

## In Congressional elections, candidates use Twitter to help their campaigns, including ‘going negative’.

*Much has been made of the role of social media in Barack Obama’s presidential election victories in 2008 and 2012, but what has been its impact on Congressional campaigns? In a study of more than 67,000 tweets from candidates for the House of Representatives during the 2012 election, **Heather Evans** finds that incumbents, Democrats, women, and those in competitive races tweet differently than challengers, Republicans, minor party candidates, men, and those in safe districts.*

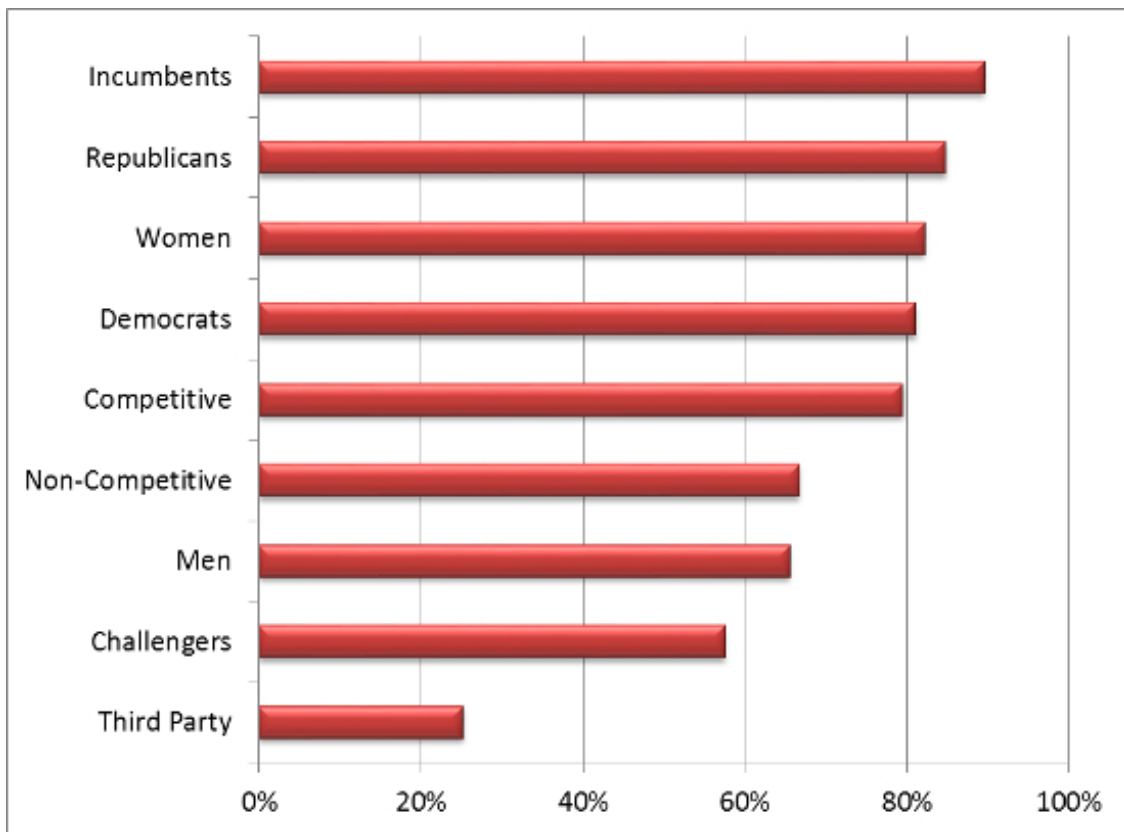


The use of social media in political campaigns has become commonplace since Barack Obama used Facebook and Twitter extensively to raise funds for his campaign in 2008. Some individuals [attributed](#) Obama’s success in 2008 to his social networking ability. Twitter, which began in 2006, has become a valuable tool for politicians to communicate with their followers. For those politicians who do not have large sums of money to spend on campaign commercials, tweeting allows them to discuss their political agenda in 140 characters or less for free. Tweets are highly visible on the politician’s message board and can be linked to other boards as well through the use of hashtags and re-tweets. For politicians wanting to reach out to young voters, Twitter is the idea platform because those who use Twitter on a daily basis [tend to be under 30 years old](#).

In [recent research](#) regarding social media and elections, I, along with my two co-authors as well as a team of coders from [Sam Houston State University](#), explored the various ways that candidates for the 2012 U.S. House elections used Twitter. While sites like [TweetCongress.org](#) allow individuals to see which members of Congress have Twitter accounts and how often they use them, until now we did not know exactly how candidates use this social networking site. Our research shows that candidates for the U.S. House in the 2012 elections used their Twitter accounts for campaigning purposes, and many resorted to negative tweets in the same manner we see on traditional television advertising.

In total, we hand coded over 67,000 tweets from more than 1,100 individuals who were running for seats in the House during the last two months of the election (September 6<sup>th</sup> to November 6<sup>th</sup>). Most candidates for the US House in 2012 had a Twitter account, though there were some variations. Women were 15 percent more likely to have Twitter accounts than men; major-party candidates were 50 percent more likely to have Twitter than third-party candidates; candidates in competitive races were 14 percent more likely to have Twitter; and incumbents were 18 percent more likely to have Twitter than challengers.

### **Figure 1 – Percentage of U.S House candidates with Twitter Accounts in 2012 elections**



On average, candidates for the House tweeted 88 times, had around 4,100 followers, and most of their time was spent discussing their campaign stops, speeches they had given, or asking their followers to get involved with their campaigns. Only about 29 percent of their tweets were about nothing in particular, what others have coined as “pointless babble.” About 14 percent of their time on Twitter was spent directly communicating with their followers.

