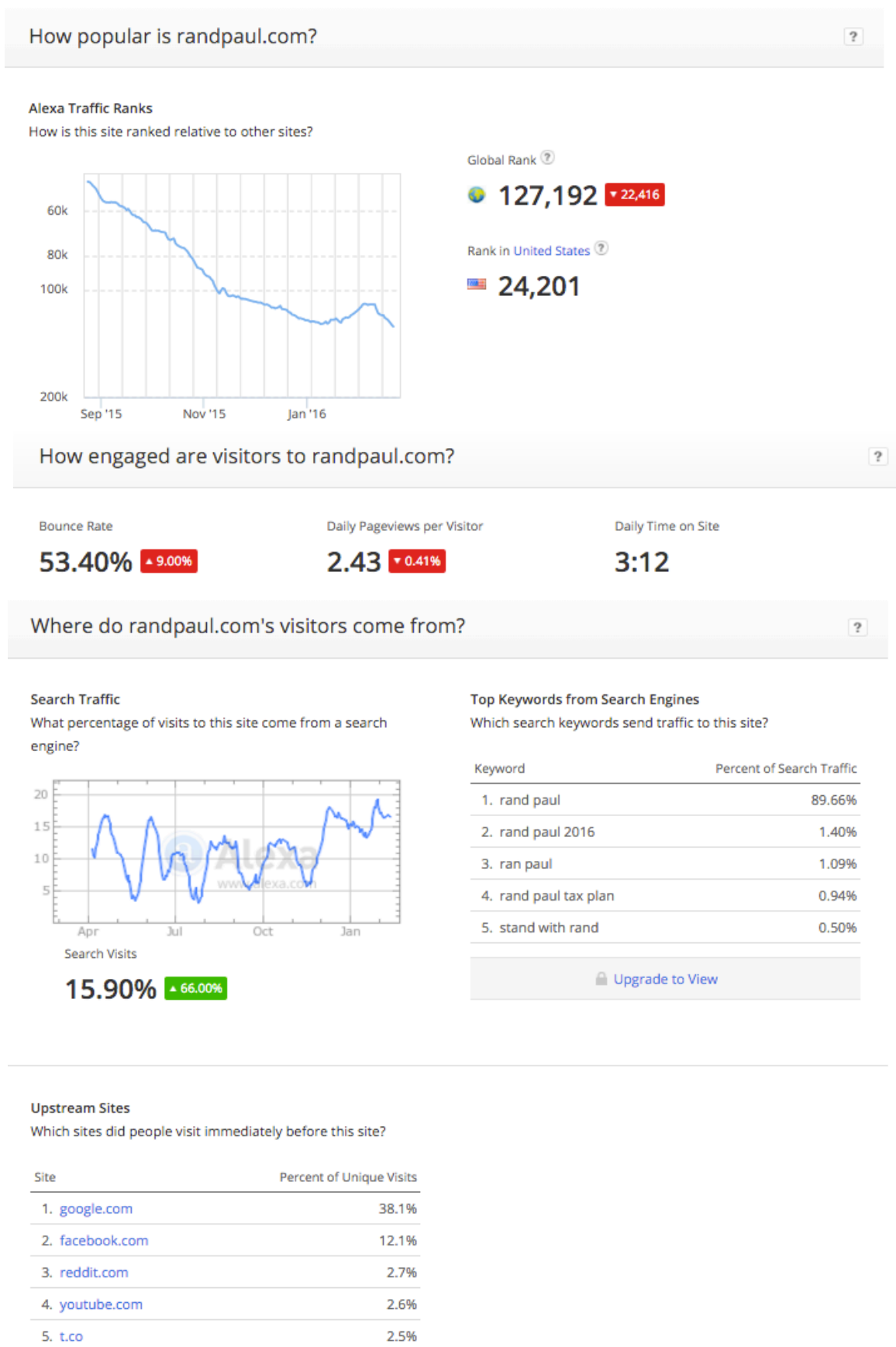
Source: Alexa.com

Figure 6 examines the frequency with which people logged on to bencarson.com. Carson's website ranked 6,973 in the country. The graph of Carson's website rank in comparison to other sites is a bell-shaped curve: steadily increasing until December, and then steadily decreasing. The bounce rate on Carson's campaign website was 63%, the daily page views per visitor was 1.82, and the daily time on the site was about two minutes and twenty-one seconds. At the lowest percentage of any of the other candidates studied, 5.7% of visits to the website were the result of a search engine, most likely using the keyword "Ben Carson" (47%). The top websites visitors used before immediately going to bencarson.com were Google (37.5%), then Facebook, Yahoo, Live (Microsoft, the only candidate to have had a significant presence of people who linked from this site), and Twitter.

Figure 6: Screenshot of Alexa.com metrics of bencarson.com

How popular is bencarson.com?

Alexa Traffic Ranks
How is this site ranked relative to other sites?

Global Rank
45,953 ▼26,680

Rank in United States
6,973

How engaged are visitors to bencarson.com?

Bounce Rate	Daily Pageviews per Visitor	Daily Time on Site
63.00% ▲39.00%	1.82 ▼18.75%	2:27 ▼17.00%

Where do bencarson.com's visitors come from?

Search Traffic
What percentage of visits to this site come from a search engine?

Search Visits
5.70% ▼37.00%

Top Keywords from Search Engines
Which search keywords send traffic to this site?

Keyword	Percent of Search Traffic
1. ben carson	47.02%
2. carson	11.75%
3. ben carson for president	7.97%
4. carson for president	2.29%
5. ben carson 2016	2.21%
🔒 Upgrade to View	

Upstream Sites
Which sites did people visit immediately before this site?

Site	Percent of Unique Visits
1. google.com	37.5%
2. facebook.com	13.0%
3. yahoo.com	5.2%
4. live.com	2.9%
5. t.co	2.2%

Source: Alexa.com

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Finally, Figure 7 examines the popularity of donaldjtrump.com. Trump's website ranked 1,108 in the country (the highest rank of all the candidates included in this research). Trump's website ranking stayed relatively high throughout. The bounce rate on Donald Trump's campaign website was 62.3%, the daily page views per visitor was 1.8, and the daily time on the site was two minutes and fifteen seconds. 8.9% of visits to the website were the result of a search engine, most using the keyword "Trump" (31.1%) or "Donald Trump" (27.1%). The top websites visitors used before immediately going to donaldjtrump.com were Google (25.3%), then Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. On the whole, Trump's website had the most traffic and was the highest ranked out of all the five candidates. However, Rubio's website had better engagement metrics, with the most page views per user.

Figure 7: Screenshot of Alexa.com metrics of donaldjtrump.com

How popular is donaldjtrump.com?

Alexa Traffic Ranks
How is this site ranked relative to other sites?

Global Rank
🌐 **7,706** ▲ 15,828

Rank in United States
🇺🇸 **1,108**

How engaged are visitors to donaldjtrump.com?

Bounce Rate	Daily Pageviews per Visitor	Daily Time on Site
62.30% ▲ 46.00%	**1.80** ▼ 29.41%	**2:15** ▼ 30.00%

Where do donaldjtrump.com's visitors come from?

Search Traffic
What percentage of visits to this site come from a search engine?

Search Visits
8.90% ▼ 48.00%

Top Keywords from Search Engines
Which search keywords send traffic to this site?

Keyword	Percent of Search Traffic
1. trump	31.11%
2. donald trump	27.06%
3. donald trump for president	5.30%
4. trump for president	5.16%
5. make america great again	3.67%

🔒 Upgrade to View

Upstream Sites
Which sites did people visit immediately before this site?

Site	Percent of Unique Visits
1. google.com	25.3%
2. facebook.com	24.8%
3. t.co	4.2%
4. twitter.com	1.9%
5. youtube.com	1.8%

Source: Alexa.com

Demographic Metrics

In addition to measuring overall website views and rank, Alexa.com measured what general demographic groups were visiting each website. Figure 8 breaks down the education of visitors to each candidate's website. All of the candidates had below the average level of "no college" education on the Internet. Rubio, Trump, Carson, and Bush had a higher than average number of people visiting their websites who had some college education. Paul was easily the leader in this category. Rubio's and Carson's websites reported above average levels of users who had college education; the three other candidates either fell at the Internet average or slightly below. Finally, only Carson ranked at having visitors to his website with above average levels of graduate education. The remaining candidates fell well below the average.

Figure 8: Screenshot of Alexa.com comparison demographic metrics for education
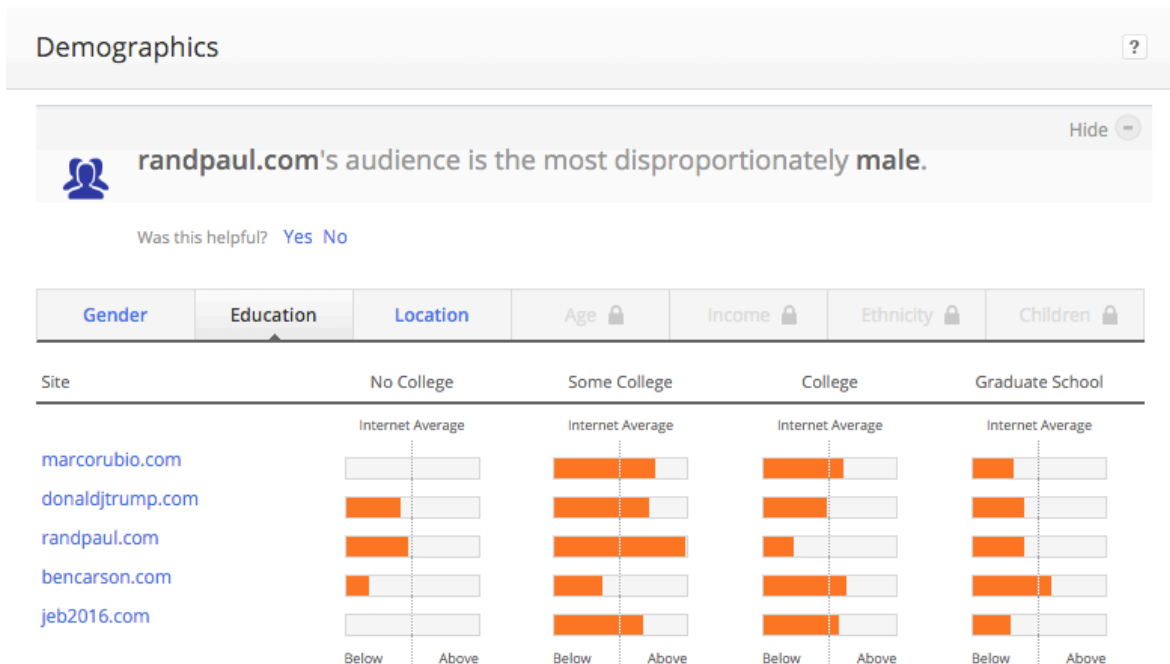
Source: Alexa.com

Besides education, Alexa.com also measured the proportion of male and female audience members to each website (as shown in Figure 9). All of the candidates had above average levels of males visiting their websites. Paul led this category as well, with a strikingly above average ranking of men. On the flip side, all of the candidates had below average levels of women visiting their websites. This meant that all of the candidates failed to attract the Internet average of women viewers to their websites. Further research would need to be conducted to determine if the five candidates' websites were more appealing to men. It was interesting that, in a year with so many women's issues at the forefront of the conversation, women were not tuning into candidates' websites at the same rate as men.

