Re-tweeting Your Way to Re-election: Analyzing Generation Z Voter Impact, Social Media Influence, and National Implication for U.S. Senate Campaigns

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Defense Date: April 6, 2020

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Abstract

The American political landscape is ever-changing with new members of government, new issues arising, and new forms of communication shaping our country. Perhaps the most important player in this landscape, however, is the newest voting population: Generation Z. Many Generation Z voters (born between 1997-2012) will come of age just in time for the 2020 election, and they are a population unlike any previous generation. The chiefly-digital manner in which they communicate and the varying issues they care about will be crucial for political candidates to understand, especially if they are seeking re-election in contested races in which the youth vote may be critical. As communication becomes increasingly digital with social media sites, these outlets are becoming major channels for political information. These sites, particularly Twitter and Instagram, are also dominated by younger Americans, making them prime avenues for politicians to connect with potential first-time voters (that is, if candidates succeed in mastering the social norms of each platform and young voters succeed in overcoming historically low voter turnout rates). The 2020 election marks the peak convergence of this new demographic of voters and the new landscape of online communication that they inhabit. This study aims to analyze the interaction among Generation Z voters, political candidates seeking elected office, and social media. In order to understand this complex relationship, I will utilize Colorado Senator Cory Gardner's 2020 re-election bid in a battleground state as a case study, examining his campaigns' use of social media, juxtaposing his online presence with other politicians, and analyzing his overall communication efficacy with young voters. Drawing upon social media analysis of Gardner and, his likely opponent, John Hickenlooper, as well as other prominent politicians on social media, as well as interviews with Generation Z voters and social media experts, this study will analyze how this generation views politics through the lens of social media and what that entails for politicians and the future of politics as a whole in the United States.

Acknowledgements

My gratitude for each person involved in producing this project is beyond words. I appreciate every person I interviewed for taking time out of their busy lives to sit down, pick up the phone, or send an email when COVID-19 proved to be a hindrance, and share their personal stories with me. You all truly gave this project life.

Thank you, Dr. Elizabeth Skewes, for your unwavering support and guidance as my thesis advisor. Your constant encouragement from our very first phone call when I was in Washington, D.C., last spring has meant the world to me. You have inspired me to leave no stone unturned as a journalist, and I am grateful for all that I've learned from you during this past year.

I would also like to thank Dr. Ken Bickers and Dr. Christine Larson for serving on my defense committee; I am excited to have support from such esteemed experts in the two fields I am most passionate about. Thank you to the professors who inspired, encouraged, and challenged this project, especially Amos Gelb and the CU in DC program, Angie Chuang, and Dr. Cindy White. Thank you all for sharing your research, expertise, and advice with me throughout this process.

Thank you to my family and friends for their understanding, their support, and their encouraging words in the most difficult times of this process. You all inspired me to undertake such a feat and celebrated me each step of the way until completion. Especially to my parents, who taught me finish the races I begin, thank you both for instilling such a competitive and courageous mentality within me and for loving me always.

This thesis would not exist without the time, energy, wisdom and support you all shared with me, and I am grateful for each and every one of you.

Chapter One: Literature Review and Rationale

Who is Generation Z?

Generation Z became the largest generation in the world in 2019, comprising 32% of the global population (Spitznamen, 2020) and reigning 66.5 million strong in the U.S., according to Pew Research Center (Fry & Parker, 2018). They are the most racially and ethnically diverse generation, projected to be majority nonwhite by 2026, and are on track to be the most well-educated demographic in America with more students choosing college over the workforce post-high school (Fry & Parker, 2018). Business Insider reported in 2018 that Generation Zers comprise 27% of the United States population (Business Insider Intelligence, 2018). While the age range of Generation Z is somewhat disputed, Pew Research Center posits that it includes those born between 1997 and 2012, making most Gen Zers between eight and twenty-three years old by the 2020 election. This means that many Generation Zers will reach voting age by 2020, so a major challenge for politicians will be increasing typically low youth voter turnout (Fraga & Holbein, 2019). Perhaps a key to fostering the youth vote is meeting them where they're at, which happens to be, a majority of the time, online.

Generation Z has the greatest access to information through the internet and social media sites—more than any other generation before them at such a young age (Fox & Rainie, 2014). Generation Z is unique in their digital use, as they are considered the generation that has never known life without the internet. A study found that 100% of all Generation Zers surveyed said they are online at least one hour a day, with almost three-quarters of those within one hour of waking up (Seemiller & Grace, 2016). The authors of this study call this "ability to connect with others around the clock" one of the major reasons that young people claim to be constantly "suffering from FOMO— the fear of missing out" (Seemiller & Grace, 2016). FOMO causes people, mainly adolescents, to spend copious amounts of time on social media out of fear that they

will miss out on "developments in social networks…regarding others and experience fear of social exclusion" (Coskun & Karayagız, 2019). According to the Global Web Index, Gen Zers spend approximately 3 hours and 38 minutes online on their smartphones each day, which is 50 minutes longer than the average American (Young, 2017). The amount of time they invest in their online presence reinforces their near-constant need to keep up with their friends or public figures that they follow. This could be an important attribute for politicians to tap into when considering how to encourage youth voting.

