Online Political Comments: Americans Talk About the Election through a "Horse-Race" Lens

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Abstract

This study examined whether user-generated comments posted on news stories about the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign focused on candidates' policies or on horse-race elements of the election, such as who is winning or losing. Using a quantitative content analysis (n = 1,881), we found that most comments had neither horse-race nor policy elements, but that horse-race elements were more frequent in comments than policy, mirroring what is found in news coverage. The public were more likely to "like" or "upvote" comments that contained either policy or horse-race elements, relative to other comments, although the relationship was slightly stronger for horse race.

1. Introduction

The news media have a long history of focusing on horse-race or strategy coverage of politics—such as polls results—instead of providing in-depth explanations of candidates' policy positions [1][2] [3] [4]. An over-emphasis on horse-race aspects of electoral politics raises concerns about the cost to democracy if citizens are not exposed to information about candidates' policy initiatives that could inform their voting decisions. Researchers have attributed horse-race coverage to a number of undesirable audience effects, including lowered political efficacy, greater polarization, drops in voter turnout, and increased cynicism and distrust [5][6] [7].

Yet almost nothing is known about whether the public discusses electoral news through the same lens of horse-race coverage. This is an important area for consideration for several reasons. First, a great deal of research has shown that political conversations—including those online—are "critical to sustaining democratic life or at least participatory engagement" [8]. Second, a majority of people read online comments [9], even if they do not comment themselves, making them an important means to capture what at least some of the electorate believes. Third, journalists frequently report on online comments as an imperfect indicator of public opinion [10]. Given the fact that so many people read online comments, it is important to understand whether the discussions in these comments, like news stories, focus on the horse-race elements of an election, rather than policies. If comments, like news stories, focus on horse-race elements, they also may lead to negative consequences, such as decreased political efficacy, lower voter turnout, greater polarization, and increased cynicism and distrust [5][6][7]. This would be normatively problematic for society and democracy more broadly. In addition, if horse-race elements are problematic in news stories, they may be even more troubling in online comments because these comments are generated by users and flow from their own thoughts and observations about the election. Thus, a horse-race focus in comments links more directly to how the electorate is viewing the election through its online discussions, rather than how journalists or news organizations are framing it.

To understand how the public discusses the election, we examined horse race versus policy in user-generated online comments about electoral politics during the 2016 presidential election the United States. We focused on online discussions about the 2016 election because it marked a notable shift in American politics, as online discussions began playing an outsized role in electoral politics [11]. Specifically, we considered how plentiful horse-race elements were in online discussions about politics and whether horse-race or policy comments were more likely to get attention or endorsements from the news audience through "likes" or "upvotes." We employed a quantitative content analysis ($n = 1{,}881$) of comments from three major news sources that have audiences that span the partisan spectrum: *The New York Times, USA TODAY*, and *FOX*

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News [12] [13]. We focus on two key points in the 2016 campaign, the Super Tuesday primaries and Election Day because horse-race coverage has been found to be more likely to closer to Election Day [6].

This study offers several notable contributions to our understanding of online political communication. From a normatively negative standpoint, we found that most comments had nothing to do with horse-race or policy elements of the election but were in fact were off-topic, vitriolic, or non-substantive content commonly found online [14] [15]. Yet, these conversations focused more frequently on horse-race elements than policies, which might increase their distrust, cynicism, or polarization [5] [6] [7]. This is troubling even if the commenters—or those reading the comments—had already made up their minds regarding whom they would vote for because it points to a missed opportunity to have the type of issue-based discussions that are valuable in a democracy [10] to help people understand government and how it works.

More normatively positive, however, was our findings that both horse-race and policy comments were more likely to get "liked" or "upvoted" relative to less substantive comments, although this relationship was slightly stronger for comments that focused on horse-race aspects of the election. This suggests that people were prioritizing comments that actually dealt with the election, rather than extraneous or off-topic comments.

2. Background

2.1. Online Discussions

Since online comments began being posted on news websites in the late 1990s [16], they have played an increasing role as forums for political discussions. While often rancorous [16] [17] [18], online political discussions can increase normative democratic outcomes, such as boosting political knowledge, efficacy, and willingness to participate politically [19]. Studying online discussions offers an avenue to get a sense of how the public feels about news [16].