Figure 9: Screenshot of Alexa.com comparison demographic metrics for gender
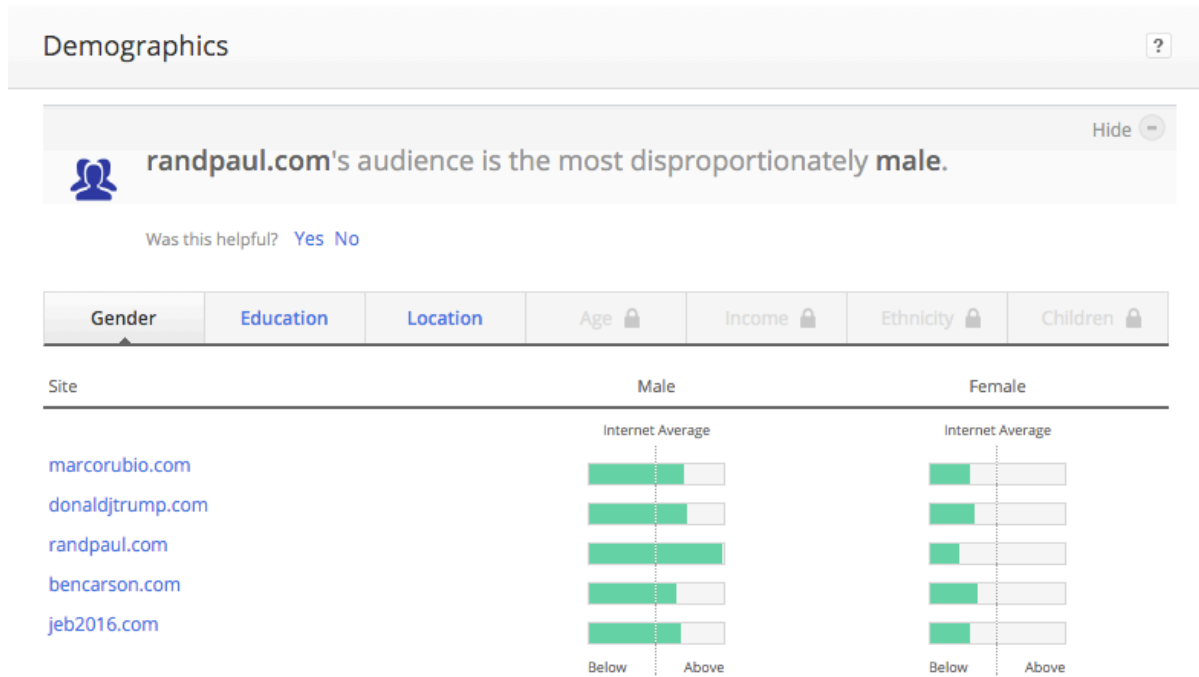
Source: Alexa.com

CHAPTER V: OVERVIEW OF WEBSITES

Chapter III and Chapter IV examined the "who" and the "how" questions of this research: "who" was looking at these websites, and "how" were they viewing them? The rest of this study examined the "what" question, "what" these viewers were seeing when they went to each website. It is important to give an overview of each of the websites, including both the structure and the content. While this study focused primarily on one section, the home pages, there was more content that deserves mention. In addition, message framing techniques employed by each of the candidates were explored in more detail. For this research, framing was defined as "an organizing principle by which structure is applied to reality through the use of selection, emphasis, exclusion, and elaboration."[88] In other words, what did a candidate's choice to include or exclude information say about what they were trying to communicate to voters?

Research conducted by Pollak (2008) identified four key factors in press releases that were then distributed online.[89] They should "(1) include a headline (2) have page titles (3) include essential information in the first paragraph (4) include embedded links."[90] Roughly the same criteria were used here to evaluate the candidates' websites, in addition to more general information about the website setup and overall theme. A brief description of each candidate and background was also included in this section.

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[88] Bichard, Shannon "Building Blog: A Multidimensional Analysis of the Distribution Frames on the 2004 Presidential Candidate Websites" 330

[89] Hill et al, "The Obama Agenda versus a Meandering Maverick: A Descriptive Analysis of Online Press Releases in the 2008 General Election Presidential Campaign" 3

[90] *Ibid.*

Jeb Bush (Jeb2016.com)

John Ellis ("Jeb") Bush was governor of Florida for eight years, from 1999 to 2007. A member of the prominent Republican political family, Bush is one of six children, including former President George W. Bush. He announced his candidacy for president on June 15, 2015.

Out of all the candidates studied for this project, Jeb2016.com went through the most transformations. In the 18-week time period of this study, there were three major phases of jeb2016.com. This reflected the shift in tone that the campaign underwent in an attempt to bring Bush back to the center of the stage. The first phase was the #AllinforJeb phase. Lasting roughly until the third week in October, this version of the site was focused on Bush's record as governor and his ideas for policies. During the #AllinforJeb phase, there was the most content on the homepage of the three phases. From announcements of endorsements to policy positions ("Jeb Bush & Israel") to attacks on Hillary Clinton ("Jeb Bush: Hillary Clinton Would be a Third Term for President Obama's Foreign Policy"), this was the most campaign-centric website out of the three. With the release of his E-book, "Reply All," on November 2, the campaign website was transformed as a supplement to the stories in the book. The main focus was the emails that Bush sent while governor of Florida. This lasted until roughly the second week of December. Finally, the third phase debuted the new slogan for the Bush campaign, "Join Us for a safer, stronger, freer America." The website can be described as a hybrid between phases one and two: it combined campaign information with Bush's record.

The basic structure of the website remained the same throughout these phases. The major sections included: "Meet Jeb," "Issues," "Volunteer," "Shop," "ES" (the website in Spanish), and "Donate." It is important to note that Bush did not have a dedicated "Issues" section on his

website until roughly the last week in September. All of the other candidates that were studied had dedicated "Issues" pages from Week 1.

Following Pollak's (2008) criteria, the Bush campaign website generally included the key factors in all three chronological phases of the website. For one, the homepage always featured the aforementioned slogan at each stage. Second, as described in the previous paragraph, there were distinct page titles. Thirdly, the first section of phases one and two did include a paragraph that introduced the candidate and explained why he was running for president. However, in the third phase, this was replaced with a video entitled "All In: All-Access With Jeb." Finally, the website did always include embedded links, whether it was linking to a donation page or the campaign's social media pages such as Twitter and Facebook.

Figure 10: Screenshot of Jeb Bush's Website

Source: Jeb2016.com

Marco Rubio (marcorubio.com)

Senator Marco Rubio of Florida was elected to the Senate in the 2010 election. He is considered to be a rising star by the Republican Party, and a protégée of former governor Jeb Bush. He announced his candidacy for president on April 13, 2015.

Rubio's website was the most consistent over the course of this study. The layout was very easy to follow: the center area was for campaign updates (including policy announcements and endorsements), the upper left hosted videos from the campaign, and the bottom left was a series of permanent links about the campaign and the candidate. Rubio's website was unique for the quantity and variety of content that was uploaded from week to week. With the most content out of all the candidates studied, there was virtually no aspect of the campaign that was not covered on the homepage. The website also employed a scrolling feature, which would constantly load blocks of information as you scrolled down the page. While sometimes these blocks linked to another section of the website, often they were individual pages in response to an attack by an opponent or an attack issued by the campaign itself.

Throughout the campaign, Rubio's message surrounded the idea of a "New American Century." This logo was always prominently displayed at the top of the webpage. Rubio's website included sections titled: "Meet Marco, "Meet Jeanette [Rubio's wife]," "Volunteer," "Store," and "Donate." These page titles stayed the same throughout the study.

Rubio was one of the two candidates studied here to employ the strategy of putting a pre-entry page on his website that asked for donations before you could click through to the main page. Usually these pages would include a short campaign video about a significant policy topic or a clip from a Republican debate.

While there was not a specific paragraph that included essential information, Rubio's version of this was the four boxes that consistently appeared underneath the headline: "Join Term Marco: The Digital Grassroots Team," "Shop Now: Get Your Marco Polo," "Donate Today: Spread Out Positive Message," and "Sign-Up Today: Join 375,000 Conservatives Getting Our Email Updates." This also served as an example of Pollack's (2008) fourth criteria for embedded links.

Figure 11: Screenshot of Marco Rubio's Website

Source: marcorubio.com

Rand Paul (randpaul.com)

Senator Randal Howard "Rand" Paul of Kentucky was elected to the Senate during the 2010 election. He is also the son of the famous libertarian and former Republican presidential candidate Congressman Ron Paul. Prior to running for the Senate, Paul was an ophthalmologist. He announced his candidacy for President on April 7, 2015.

The senator's website was focused on the issues that he is most passionate about: government reform and simplifying the tax code. His campaign slogan, "Dr. Rand Paul: Defeat the Washington Machine" was prominently featured at the top of the page. The only time this headline changed was during a major donor push; then, the title changed to "The Post Debate Moneybomb" or "End of Quarter Moneybomb." Paul's website included pages titled "Issues," "About Rand," "About Kelley [Paul's Wife]," "Volunteer," and "News." These page titles stayed the same throughout the research. Paul was the only other candidate studied who employed the pre-entry page to his website. While it was not used with the same frequency with which the Rubio campaign employed this tactic, it was often timed around the Federal Election Commission's filing deadlines.

The structure of Paul's homepage followed the same format throughout his campaign. Following the slogan banner, there was a real-time Twitter block, displaying tweets from the candidate. Next, there was a block titled "Learn More About Rand and Kelley" (a link to biographies of the Senator and his wife) and information on Paul's flat tax. Next, there was the "News & Social" section, essentially displaying current events and tales from the campaign trail. Following this was a block entitled "Rand on the Issues," with links to Paul's positions on "Spending and Debt," "Ending NSA Spying," and "Term Limits." These three issues were featured on the homepage throughout the duration of this study. Subsequent to this section was

the "Latest Videos" block, featuring items such as campaign ads and debate clips. The most interactive feature of the website was the "Endorsements" map, which allowed visitors to drop a virtual pin on their location as a place that supported Paul's candidacy. Finally, there was the calendar of "Campaign Events" and "Volunteer" information by state.

Figure 12: Screenshot of Rand Paul's Website

Source: randpaul.com

Ben Carson (bencarson.com)

Dr. Benjamin Solomon "Ben" Carson is a retired neurosurgeon from Michigan. He is considered to be an expert in his field, and spent much of his career at Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore, Maryland. Carson is also a member of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. He announced his candidacy on May 4, 2015.

The campaign website for Ben Carson's presidential run was an anomaly, much like the candidate himself. With sections that varied from week to week and a scattered format, it was not the most technologically savvy website. The home page was very sparse, with little in terms of information about the candidate himself. The slogan for the campaign, "Heal Inspire Revive," was featured at the top of the page. The sections of the website that were listed at the top of the page include: "Meet Ben," "Issues," "Events," "Volunteer," "News," "Search," "Store," and "Support Ben." Different features of the home page were often disappearing. For example, the calendar of upcoming campaign events was not consistently featured, as well as the "Stand With Ben" section that was devoted to user-submitted photos of the candidate. The only relatively consistent aspect of the website was the "Featured News" block, which included press releases from the campaign as well as links to articles about Carson from outside news sources.

In terms of the criteria outlined by Pollack (2008), the Carson campaign's website did include most of the essential features. It did lack, however, any specifics about the candidate or essential information for voters. In comparison to the other websites studied, it had the fewest details about policy positions or experience. Carson's website may have been sparse simply because of the fact that he did not have a past record to displayed prominently. At many points during this study, there was very little content in terms of messaging that could easily be analyzed.

Figure 13: Screenshot of Ben Carson's Website

Source: bencarson.com

. Donald Trump (donaldjtrump.com)

Donald John Trump is a billionaire business owner and celebrity from New York City. While Trump has flirted with the idea of running for public office before, he is another one of the "outsider" candidates in the race this year. Known for his outspoken personality and flashy persona, Trump is, to say the least, an anomaly in this year's presidential race. He announced his candidacy on June 16, 2015.

Continuing on this theme of "outsider versus insider" websites, Trump's website also stood out for its simplicity. The top of the homepage featured the Trump campaign slogan, "Make America Great Again!" along with a picture of Trump. The different pages on his website are labeled: "Positions," "States," "Get Involved," "Media," "Shop," and "Donate." Above this banner, there are two, smaller sections: "About" and "Gallery." In contrast to the other candidates, Trump's biography was not a main feature on the navigation bar.

The main section of the homepage was divided into three different blocks: "In the News," "Press Releases," and "Video." "In the News" links visitors to pro-Trump articles from a variety of media sources. The "Video" section included interviews by Trump and his appearances on various cable networks.