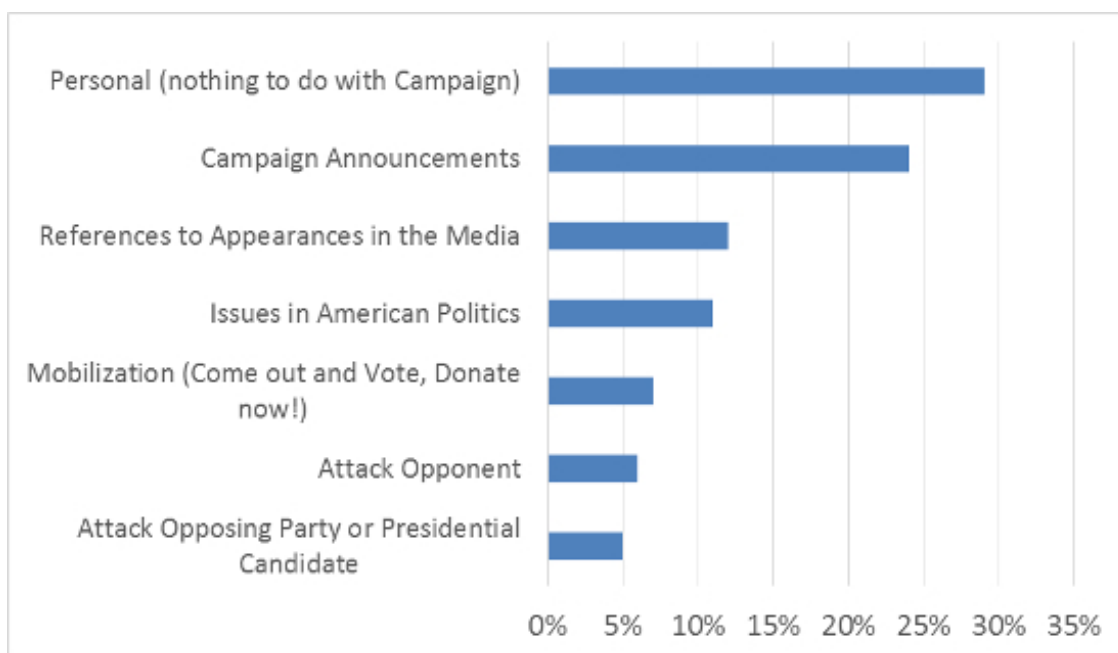
We coded the tweets from candidates in the following categories:

**Table 1 – Categories of tweets from U.S. House candidates**

<b>Personal</b>	These tweets had nothing in particular to do with their campaigns. Usually these tweets involved linking to pictures they had taken of their families or talking about their favorite NFL team.
<b>Mobilization</b>	These tweets asked their followers to do something, like donate to their campaign or vote for them in the upcoming election.
<b>Campaign</b>	Those where the candidate discussed where they had been during their campaign, what groups they had met with, and where they were going next.
<b>Media</b>	Where the candidate linked up stories about them in the news media.
<b>Attack</b>	Where the candidate directly criticized their opponent.
<b>Attack other</b>	Where the candidate criticized the opposing party or presidential candidate.
<b>Issue</b>	Where the candidate tweeted about an issue in American politics, such as abortion, gay marriage, or immigration.
<b>User interaction</b>	Where the candidate actually responded to another user on Twitter. These tweets use the “@” sign.

As Figure 2 shows, our findings show that not only were candidates using their Twitter pages to campaign, but some candidates were more active (and negative) than others. In particular, there were strong partisan, gender, incumbency, and competitive election effects.

**Figure 2 – Percentage of total Tweets for U.S. House candidates in 2012**



Republicans and Democrats used Twitter at the same rates and in the same manner. Third party candidates, on the other hand, used Twitter significantly more often than major party candidates if they had accounts (but most did not). Third-party candidates were significantly more likely to use attack tweets than Republicans, and they were more likely to attack Republicans, Democrats, Romney, and Obama than either of the two major parties.

Unlike research on television advertising, we find that women tweeted significantly more than men (107 times to 82 times), and their tweets were more negative. Women were also more likely to use mobilization, campaign, and issue tweets. Women on average also had nearly 6,200 followers, while men had 3,600.

While incumbents had more followers than challengers (7,400 to 1,600, on average) challengers used Twitter more often and more negatively. Challengers sent significantly more attack, campaign, media, and user interaction tweets. Those in competitive elections also tweeted differently than those in safe races. Candidates in competitive races sent significantly more attack and mobilization tweets. Instead of focusing on their challengers, those in safe races sent more tweets regarding the opposing party and presidential candidate.

While our research shows that not all candidates tweet alike, what is still unknown is why candidates use Twitter in the manner that they do. For instance, why are women more likely to go negative on Twitter as opposed to traditional television advertising? We also do not yet understand the effect of Twitter on elections. For instance, if followers receive a direct communication on Twitter with a candidate, will they become more likely to vote for them? This work is left for future research.

*This article is based on the paper [‘Twitter Style: An Analysis of How House Candidates Used Twitter in Their 2012 Campaigns’](#) in *Political Science and Politics*.*

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**About the author**

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Heather Evans is an Assistant Professor in the [Department of Political Science](#) at [Sam Houston State University](#). Her primary research interests are political participation and behavior, public opinion, competitive elections, media and politics, the status of women in the political science discipline, and political psychology. Her book, “Competitive Elections and Democracy in America: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly”, was just published by *Routledge* in November 2013.



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