We focused specifically on user-generated comments on news websites for several reasons. First, readership of these comments is plentiful. For example, a survey found that almost half (41.9%) of Americans who do not comment on news websites still read comments on news sites [9]. Similarly, a survey of a representative sample of 3,400 Swedes found that about half read comments on news sites [20]. Second, news websites are the original commenting venues for news [16], are more directly linked to the news organization's audience and brand, and are under a news outlet's control in ways that social media comments are not [14]. Third, most news sites retain commenting features on their own websites [21] even though some outlets are shifting commenting to Facebook in hopes the platform's real-name requirement will lead to more civil discourse [22]. Indeed, Facebook comments have been found to be only slightly more civil than comments on news websites but also less rational and thoughtful [21] [23]. News commenters themselves do not perceive Facebook to be a more productive commenting space or that news comments on Facebook are of higher quality [24]. Finally, some evidence demonstrates that people are more likely to comment about the news on news websites, rather than on social media [24].

Of course, incivility mars 20% of comments on online news websites [17] [18], or even more for particularly controversial topics [25]. Uncivil comments posted on news stories have been shown to reduce people's perceptions that the news content is credible [26] [27], but that does not mean people do not want to read it. In fact, an analysis of 9 million comments in *The News York Times* showed that readers were more likely to recommend uncivil comments, versus civil ones [28]. For the reasons just described, comments on news websites were an advantageous context for this study.

Although some research has found relationships between the content of news stories and the content of comments posted on the stories [29], there is no way to ascertain whether commenters or those reading comments actually read the news story. Indeed, evidence suggests that many people comment without reading the stories [9], and research has shown that as many as half of comments are unrelated to the content of the stories upon which they are posted [15]. The problem of people commenting without reading a story is so prominent that one news organization is requiring that users pass a quiz about the story before they can comment [30] to help ensure commenters are discussing the story. Thus, we urge there is great merit in considering comments as their own entity, separate from the story they are posted on, as comments are a "meso news-space," a user-generated entity that is related to but distinct from news processes [31]. As a result, we focused only on comments, not the stories. All the stories were horse-race style.

2.2. Horse Race Versus Policy

Horse-race election coverage can be found in newspapers dating to the 1880s to add drama to stories [32], and it continues to dominate both print and broadcast coverage of politics [1] [2] [3] [4]. In horse-race coverage, the news media focus on how much money candidates acquire, how they are doing in the polls, and what their chances of winning or losing are [3] [4] [33][34]. Because polls are not always accurate, the horse-race focus can skew public perceptions of who

might win an election, and, as a result, dampen turnout [5] [6].

A great deal of political communication research has documented both the prevalence and normatively negative effects of an over-emphasis on horse-race coverage. Early studies showed that horse-race coverage was increasing, as journalists treated elections as a "game." Stories about strategy of an election encompassed as much as 67% of news articles in the late 1980s, making it the dominant way campaigns were covered [7]. Horse race stories accounted for 40% of electoral coverage in *The New York Times*, from 1952 to 2000 [1], while horse race coverage on television news increased from 58% in 1988 to 71% in 2000 [2]. Since then, the media's preoccupation with horse-race elements has continued [3] [4] [5]. Polls, a frequent attribute of horse-race coverage, have particular appeal to journalists—especially at 24-hour cable news networks—because they are frequently updated, objective, and add a numerical element to the horse race trope [35].

Although horse-race coverage might be entertaining [36], most studies have found more deleterious results. Horse-race coverage can distract the public from candidates' stances on policy, dampen voter turnout, propagate polarization, and activate the public's cynicism about politics [5] [6] [7]. In addition, experimental research has shown that reporting on polls—an element of horse-race coverage—can change how people feel about issues [33]. Partisans in particular perceive news articles as biased if they report polls that show their candidate as trailing [34]. Horse-race coverage is more likely when contests are neck and neck, and this coverage increases as Election Day [4] or pivotal votes on controversial policies [3] get closer. This is notable because these are just the periods when policy coverage would more essential to the public. Notably, research has found that reliance on horse-race coverage is related to contextual factors, with large or corporate-owned newspaper chains more likely to focus on horse-race coverage [4].