The most interesting feature (although not studied in this research) was the large block that is essentially a live Twitter feed. Throughout the campaign, Trump was known for his affinity for Twitter and his seemingly constant use of the social media site. Therefore, it is no surprise that Trump chose to include this on his homepage. In contrast to the "Press Releases" section, Twitter did afford Trump the opportunity to respond to current events quickly and in a few words, whereas his more traditional press releases were longer and are updated less often.

Figure 14: Screenshot of Donald Trump's Website

Source: donaldjtrump.com

CHAPTER V: RESULTS—Home Pages

At the conclusion of the 18-week content analysis, results were broken down into three pieces: the number of competitive, substantive, and informative messages per week in order to get a sense of the overall message of each website. Figures 15 through 19 reflect the frequency of messages from week to week for each candidate. Figures 20 through 24 show these numbers as a conditional distribution. Finally, Figures 25 through 29 demonstrate the percentage of each website that was substantive, competitive, or informative overall.

Frequency of Messages

This section demonstrates the measured frequency of messages for each of the candidates' websites. This was calculated by graphing the total number of substantive, competitive, and informative messages per week. Looking at the results, different patterns emerged, especially relative to the candidates' overall standing in the polls.

Jeb Bush (Jeb2016.com)

Here, in the first phase of the Bush website, substantive messages were the dominant force from September 2 to October 3. For examples, the website featured items such as "My Passion for Education Reform" and "Full Remarks: Taking on Islamic Terrorism" on October 3. These were both considered "Issue" blocks, and thus examples of substantive messaging. In addition, the peak of Bush's competitive messaging strategy was during the weeks leading up to October 3, peaking during that time ("The Real Donald Trump," September 19). This correlated with Bush's polling numbers at the time: as is shown in Figure 1, Bush hovered around ten percent, the highest mark he achieved. As Bush's polling numbers dropped, there was a decrease in the number of competitive messages.

Figure 15: Frequency of messages on Jeb2016.com
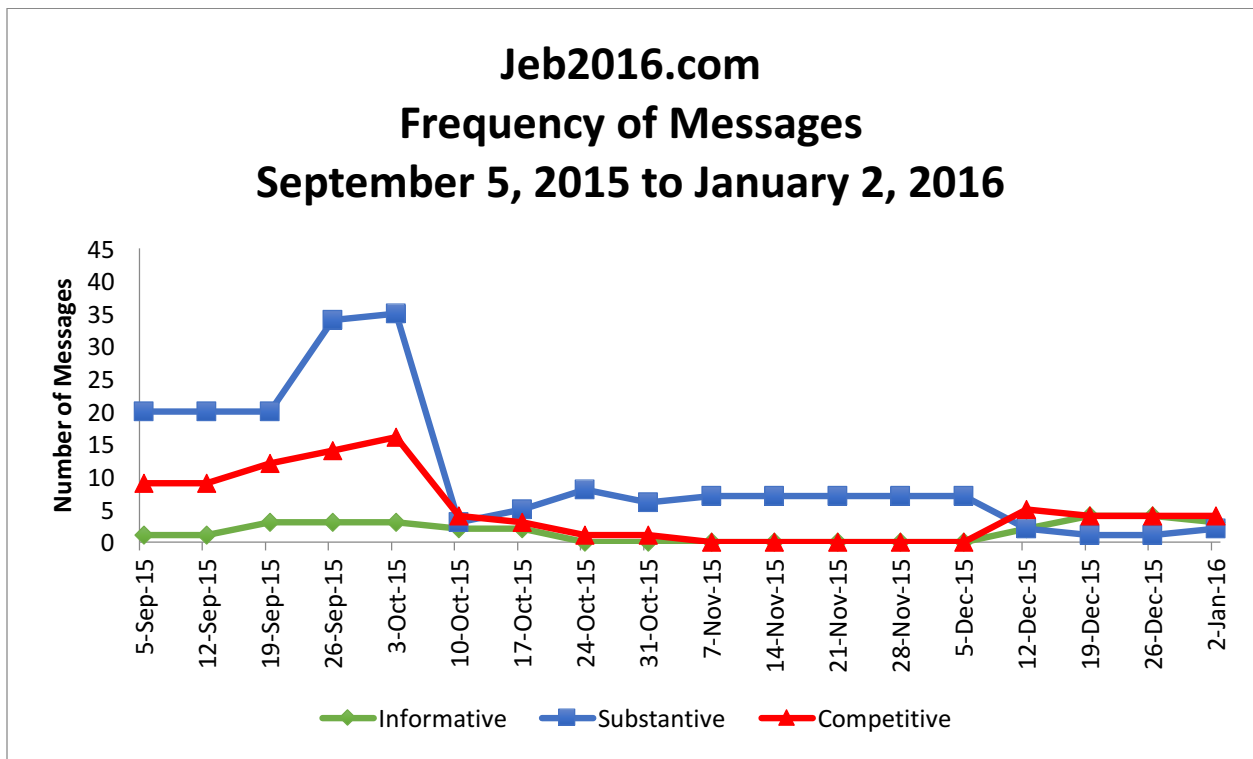
The sharp drop in substantive messages can most likely be attributed to the retooling of the website. As previously mentioned, this was the time period in which Bush was focusing on

his eBook, "Reply All," about his time as governor of Florida. The bulk of the information

concerned his record and background, both of which are classified as substantive messages. This

includes messages such as "Conservative Governor: Read Emails."

Informative messages were virtually nonexistent on the homepage of his website.

Staffing decisions or appearance dates stayed in a separate section of the website and were rarely

featured on the front page. Overall, it is worth noting that Bush did not include a significant

amount of content on any version of his website.

Marco Rubio (marcorubio.com)

In contrast to Bush, Rubio employed a depth and variety of messages on the homepage of

his website. Rubio started off very substantively, with references to policy proposals and past

voting records. He dedicated extensive amounts of home page retail space to outlining his views

on "Marriage" and the "Second Amendment." While he stayed relatively substantive throughout,

the substantive messages dominating his website dip around October 17. This is reflected in an

uptick in his polling numbers, as shown in Figure 1. For instance, messages such as "Too Many

Leaders Are Trapped in the Past: What You Will See Tonight." This was referring to one of the

Republican debates, and was coded as a horse race, competitive message. Informative and

competitive messages reflected the same pattern for September 2 through October 24, splitting

off around October 31. As previously mentioned, this was the time period in which Rubio was

polling better nationally, around 12% from November 7 to November 28. This number was

significant for Rubio because it is the first time he consistently broke away from the other lower

tier candidates in terms of polling average over the course of this study. On November 21,

Rubio's website included the block "Marco Blows Away Conservatives at Florida GOP's

Sunshine Summit," a campaign oriented attack on his opponents, and a clear reflection of the campaign's increasingly competitive edge.

Figure 16: Frequency of messages on marcorubio.com

marcorubio.com
Frequency of Messages
September 5, 2015 to January 2, 2016
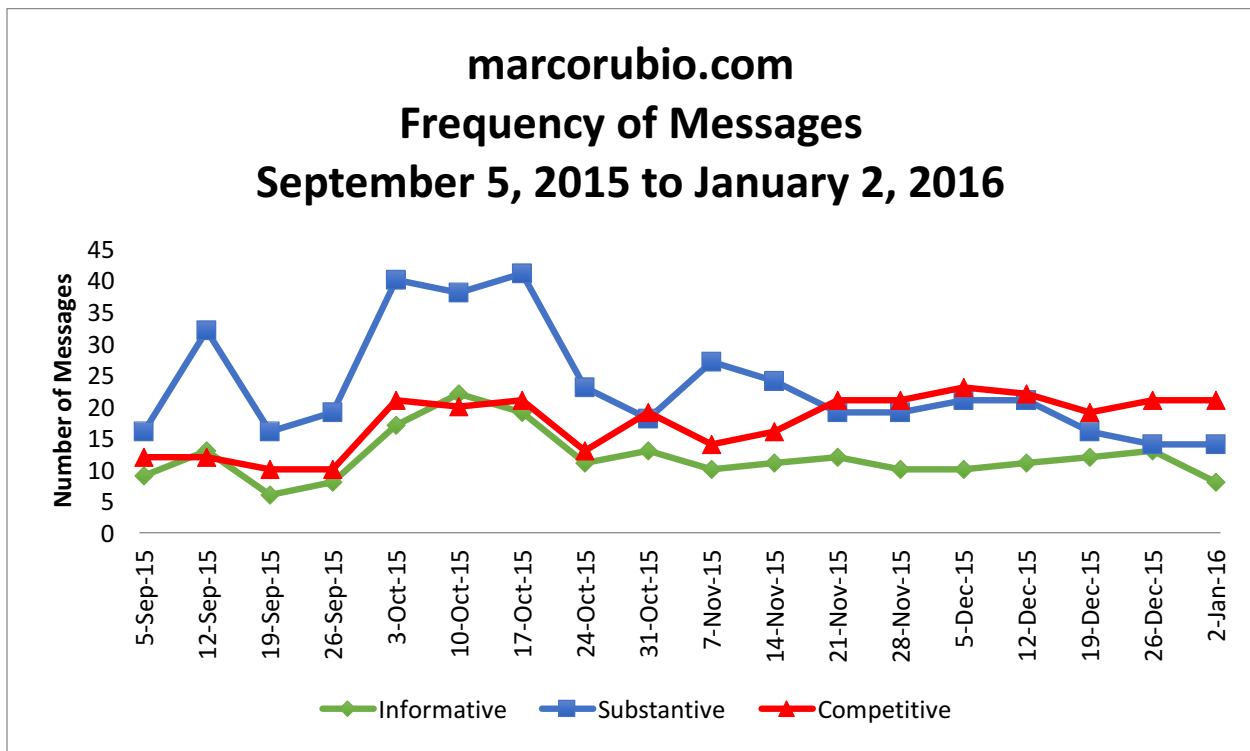
Rubio's home page was most notable for the amount of content each week. On average, there were around 50 messages per week posted on the home page. This is a plentiful sample size to draw from, and gave the most comprehensive information on the direction and tone of this campaign. On the other hand, this is an outlier in this study: the rest of the campaigns typically featured fewer messages on their home pages.

Rand Paul (randpaul.com)

Paul's website, while having certain distinct moments of change, was relatively consistent throughout this study. From October 24 to January 2, the number of informative messages stayed completely constant. This reflects the overall structure of his website. As

described in Chapter V, Paul's home page focused much of its content on volunteer information, upcoming events, and endorsements.