In contrast, policy coverage may help the audience choose whom to vote for or enable them to understand complex issues by explaining candidates' views on policies, such as health care. Horse-race coverage has become particularly pronounced in recent years, illustrated by statistician Nate Silver's use of statistical modeling to present results of multiple polls starting with the 2012 election [37]. This led to "the Nate Silver Effect", where journalists view advanced statistical metrics as necessary to election coverage [38], exacerbating the prevalence of horse race. In the 2016 election [39], horse-race coverage took center stage with polls overwhelmingly predicting—incorrectly—that Hillary Clinton would defeat Donald Trump.

Reporters and political commentators have been found to tweet about policies more than horse-race elements when they discuss politics online [40], but little is known about whether the public also focuses on horse-race elements when they discuss political news, as news stories do, or policy, as reporters and commentators do. This leads to our first question:

RQ1: Are horse-race or policy elements more frequent in online conversations about the election?

2.3. Endorsing horse-race or policy?

There is evidence that the public gravitates to horse-race coverage [41], despite its normative disadvantages, although more recent research suggests the public would pick policy stories over horse-race if given the choice [42]. A large scale study using Facebook posts found that horse-race news generated more clicks, but issue stories garnered more reactions (e.g., "likes") and comments [43], suggesting the public is interested in both policy and horse-race elements.

Yet, little is known about how the public perceives online comments that discuss the election in either a horse-race or policy manner. One way to understand the public's perception is by considering the social reactions posted on online comments.

Social reactions, ubiquitous on social media and news websites, are a way for people to express emotions about content to mimic the social cues of face-to-face communication [44] [45] [46] [47] [48]. People use reactions to convey their approval of a particular topic, news story, or online post [49]. These reactions are a simple form of user interaction [50] that also expands the visibility of content, and, in so doing, may alert other users that the content is worth reading [51]. Thus, they may operate as heuristic cues by drawing attention to a particular post or comment and signaling to others that it has value.

The heuristic-systematic model [HSM; 52] is informative to explain how this works. HSM predicts that certain stimuli will lead people to recall some information they already know and use that information to process the new stimuli quickly, rather than in a more systematic method [53]. One type of heuristic in the model is an endorsement, which operates by recommending to people what they *should* think about something [54] [55]. Notably, research has shown that "upvotes" are a means of indicating what content they favor or not [49] [50] [51]. Following this reasoning, a "like" or an "upvote" on a comment would be an endorsement of that comment—a means for the public to cue other users that this content is worthwhile. Thus, more "likes" or "upvotes" on comments with either horse-race or policy elements could signal to other users

that this type of discourse is preferred. Given that the literature is unclear on whether the public prefers horse-race or policy content, we posed the following:

RQ2: Will comments about horse-race aspects of the elections or about candidates' policy initiatives have a greater likelihood of being "liked" or "upvoted"?

2.4. Differing news audiences and campaign periods

We examined comments from three news sites with varied partisan-leaning news audiences to provide a broader understanding of how the public discusses politics online. *The New York Times*' audiences leans to the left politically; *Fox News*' leans right, and *USA TODAY*'s audience is in the middle [12]. Given that people tend to select media that fit their political world views [13], these three media outlets allowed us to expand our findings beyond one specific news outlet or ideology and provide an opportunity to consider differences across partisan news audiences. Notably, all three news outlets are similar in that they are national corporate-owned media organizations, which are more likely to present horse-race coverage in their content, than local news [4], making them suitable for comparison.

In addition, we examined data at two points in the campaign because research has shown that horse-race coverage is more likely in a campaign as it gets closer to Election Day [4] or a pivotal vote [3]. Thus, we considered whether horse-race or policy elements were more frequently across time periods or news outlets and whether "likes" and "upvotes" differed by time period or news outlet.

RQ3: Will a) campaign period (Super Tuesday vs. Election Day) or the b) news organization where the comments were posted predict whether they are about horse-race aspects of the election or candidates' policy initiatives?

RQ4: Will a) campaign period (Super Tuesday vs. Election Day) or the b) news organization where the comments were posted predict whether comments are "liked" or "upvoted"?

3. Method

3.1. Data

A random sample of online news comments (n = 1,881) was collected. All comments had been posted on horse-race style news stories announcing results about the 2016 presidential campaign on Super Tuesday (n = 41.5%) and Election Day (n = 58.5%). Comments were drawn from the *NYT* (n = 31.8%), *FOX News* (n = 43.2%) and *USA TODAY* (n = 25.0%).