Figure 17: Frequency of messages on randpaul.com
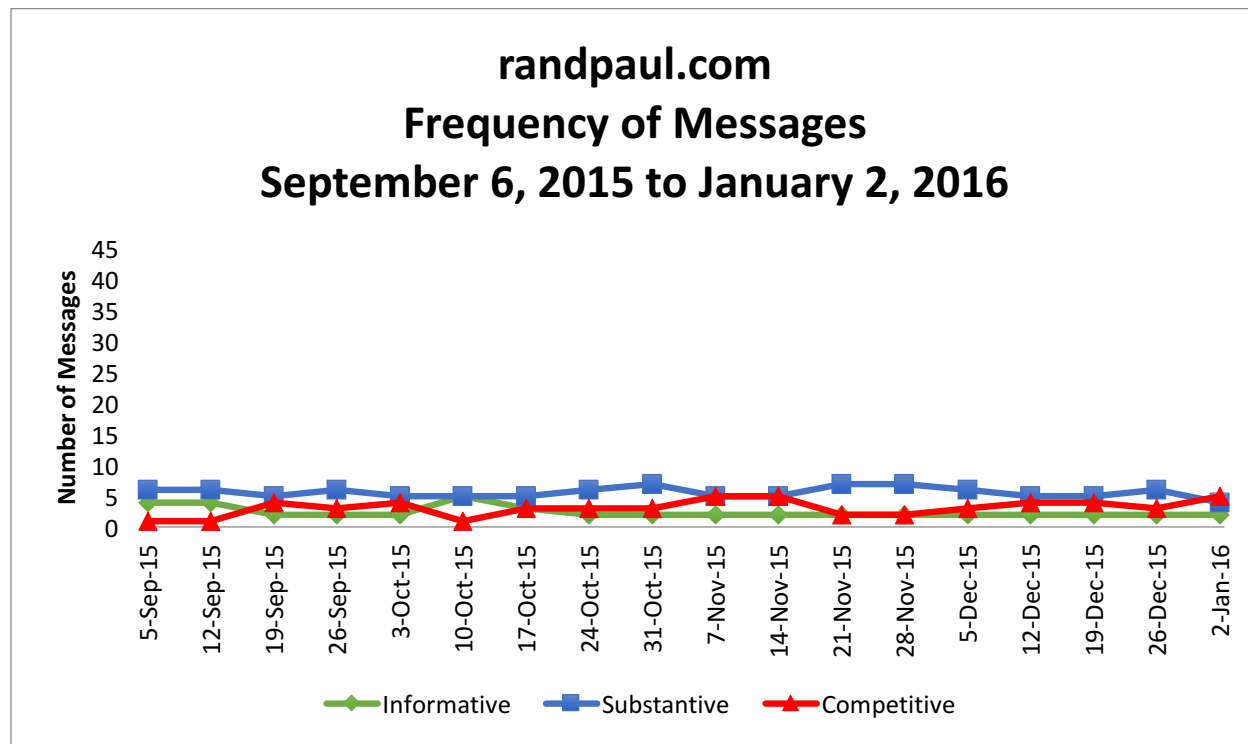
While Paul was never the leader of the GOP pack, there were moments in the campaign when he got a boost. This was reflected in his website as well: it surged in competitive messages from November 7-14, also the same time his poll numbers in Figure 1 reached their all time high at 3.7%. While Paul is not quite able to transition from third-tier status, this did give his campaign some life. Substantive messages dominated the overall tone of the website. Only in the last week of this study, January 2, was the number of substantive messages lower than competitive messages. This could represent an effort by the campaign to remain relevant in the upcoming months, however, more data would be needed to better answer this question. It could also be simply a reflection of the campaign pushing to stay in the race as the Iowa caucuses were looming.

Ben Carson (bencarson.com)

As demonstrated here, the Carson campaign's website did not have a general theme that can be well described. For most of the weeks studied, there did not seem to be a coherent messaging strategy. For the first couple of weeks, the message fluctuated between the different themes. From October 10 to November 21, the campaign website did contain more competitive messages. The RCP polling average in Figure 1 also showed Carson at the height of his polling average during this time period, starting at 17.7% on October 6 and jumping to 24.5% by November 7.

Figure 18: Frequency of messages of bencarson.com
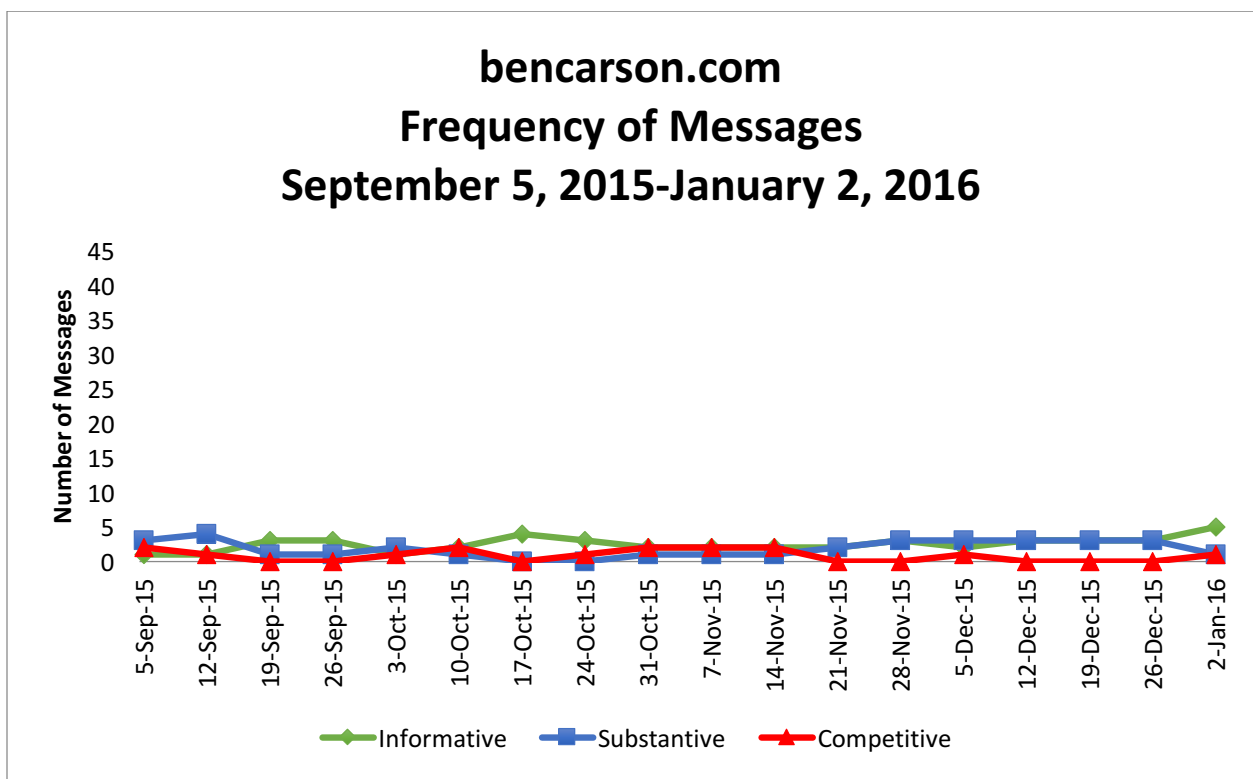
After this, however, the number of competitive messages sharply decreased. From this point onward, the substantive and informative messages stayed roughly at the same levels. This reflected a downward trend in the polls as well. Carson's website, as described in the overview, is the sparsest in terms of content. The website mostly included information about upcoming

events or articles where Carson was mentioned. For instance, "You Have Questions? Ben Has Answers! #AskBen," was considered a campaign announcement and therefore an informative message.

Donald Trump (donaldjtrump.com)

Throughout this research, the home page of donaldjtrump.com consistently contained the most competitive messages. The majority of the messages were competitive in nature, reflecting Trump's frontrunner status throughout this research. In the RCP Polling Average in Figure 1, Trump's polling numbers remained much higher than his closest competitors.

Figure 19: Frequency of messages on donaldjtrump.com
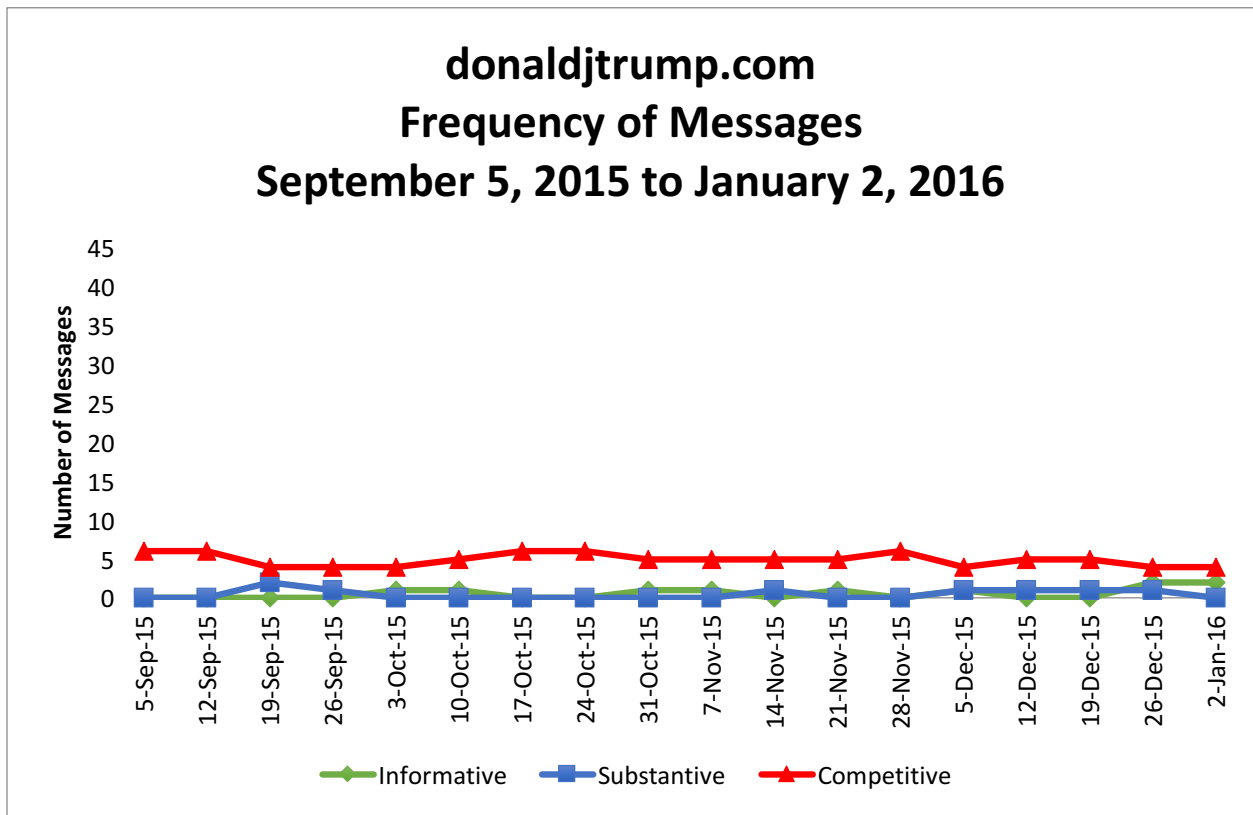
The exception to this would be around November 7, when Trump and Carson were virtually tied. For example, messages included "Republicans Trust Trump on Economy, Nuclear

Weapons: Reuters/IPSOS Poll." Polling references were considered to be a part of the horse race messaging, which was exclusively competitive in nature. It is no surprise that Trump wanted to highlight his superior polling numbers in one individual poll when the race between him and Carson was tightening. Substantive and informative messages hovered around zero to one per week. From October 2 to November 28, there were zero substantive messages on Trump's homepage. When a substantive message did appear, as one did on December 5, "Donald Trump on Climate Change Policy," it was a considered an issue mention. Such one-off policy platform statements were typical of the home page.

Conditional Distribution

     In order to further analyze the relationship between the independent and dependent variables, conditional distributions were formulated for each of the candidates' websites. A conditional distribution indicated the distribution of one variable based on the value of another. For this research, a conditional distribution demonstrated what percentage of the website was competitive, substantive, or informative from week to week. The conditional distribution for each week was calculated by adding up the total number of messages and dividing the count for each type of messaging strategy by that number. This provided a way to look at the messages as percentages as opposed to the frequency counts explained earlier. It also leveled the playing field in the sense that this allowed for a comparison of "apples to apples." While the frequency tables were helpful in demonstrating the cycles of the homepages, the conditional distribution calculated showed the percentage of informative, substantive, and competitive messages on each website.

Jeb Bush (Jeb2016.com)

Through this analysis, substantive messages dominated the Bush campaign homepage. From September 2 to December 5, substantive messages made up between 67% and 100% of the messages (with the exception of October 10, where the percentage of substance messages dropped to 33%). The first two phases of the Bush website, #AllinforJeb and "Reply All," were clearly projecting a mostly substantive image of the candidate. While the website hovered around 30% competitive messages for the first six weeks of the study, the percentage of competitive messages declined during the "Reply All" phase of the campaign. Bush himself was polling his lowest during this time, starting at 8% and dropping off to 2.8% by December 5 (Figure 1).

Figure 20: Conditional distribution of messages for Jeb2016.com
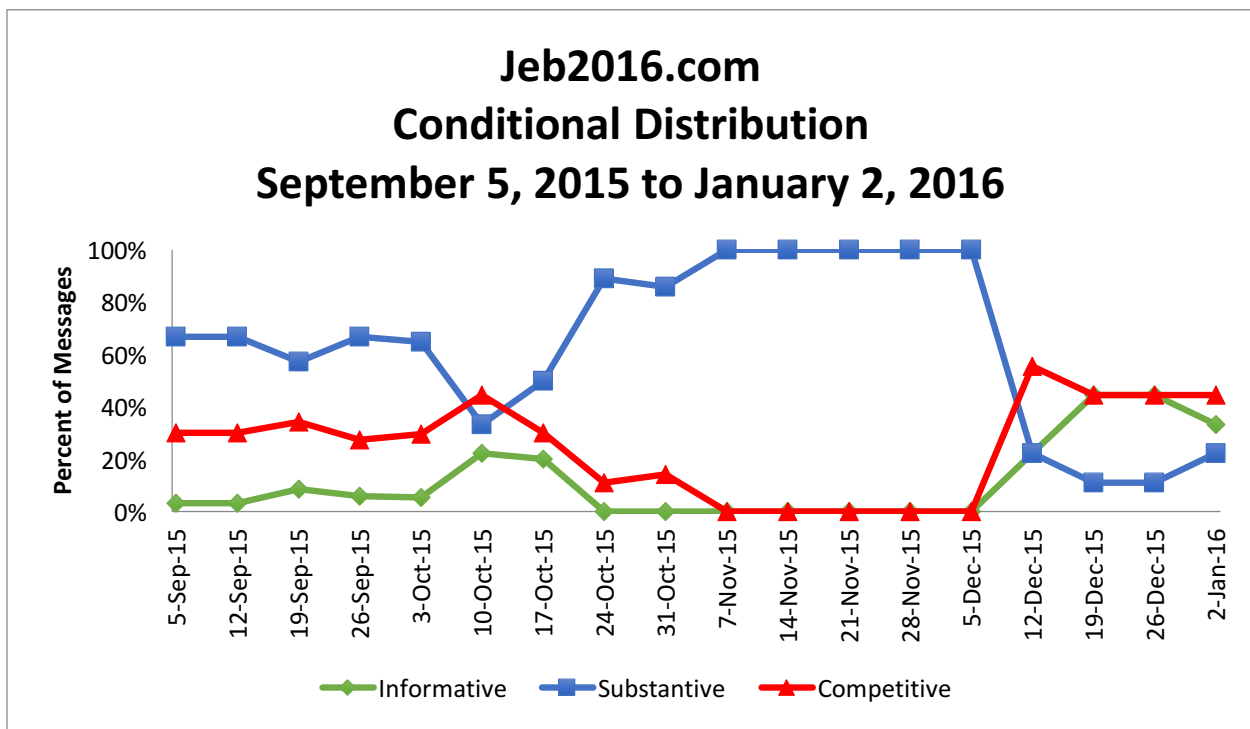
Possibly sensing that this strategy was not a winning one, Bush's substantive message focus droped to 22% by December 12. This also marked the new phase of his website: "Join Us for a safer, stronger, freer America." This date also marked the highest percentage of competitive messages on the website, reaching 56%.

In terms of informative messages, the first two phases of the campaign did not include very high levels of such information. Campaign announcements, such as "Dinner with Jeb" (a contest announcement), did not appear at all during the second phase of the campaign website, and only reached their highest numbers (around 40%) in the third phase.

Marco Rubio (marcorubio.com)

Given the amount of material to work with, Rubio's website provided the greatest insight into the overall structure of his campaign message, and how it changed over the course of this project. At the beginning, Rubio's homepage contained about 50% substantive messages. This lasted roughly through November 14, at which point the percentage of substantive messages fell.

Figure 21: Conditional distribution of messages for marcorubio.com
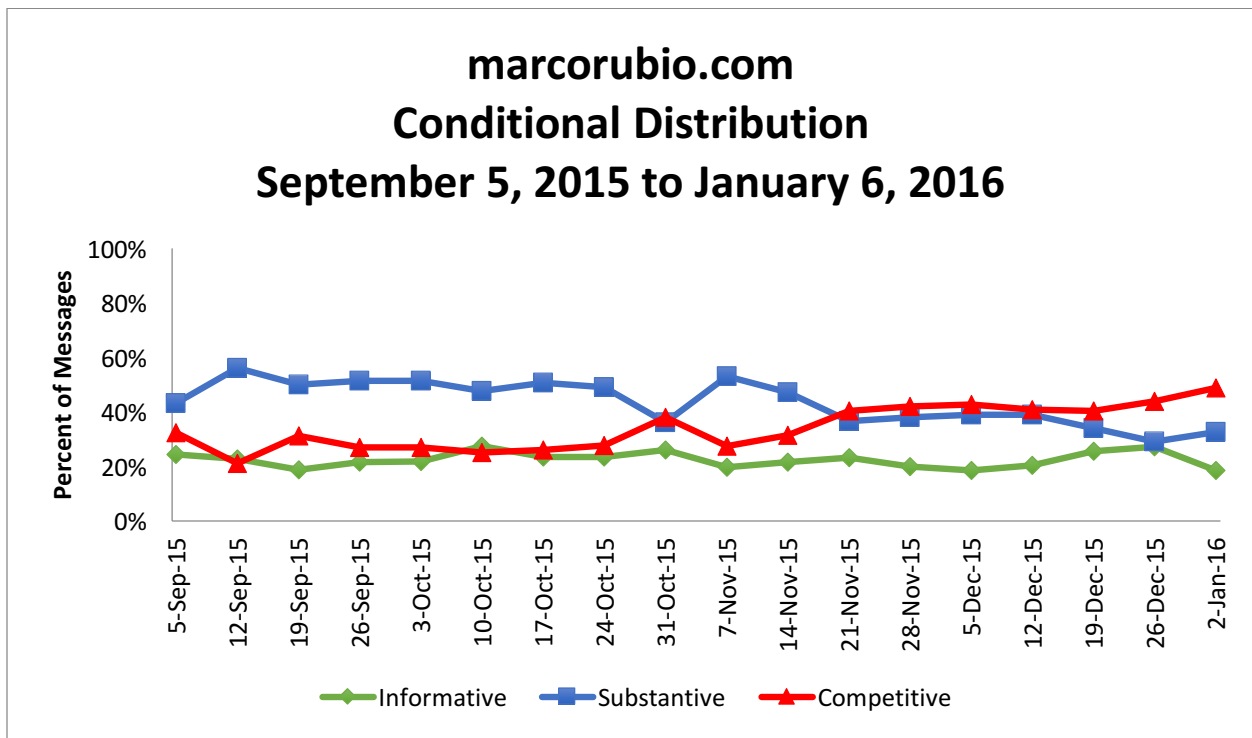
At this juncture, the percentage of competitive messages broke 30%. This is the beginning of an upward trend that continued to grow throughout the rest of the study. As

previously mentioned, this was approximately the point at which Rubio's polling numbers hit their stride as well. From this point, the percentage of substantive and competitive messaging virtually switched, with substantive messaging sloping downward and competitive messaging sloping upward. Competitive messages at this point included "This Election is a Generational Choice--and Hillary Clinton is a Candidate of the Past," a candidate-centered attack, and "WATCH: Before the Phony Attacks, Here's What Jeb Had to Say about Marco," a horse race message due to the direct reference of one of his GOP opponents and how the race for the presidency had "changed" Bush.

Informative messaging remained comparatively even throughout the campaign, with the high point being 27% on December 26. However, no messaging strategy at any point was drastically higher than the other. While other candidates demonstrated sharp differences, the Rubio campaign did not display any severe shifts in tone.

Rand Paul (randpaul.com)

This graph helps to show the focus of the Paul campaign towards substantive messages. On average, Paul's homepage featured around 50% substantive messages. Similar to Rubio, there were not significant changes in the overall tone of the website. At certain points when Paul was polling better, for example, on November 14, the percentage of substantive and competitive messages was even. Examples of competitive messages included statements such as "A Conservative Realist Awakening? Rand Paul Strikes Back" and "In the Latest Debate, of Course it Was Rand Paul." Both of these messages were competitive, horse race statements referring to the state of the invisible primary contest and Paul's place in the field. Informative messages from October 24 to January 2 remained almost the same, shifting between 17% and 18%.

Figure 22: Conditional distribution of messages for randpaul.com
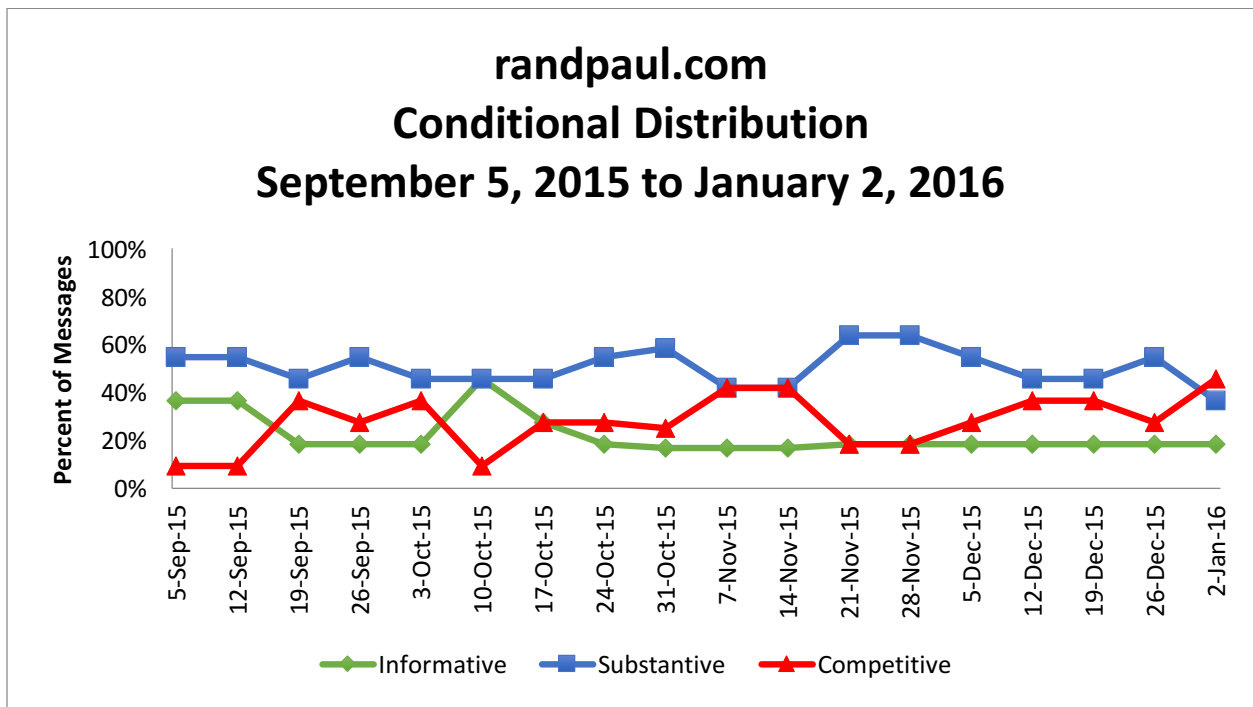
Ben Carson (bencarson.com)

More than anything, this graph demonstrates the lack of a clear focus by the Carson campaign. There are certain points over the course of this study when there seemed to be a push for a distinct message; however, it did not appear to be a lasting trend. From October 31 to November 14, competitive and informative messages were even at 40% each. As Figure 1 shows, this also coincided with the height of Carson's polling in this study.