Comments were selected from stories published on March 1 and 2, 2016, the day of and the day after the Super Tuesday primaries, and from November 8 and 9, 2016, the day of and the day after general election. We used a search of Google News, which returns only news stories, to find the news stories from which we retrieved the comments. For the Election Day stories, the keywords "election," "president," and "results" were used, and "Super Tuesday" and "results" were used for comments about the primaries. For all searches, we limited them to the two days of our two time periods, and also searched by the URL for each of the three news sites, so we would only retrieve their stories. Because we wanted to focus on comments posted on the *main* news story that reported either the Super Tuesday or Election Day results, we excluded opinion pieces or follow-up stories. We collected multiple stories from *USA TODAY* because its main story had fewer comments than the main stories from the other news outlets.

Collectively, the news stories we retrieved using the above method had roughly 18,000 comments posted, so we randomly selected 10% of those comments to create our sample, using a random start [56]. This process involves randomly selecting a number to begin our search and then selecting every 10th comment after that to be in the sample. Because *FOX News*' commenting platform operated differently than the other sites, we used the number of "listeners" posted at the start of the comment thread to estimate the number of total comments.

3.2. Coding

Inter-coder reliability was assessed before we coded comments to determine whether comments had horse-race or policy elements. The second author and a student research assistant practiced coding with 400 comments drawn from the total universe that were not part of the study sample before inter-coder reliability was attempted [56]. Then these two coders independently coded 328 comments that were within the universe but not within the sample because this number of comments constitutes 20% of the final sample size [56]. Inter-coder reliability ranged from 0.67 to 1.0 on all study variables using Krippendorff's α, which meets the standard threshold for exploratory studies [56].

Table 1 provides Krippendorff's alpha coefficients and operational definitions for each variable.

Table 1. Coding categories, description, and Krippendorff's alpha for inter-coder reliability

Variable	Coding Scheme	Krippendorff's Alpha
Policy	Code yes if mentions a candidates' policy initiative, such as Social Security, the Affordable Care Act, etc.	0.68
Horse Race	Code yes for descriptions of campaign strategies, who is winning or losing in polls, campaign tactics to get votes, money raised, etc.	0.74
Likes and upvotes	Total number was recorded	1.0

After inter-coder reliability was achieved, the second author coded 55.9% of the sample (1,051 comments), and the student research assistant coded the remaining 44.1% (830 comments). Initially, each comment was coded for whether it contained policy elements or not and whether it contained horse-race elements or not. Under this coding scheme, a comment could contain both policy and horse-race elements, one or the other, or neither.

Some of the commenting platforms used "likes" and some used "upvotes," and these were combined into one variable that ranged from 0 to 720 [$M = 8.29$, $SD = 40.56$]. Because the variable had high positive skew (skewness = 11.32) and a distribution more peaked than a normal distribution (kurtosis = 150.04), this variable was transformed using logarithmic 10 [57]. The logged variable was used in all analyses.

4. Findings

RQ1 asked whether horse-race or policy elements were more frequent in online conversations about the election. To answer this, the policy and horse-race variables were combined to create one variable with four categories, and a frequency analysis showed that horse-race elements were more common than policy, although the majority of comments contained neither attributes (**Figure 1**).

While content analyses typically aim to classify most content into discrete, mutually exclusive categories, with few falling into a catch-all "other" category [56], our goal with the study was to see how many comments—if any—fell into just two categories that are frequent in election news coverage. Because of that goal, the fact that most comments fell into "neither" is not problematic. Rather it illustrates that Americans discuss the election in very different ways than journalists report on it. Election coverage frequently falls neatly into either horse-race or policy categories [3] [4], but our data showed that online discussions clearly do not. This is unsurprising but informative because online commenters often veer off-topic [15]. Examples of comments that fit into "neither" included nonsensical content (e.g., "whaaaaaa.....whaaaaaaaaaa"), responses to other commenters that had little content (e.g., "LOL"), impolite speech (e.g., "F OFF LOSER"), and off-topic content (e.g., "Did Katy Perry jump off a NY skyscraper this morning? If not, tell her to wait until the Editorial Board of this rag can meet up with her. They can all hold hands as they go over the side.......").

Few comments contained both horse race and policy, suggesting that in comments horse race and policy are distinct ways of describing politics, much as they are in news stories. A comment that contained both horse race and policy, for example, might discuss poll results but then attribute those results to one of the candidates' policy initiatives.