Figure 23: Conditional distribution of messages for bencarson.com
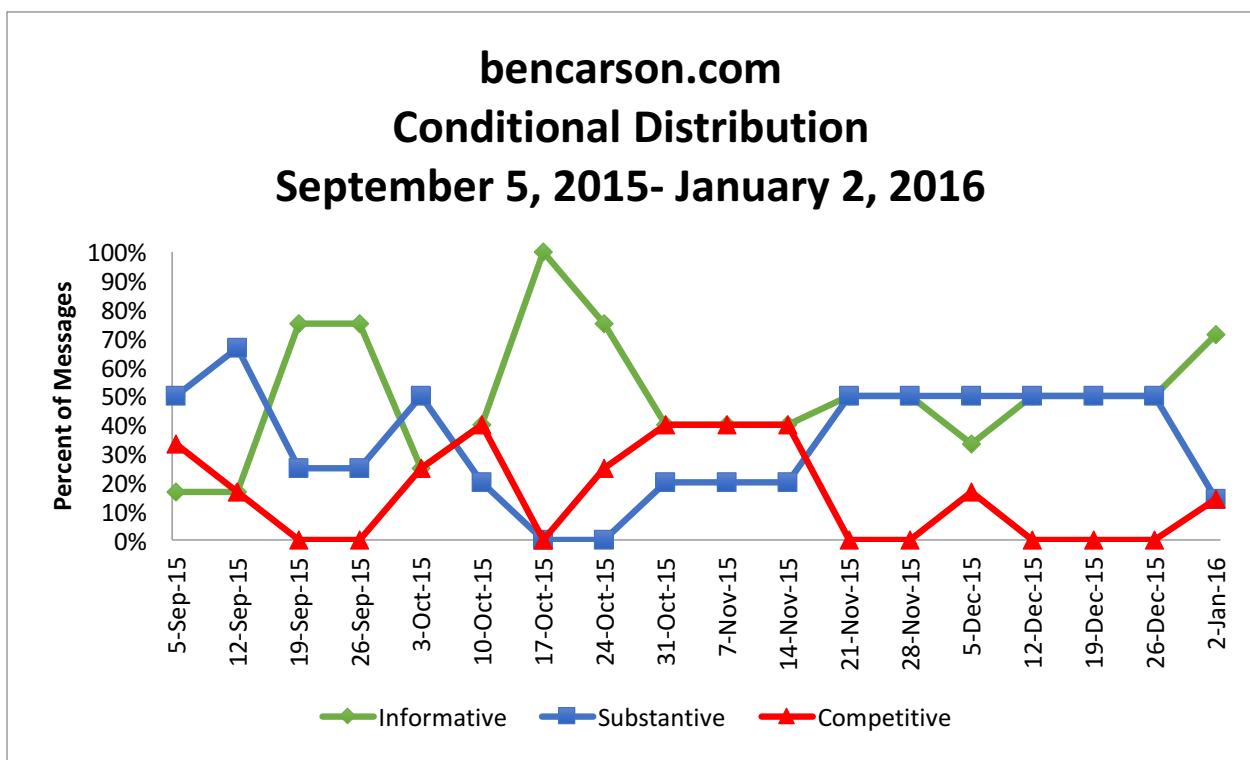
It is possible the campaign was shifting the focus of the homepage to be more competitive and reflect the state of the "horse race." One such statement was this block, which read "View Ben Carson's Closing Statements at the GOP Debate," inviting visitors to watch a video from a recent debate. Following this bump, competitive messages dropped drastically to 0%, and substantive messages hit their stride, staying at 50% from November 21 to December 26. The percentage of informative messages had no discernible pattern, and evened out at

approximately 40% around October 31. Prior to this, however, informative messages drove the Carson homepage, at one point reaching 100%. As evidenced by Carson's poll numbers, he did reach first tier status during this research. However, he was not able to sustain that momentum for long, and soon returned to third-tier status.

Donald Trump (donaldjtrump.com)

Looking at Figure 24, a clear, dominant message emerges. Trump's homepage clearly featured the most competitive messages out of all the candidates studied. On average, Trump's website comprised of 83% competitive messages. On a number of occasions, Trump's homepage contained 100% competitive messages. On October 17, for example, Trump's website featured horse race messages including "In the News: CNBC Caves to Trump's Demands for Next GOP Debate."

Figure 24: Conditional distribution of messages for donaldjtrump.com
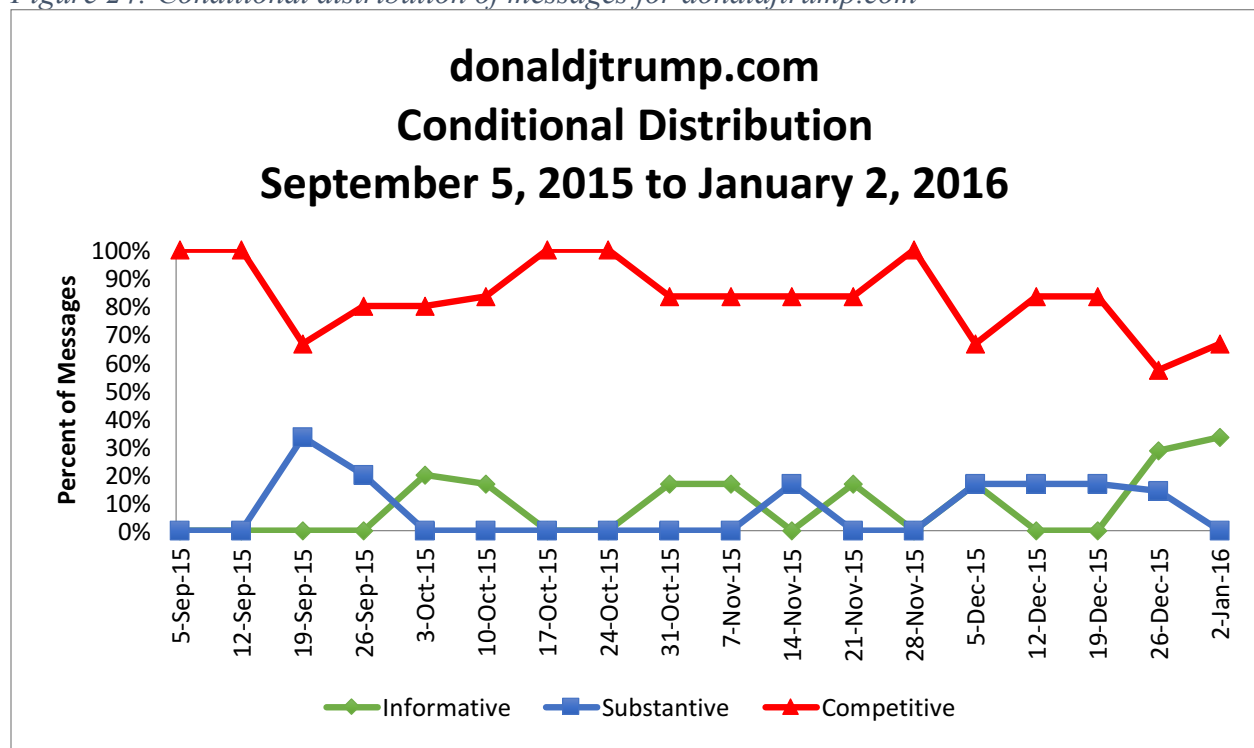
For most of the first half of this study, there were zero percent substantive messages on the homepage. As Figure 1 shows, Trump remained the frontrunner throughout, giving him plenty of reason to focus his attention on remaining competitive. Unlike the other candidates, however, Trump's website had sharp dividing lines. The percentage of substantive or informative messages never even came close to the percentage of competitive messages. Going against the hypothesis of this research, the lowest percentage of competitive messages, 57%, occurred during the highest point of Trump's polling average during this study (Figure 1). This reinforces Haynes et. al. (2002) who concluded that frontrunners tend to include more substantive messages.[91] This may simply be an outlier in the research, or may represent an attempt on the part of the campaign to shift messaging strategies, and include policy positions as well as attacks on opponents.

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[91] Haynes et al., "Getting the Message out: Candidate Communication Strategy During the Invisible Primary," 638.

Overall Content

Figures 25 through 29 demonstrate the overall content comparisons for each of the candidates' websites. This was calculated by adding up all the substantive, competitive, and informative messages and dividing by the total number of messages. These graphs demonstrate the tone of each website in aggregate and the differences between the candidates' overall messaging strategies.

Certain conclusions about what will be shown in the results were drawn here. Haynes et al. (2002) suggest that "one messaging strategy will dominate each campaign and that this strategy will be determined by the candidate's position within the field of competitors."[92] Generally, this means that frontrunners focused on "information dissemination, second tier candidates will attempt competitive messaging strategies and substantive (although to a lesser degree), and third-tier candidates will focus on substantive messages."[93]

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[92] Haynes et al., "Getting the Message out: Candidate Communication Strategy During the Invisible Primary" 639.
[93] *Ibid.*

Jeb Bush (Jeb2016.com)

At 63% substantive messages overall, Bush had the most policy and issue based website homepage out of all the candidates studied. His website was also about 28% competitive and nine percent informative overall. While at one point during the campaign season Bush was considered to be a frontrunner, his dismal poll numbers pushed him more towards the line of a second-tier candidate. While Haynes et al. (2002) would have expected Bush's more substantive focused website to have pushed the frontrunner (in this case, Donald Trump) to address more substantive policy issues, this was clearly not the case.[94] The campaign's decision to remain substantive seems to have been a conscious decision by the campaign, but it did not bolster Bush's overall chance at the nomination.

Figure 25: Overview of website message content for Jeb2016.com

jeb2016.com Content Overview
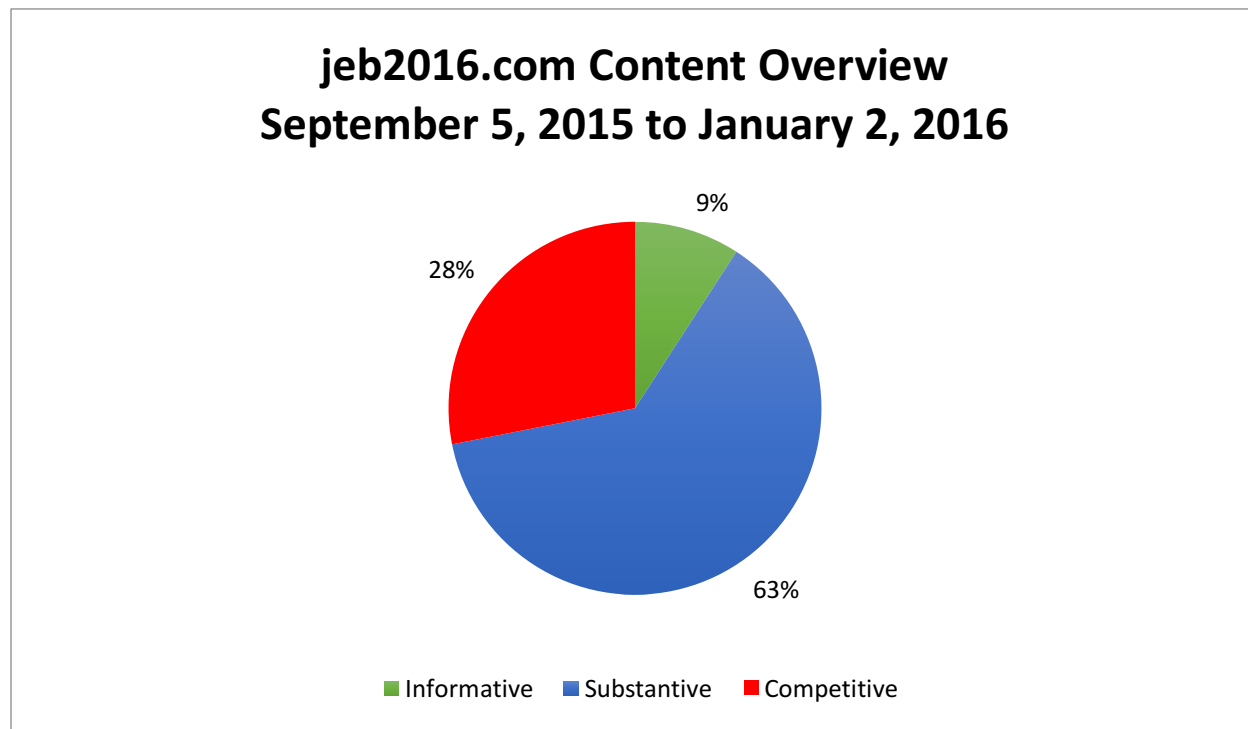September 5, 2015 to January 2, 2016

9%
28%
63%

■ Informative ■ Substantive ■ Competitive

---

[94] Haynes et al., "Getting the Message out: Candidate Communication Strategy During the Invisible Primary," 638.

Marco Rubio (marcorubio.com)

The makeup of Rubio's website overall is similar to other candidates in this study. His homepage featured about 44% substantive messages overall. Competitive messages made up about one third of the overall content on his website, while informative messages accounted for roughly 23%. This reflected the overall vision of the Rubio campaign: ideas mixed with a competitive edge. The website mixed competitive statements aimed at Rubio's Republican and Democratic opponents with carefully laid out policy details. The quarter of his website being attributed to informative messages can be explained by the frequency with which the campaign announced new staffers and campaign chairmen as well as opportunities to meet the candidate.

Figure 26: Overview of website message content for marcorubio.com

marcorubio.com Content Overview
September 5, 2015 to January 2, 2016

23%

33%

44%

■ Informative ■ Substantive ■ Competitive
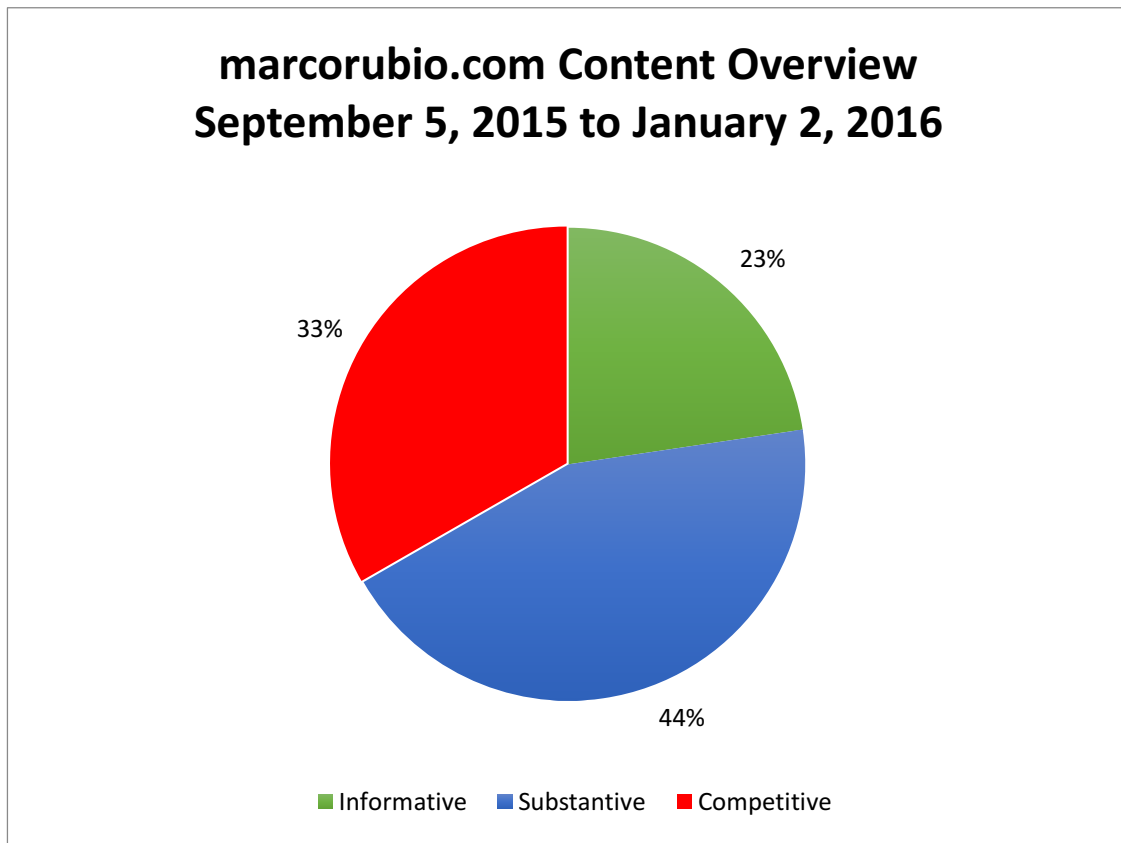
Rand Paul (randpaul.com)

Paul's website was heavily focused on substantive messages: about 50% of the overall content on his homepage over the course of tis research was classified as "substantive." In contrast, about 28% of the homepage was considered "competitive." The messages on his home page were also about 22% informative. This breakdown reflected the ideological focus of the Paul campaign. As a candidate, Paul represented the more libertarian wing of the Republican Party. As such, he can be considered more of a third-tier candidate: "Those at the bottom of the ranks must generally maintain whatever 'niche' of the party they appeal to at the same time they are attempting to get people to pay attention to their message."[95] There were points when Paul's website contained more competitive messages, such as after a particularly strong debate showing, but the campaign's true goal was to offer policy solutions.

Figure 27: Overview of message content for randpaul.com

randpaul.com Content Overview
September 5, 2015 to January 6, 2016

22%
28%
50%

■ Informative ■ Substantive ■ Competitive

---
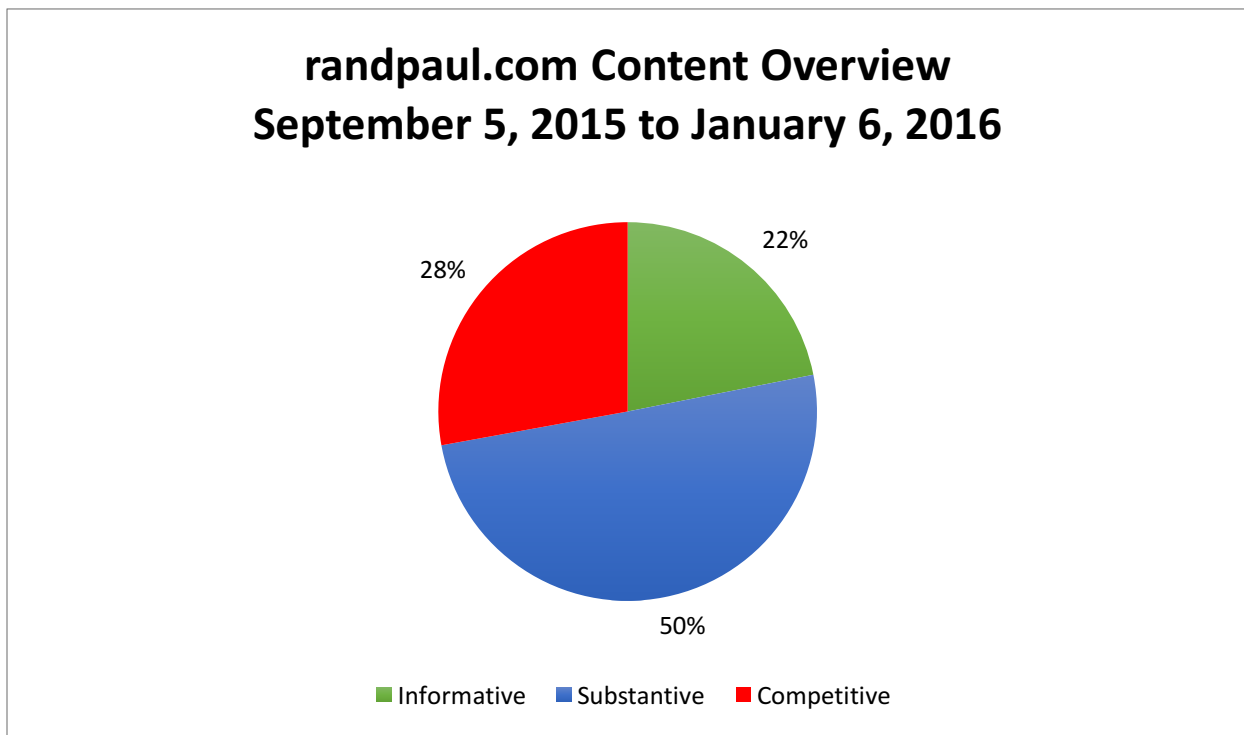
[95] Haynes et al., "Getting the Message out: Candidate Communication Strategy During the Invisible Primary" 639.

Ben Carson (bencarson.com)

Carson's website ultimately had a completely different focus than the rest of the candidates. Informative messages made up 48% of the overall content of his webpage during the duration of this research. In addition, 36% of the home page messages were substantive. Most interestingly, though, 18% of the messages were considered competitive. This is the lowest percentage of competitive messages from any of the candidates. Despite Carson's brief frontrunner status, his campaign seems to have largely functioned on a third-tier level. As previously discussed, much of his website was devoted to informing visitors about contests, where to see Carson, and other logistical updates. Substantive messages tended to be news articles that the campaign linked to describing Carson's positions on issues. Competitive messages represented the smallest portion of the website messaging strategy overall.

Figure 28: Overview of message content for bencarson.com

**bencarson.com Content Overview
September 5, 2015 to January 2, 2016**

16%
48%
36%

■ Informative ■ Substantive ■ Competitive
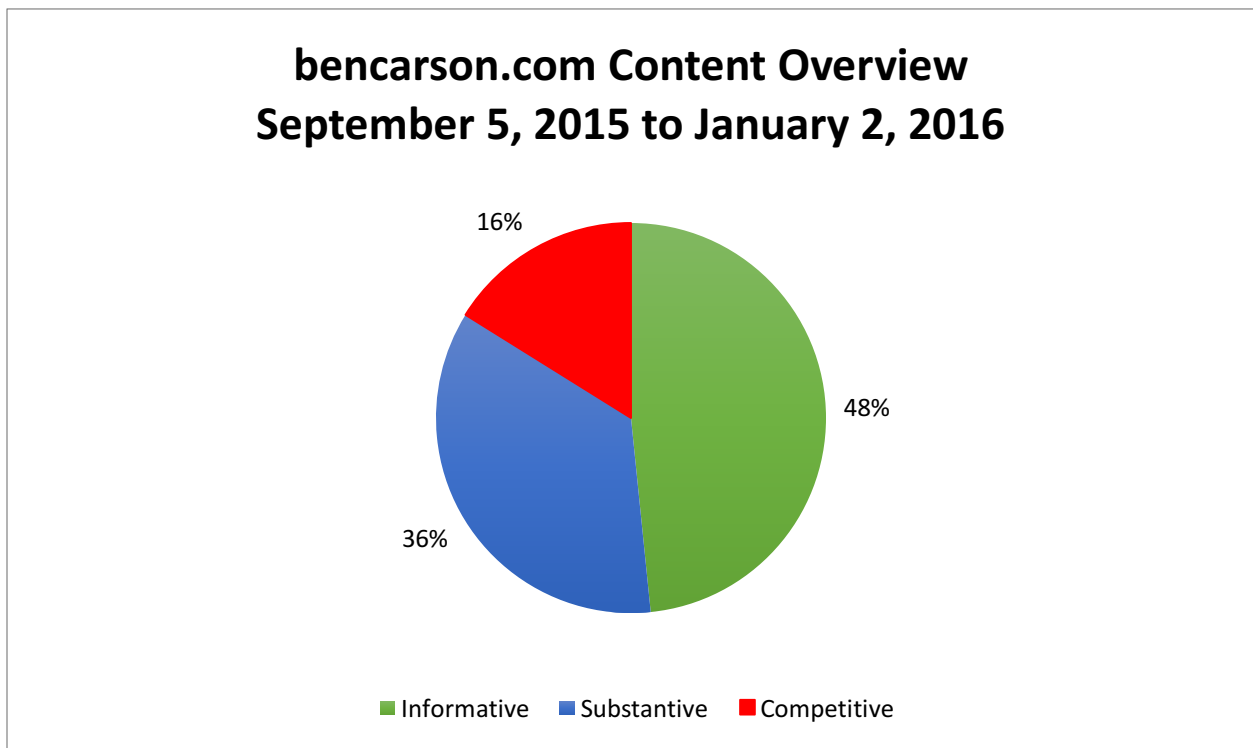
Donald Trump (donaldjtrump.com)

The other perceived "outsider" in the race also had a very divided website. The dominant message that the campaign's homepage projected throughout this research is competitive, with 83% of the messages. This is a staggering amount, and a stark contrast to the rest of the candidates. Substantive and informative messages were relatively the same amount, at eight percent and nine percent, respectively. Based on the polling in Figure 1, Trump remained the frontrunner throughout the entire course of this research. Trump chose to go fully competitive on his website's homepage as a way to support his status in the race. Trump often pointed to poll numbers, debate performances, and attacks on his website, all of which were very competitive messages. There was little mention of substantive policy issues or background on the candidate. Despite going against the traditional candidate behavior of a frontrunner outlined by Haynes et. al. (2002), this appeared to have been a strategic choice by the campaign.