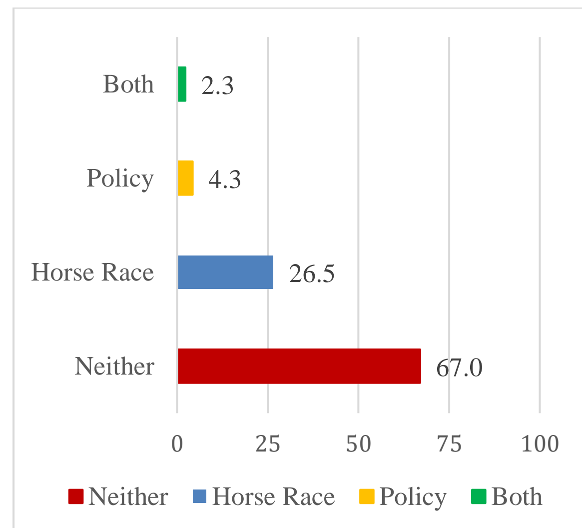

Figure 1. Percentages for each comment type

RQ2 asked if comments about horse-race aspects of the elections or about candidates' policy initiatives had a greater likelihood of being "liked" or "upvoted," and an ordinary least squares (OLS) regression model with number of "likes" or "upvotes" as the dependent variable was used to answer it. For a more parsimonious analysis, the type of comment variable was recoded into three groups: policy, horse race, and neither/both, which served as the reference category. Neither/both were combined because comments with both horse-race and policy elements were so infrequent in the dataset that they would have a negligible effect. As shown in **Table 2**, results showed that both policy ($\beta = 0.05$, $SE = 0.05$, $p = .03$) and horse-race comments ($\beta = 0.06$, $SE = 0.02$, $p = .003$) were weakly correlated with getting "liked" or "upvoted," but the association was slightly stronger for horse-race comments.

Table 2. Ordinary least squares (OLS) regression analysis for number of likes or upvotes

	Number of Likes or Upvotes[1]		
	B	*SE*	*β*
Constant	0.26^{***}	0.03	0.11
Type of Comment[2]			
Policy	0.11^{*}	0.05	0.05
Horse Race	0.07^{**}	0.02	0.06
News Organization[2]			
New York Times	0.43^{***}	0.03	0.40
FOX News	-0.10^{***}	0.03	-0.10
Election Period[2]			
Election Day	0.11^{***}	0.02	0.11
	$R^2 = .25$ $F = 122.78^{***}$		

[1] Logarithmic 10 transformed.
[2] Variables are dummy-coded. References categories are neither/both for type of comment, *USA TODAY* for news organization, and Super Tuesday for election period.
$^{***}p < .001$; $^{**}p < .01$ $^{*}p < .05$

RQ3 asked whether a) campaign period (Super Tuesday vs. Election Day) or the b) news organization where the comments were posted predicted whether they were about horse-race aspects of the election or candidates' policy initiatives. As the dependent variable—whether a comment discusses candidates' policy initiatives, horse race aspects, or neither/both—is categorical, we calculated a multinomial regression. Results (**Table 3**) showed that comments about Election Day were significantly more likely to be about horse race ($B = 1.09$, $SE = 0.13$, $p < .001$), answering RQ3a. In answering RQ3b, *The New York Times*' comments were significantly more likely to focus on horse race ($B = 0.63$, $SE = 0.15$, $p < .001$), while *FOX News*' comments were less likely to focus on horse race ($B = -0.66$, $SE = 0.17$, $p < .001$).

Table 3. Multinomial regression analyses for type of comment

	Type of Comment			
	Policy		Horse Race	
	B (SE)	Odds Ratio	*B* (SE)	Odds Ratio
News Org.				
NYT	0.36 (0.31)	1.44	0.63^{***} (0.15)	1.87
FOX	-0.09 (0.32)	0.92	-0.66^{***} (0.17)	0.52
USA TODAY[1]				
Period				
Election Day	0.06 (0.26)	1.06	1.09^{***} (0.13)	2.97
Super Tuesday[1]				
Nagelkerke R^2	0.11			

[1] Indicates reference category.
$^{***}p < .001$
SE = standard error

To answer, RQ4, which asked if a) campaign period (Super Tuesday vs. Election Day) or the b) news organization where the comments were posted would predict whether "liked" or "upvoted," the same OLS regression equation used to answer RQ2 was considered. In answer to RQ4a, Election Day comments showed a weak ($\beta = 0.11$, $SE = 0.02$, $p < .001$) but significant relationship with being "liked" or "upvoted" (**Table 2**). The *Times*' comments were moderately correlated with being "liked" or "upvoted" ($\beta = 0.40$, $SE = 0.03$, $p < .001$, while *FOX News*' comments showed a weak negative association with being "liked" or "upvoted" ($\beta = -0.11$, $SE = 0.03$, $p < .001$), answering RQ4b.