Figure 29: Overview of message content for donaldjtrump.com

**donaldjtrump.com Content Overview
September 5, 2015 to January 6, 2016**

9%

8%

83%

■ Informative ■ Substantive ■ Competitive
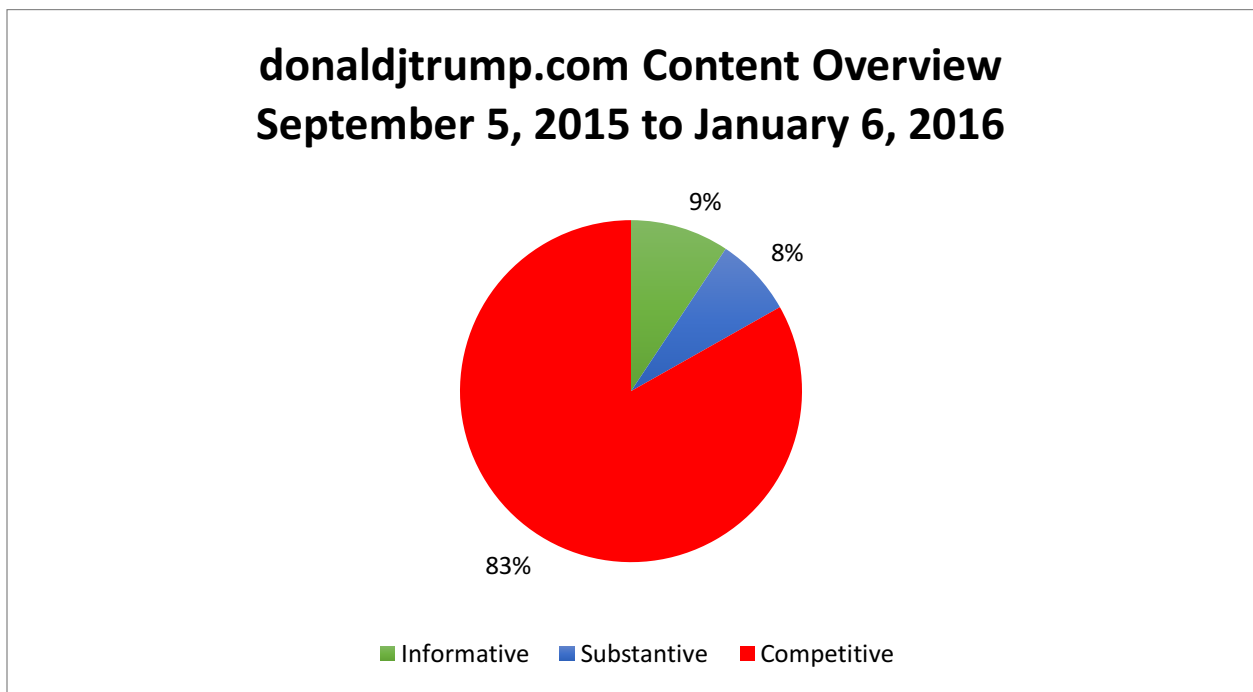
CHAPTER VI: ANALYSIS

What can we take away from these results? What would the average voter take away from these results? This analysis can be framed in terms of what Popkin (1991) would describe as the Drunkard's Search.[96] Here, he is "referring to a decision about how to compare candidates, about the criterion on which to compare candidates and make a choice, because a decision about where to look, or a decision about which information to retrieve, becomes a decision about how to decide."[97] Two parts of this statement are essential to this study: where to look and what information to retrieve. For the purposes of this study, it was assumed that voters are looking at candidates' websites. What comes next is what information voters receive about the candidates from their homepages. By simply going to the homepage of the website, no voter is going to get a complete picture of the candidate. However, low-information voters will get what Popkin (1991) calls a low-information signal.[98] There are two main signals during a primary: a victory signal (who is winning) and a personal characteristics and policy signal.[99] This corresponds well with the matrix that we are using in this research. The victory signal here corresponds with the competitive messaging strategy, while the background and policy signal corresponds with the substantive messaging strategy.

Based on the findings in Chapter V, a number of conclusions can be drawn. Voters logging on to Donald Trump's website saw overwhelmingly competitive messages. As the perceived front runner, he was projecting an image of being the winner, even though the contest

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[96] Popkin, *The Reasoning Voter,* 92.
[97] Popkin, *The Reasoning Voter,* 92-93.
[98] Popkin, *The Reasoning Voter,* 117.
[99] *Ibid.*

was far from over. Trump was largely able to maintain a competitive message driven website because there was less pressure for him to have clearly defined policies. Supporters of Trump's campaign were not necessarily looking for long policy proposals or detailed plans. In addition, being a media figure placed Trump at an advantage: there was not much information that the general public did not already know about him. Therefore, he did not need to expend valuable home page space on introducing himself to voters.

In the middle, Marco Rubio and Rand Paul projected varying degrees of competition and substance. There were moments during each of their respective campaigns (more so Rubio than Paul) when they were signaling to voters that they were still viable contenders through their use of competitive messages. Both were relatively known quantities, but were still fresh on the political scene. There is an amount of identification that they needed to do, as well as proving why they could (potentially) win the nomination. As Haynes et al. (2002) points out, "Candidates certainly benefit when their framing of the campaign takes hold in the news media and thus is conveyed to the public."[100] Both Rubio and Paul attempted to project an image that they were candidates with substantive policy goals, but also candidates who could beat out their GOP opponents in the primary and go on to win the general election. If their poll numbers were even the slightest bit elevated, they could have taken that opportunity to show the success of their campaign and the momentum that was behind them, and translated that onto their websites.

Voters arriving at Jeb Bush's website on any given day during the invisible primary period studied saw predominantly substantive messages. The Bush campaign was signaling to low-information voters details about the candidate and goals of the campaign. This was an interesting tactic considering Bush is no stranger to politics. As a member of the Bush family,

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[100] Haynes et al., "Getting the Message out: Candidate Communication Strategy During the Invisible Primary" 649.

Jeb has been in the public eye for a while now. The first six weeks and the last three weeks of this research showed Bush was trying to be more competitive, or at least pushing himself to be seen as a perceivable front runner. There was a large chunk of time in the middle when Bush focused solely on his background. To low-information voters, he was signaling a more substantive campaign about issues. Throughout the invisible primary, Bush attempted to position himself as the "adult" in the room. His website reflected this attempt to be the more mature voice in the Republican field.

The exception to the rule would have been Ben Carson. As previously mentioned, his website home page was predominantly made up of informative messages. This would suggest that his campaign was signaling something different entirely. It is not totally clear what message it was trying to send. The campaign may have been using the website homepage as more of an information center for potential supporters than a way to project a message about the candidate. Further research will be necessary to gain a better perspective on the campaign's motivations.

CHAPTER VII: CONCLUSIONS

In the end, it is difficult to definitively say whether or not low-information voters actively sought out the websites in this study. We can draw relationships between the act of Googling a candidate in order to find more information and then linking to the candidate's website. Yet unless we set up an experiment that tracked voters' Internet behavior, the link remains a theory. However, what we can draw conclusions on is what they saw once they were brought to these sites. The information shortcuts used in this study (the classification of messages as either substantive, competitive, or informative) gave us good insight into the changing message of the campaigns. As the poll numbers changed, so did the home pages of each of the websites. It is evident that the candidates did attempt to change their websites to reflect their standing in the race.

Most importantly, these results show that campaigns and candidates do pay attention to polls and their status in the race. The conclusions that can be drawn here are the same ones that were drawn by Haynes et al. (2002):

> A candidate's decision to engage predominately in marketing (substantive messaging) or war (competitive messaging) is determined by the candidate's strategic goals, which are guided primarily by the candidate's competitive position in the field.[101]

This hypothesis has also been proven in this research of websites. For example, while Bush's website started off more competitive, the percentage of competitive messages decreased when his polling average decreased.

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[101] Haynes et al. "Getting the Message Out: Candidate Communication Strategy during the Invisible Primary" 637

In contrast, Rubio started off more substantive, but as his popularity increased, so did his competitive messages. We saw a spike of competitiveness with Carson around the same time his poll numbers surged. While Paul was consistently substantive throughout (reflecting his campaign), Trump was competitive from the beginning, mirroring his front runner status. The average voter may not necessarily know or understand all the nuances of a modern campaign. The information they receive from going to a candidate's website may be the only direct contact they have with a candidate. The average voter, as Popkin (1991) has pointed out, does not have the time or the inclination to seek out multiple sources of information. If the messages they receive are competitive, they may be more inclined to believe that someone is the frontrunner. In contrast, if they have mainly substantive messages, they may learn more about the individual and what policy platforms they represent.

The idea of "what you see is what you get" holds true when examining campaign websites; they are largely representative of the campaign and the candidate as a whole. This further solidifies the campaign website's role in upcoming election contests. By urging voters to go to their websites, candidates continue to perpetuate the idea of a central hub for voters to go to and learn more about who they are and what they believe in.

The differences between the "outsider versus insider" status was an unintended consequence of this research, but is nevertheless an interesting representation of the two, distinct groups of candidates. Trump and Carson did not have the "typical" campaign websites, but neither are they the "typical" presidential candidates. Bush, Rubio, and Paul, while each having a different focus, had a much more traditional campaign website. While this fact probably did not impact the race, it does reflect this growing trend in American politics. Further research is necessary to determine the longevity of this trend and its impact on future primary contests.

Another aspect of this study that could be expanded on in future research would be if the candidates overall are becoming more competitive as a way to stay relevant as the actual voting process gets closer. Most of this study took place deep into the invisible primary, before many people have even begun paying attention to whom they are going to vote for in the early primary contests. However, the websites of Bush, Rubio, and Paul all contained slightly higher competitive messages at the end of this study, which was about a month away from the Iowa caucus. This could suggest that candidates may be influenced by the timing of the race as well, keeping in mind that some voters may not start actively participating until after the invisible primary. It would be worth studying how these results change if the same experiment was completed at the beginning, from the Iowa caucuses to the Republican convention.

Overall, the goal of this research was to take the work by Haynes et. al. (2002) and Popkin (1994) and update it in a modern context. The same principles that both researchers identified hold true when applying their research to modern technology, such as websites. This research has shown that, as Popkin (1994) originally identified, voters can use websites as a proxy measurement and a way of gaining information about a campaign's overall messaging strategy. In large measure, the candidates appeared to be influenced by their overall standing in the polls.

On the other hand, there is some disagreement about the traditional behaviors of a frontrunner, as outlined by Haynes et. al. (2002), and what the ultimate result of the content analysis of Trump's website concluded. This leaves open the possibility that frontrunners in presidential campaigns may project a more competitive message when they are leading the polls. This election may have been an outlier, or it could be an indication of a model for future frontrunners to follow. Depending on the success of the Trump campaign, candidates in the

future may attempt to replicate Trump's competition-driven message. The ability of Internet platforms, such as websites and social media, to be updated and changed quickly may also provide a chance for campaigns to go on the attack much faster than previously. As the Internet continues to evolve and grow increasingly important in presidential elections, research that incorporates these new tools will be essential in understanding the modern campaign.

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