5. Discussion

This study had two main aims. First, was to understand whether Americans use a horse-race narrative to discuss the election, much as news stories do [1] [2] [3] [4], or focus on political policies, as reporters do when they tweet [40]. Second, was to

understand how the public may draw attention to either policy or horse-race focused comments by "liking" or "upvoting" them.

Overwhelmingly, we found that most comments were neither about horse-race or policy, supporting research that shows that a majority of comments on news stories are unrelated to the journalistic content [15]. This is troubling but unsurprising because it suggests people are not using news sites to comment or discuss the election in meaningful ways. Even more concerning, we found that the public discussed politics using the lens of a horse-race narrative, rather than policy. This is notable because our sample included stories from Super Tuesday, where the public may still presumably be figuring out which candidate to select at the ballot box. Our finding is troubling because it suggests that the more normatively valuable discussions of candidates' policies are not happening online as frequently as conversations about who is winning or losing or poll results. Of course, it is unclear whether horse-race related discussions have the same negative effects as horse-race related news, such as political polarization, lower turnout, or cynicism [5] [6][7]. Yet, it is quite plausible that they do, and future research should test this question. Thus, our findings highlight the need to encourage more thoughtful discussions online about candidates' views on issues, rather than just the strategy of the election.

The public was more likely to "like" or "upvote" both horse-race and policy comments relative to other comments, as both comment types showed weak associations with having reactions. This relationship was slightly stronger for horse-race comments. "Likes" or "upvotes" are a way for readers to signal agreement or endorsement of a comment as well as give it more visibility [44] [45] [46] [47][48] [49] [50] [51]. Our findings suggest commenters may be at least slightly privileging horse-race comments over the more normatively important policy comments. However, this concern should be interpreted with caution because other research has found that people privilege issue-based headlines by commenting on them or posting reactions, such as "likes," although they click more on strategy-based headlines [43]. In a content analysis it is impossible to know the political beliefs of the participants, but it is possible that people were liking or upvoting stories based on horse-race content, such as polls, that supported their own candidate or that they were reacting to what they perceived as bias in the news reports for including or excluding certain information, such as polls [58]. The basis for this interpretation is research that has found people perceive a news article as biased if it reports a poll that shows their candidate trailing [34].

Furthermore, comments about Election Day were more likely to be horse-race focused. This contrasts with some early research [6] that found Super Tuesday was the apex of horse race news, although our finding supports a more recent study that found horse-race coverage increases toward Election Day [4]. *The New York Times'* audience, which tends to be more liberal-leaning, was more likely to discuss the election through a horse-race lens, compared with the more right-leaning *FOX News* audience. This finding sheds some light on how different news audiences talk about politics online, given that research shows people select media that fits their partisan beliefs [13], although caution should be taken because there was no way to assess the actual political beliefs of individual commenters.

Overall, our findings show that Americans may discuss electoral politics with a focus on horse-race aspects, much as the news has covered these races for more than a century [32]. In some ways, this is unsurprising, but it highlights with more urgency that news organizations should do a better job of discussing candidates' policy beliefs, so, perhaps the public will follow suit.

Our study is limited in that it considered only two points in the campaign, so future research should examine comments throughout the election cycle. In addition, it would be worthwhile to replicate these findings in regard to the 2020 election and in other countries. Finally, we considered only "likes" and "upvotes" because our sample was taken from news websites. It would be fruitful to consider comments posted on Facebook, so that the whole array of reactions could be considered.

6. Conclusion

Our results clearly suggest that the public is not having conversations about electoral politics online that are as productive as they could be. Most comments were not about either horse-race or policy elements, but people were more likely to talk about the election using horse-race elements, such as who is winning or losing or polls results, than issues. Through "likes" and "upvotes," the public is signaling attention to both horse-race and policy comments, although the relationship is slightly stronger for horse-race. Clearly, more work is needed to improve how Americans talk about politics online.

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