Generation Z on Peer Influence

According to a survey by the authors of, "Generation Z Goes to College," Gen Zers are motivated chiefly by advocating for a cause they are passionate about, helping others make a difference, earning credit or opportunities for advancement, and fearing that they may let others down (Seemiller & Grace, 2016). Their desire to not be left behind and to join forces for a cause relates to their high response to peer influencers, or individuals with an exceptionally large following of peers on social media (Pilgrim & Bohnet-Joschko, 2019). These influencers get Gen Zers to try new products, styles, and experiences, with one study illustrating that 40% of people ended up buying a product after viewing an influencer's post containing a product that the influencer claims to use (Swant, 2016). This persuasive concept could be replicated as a potential social media tactic for campaigns to select a prominent peer influencer and have them motivate their peers to vote for a candidate, or simply to vote in general. While the involvement of social media in this process is relatively new with the advent of smart phones, this method of influence is nothing new. In fact, this powerful tool of influence has been around for decades and was developed to explain how the general public received their political information.

This framework on politics, studied in the 1950s by Elihu Katz and Paul Lazarsfeld, was called the "influential hypothesis," indicating that voters are heavily influenced by individuals

called "opinion leaders" (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). Opinion leaders are individuals of higher

education and social status, and they are often more interested in mass media and politics than the

average American to begin with. Essentially, influential figures like preachers, professors, and

lawyers could shape public opinion regarding what was heard in the media and from politicians.

Lazarsfeld also developed the "two-step flow" of influence framework, which demonstrates that

the mass media reaches opinion leaders, who in turn reach the less-active portions of the American

public, which was first published in 1944 (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1944; Lazarsfeld,

1955). This power dynamic indicates that the average American will not necessarily be persuaded

or even reached by candidates themselves, but rater by opinion leaders they know, respect, and

trust. This gives opinion leaders the opportunity to share information through their own lens rather

than delivering the meticulous, controlled message that the candidates and their campaigns want to

disseminate. While the candidates may believe they are reaching the majority of the American

public with their messaging, Lazarsfeld's framework poses that, in reality, they are predominantly

reaching opinion leaders who then spread their message to the average American.

The two-step flow of influence is applicable in the 2020 election, though the opinion

leaders may have shifted from the pastors and professors that Lazarsfeld identified to social media

influencers and peers. Young people are especially impressionable and influenced by the opinions

of others in their adolescent stage of life, and since they already demonstrated that they gravitate

towards individuals on social media whose opinions they trust regarding products, perhaps the

same is true for politics. These opinion leaders with large social followings possess a great deal of

power not only in encouraging young people to vote, but also in shaping their ideologies on

certain political issues, because young people are more likely than most Americans to "protest

politics and express their views in an online forum" (Sloam, 2014). What exactly are the views

that Generation Zers are likely to express in online forums? If politicians want to engage with

young people on social media sites where they are likely to express their opinions, politicians must first understand the social and cultural events that have influenced Gen Z's political ideologies in order to engage with them on these forums.

Generation Z and Politics

Ideologies developed in the adolescent period are often clung to for the remainder of an individual's life, so this period is crucial for politicians to gain their loyalty (Green, Palmquist, & Schickler, 2002). There is conflicting research when it comes to political parties and Gen Z, however. On the one hand, the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) released poll results just prior to the 2018 midterms suggesting that young people continue to follow a national trend of moving away from organized parties. Just more half of the 18- to 24-year-old survey respondents affiliated with a political party, with more than 33% of them identifying as "Independent" (CIRCLE, 2018). More Americans, particularly youth, "are disassociating from the two major political parties and are striking out as Independents" (Twenge, Honeycutt, Prislin, & Sherman, 2016). CIRCLE finds that this lack of Democratic or Republican affiliation has less to do with being uninformed and more to do with "doubts that the parties represent their views and interests" and "skepticism about their efficacy."

Nonetheless, a key trait for Gen Z is "the need to belong" and to pledge loyalty to a group that merits them "peer acceptance" (Williams, Page, Petrosky, & Hernandez, 2010). An important finding from CIRCLE's survey also suggests that the parties have the potential to reach young voters as "most youth say they have never been asked to be a member of a political party" (CIRCLE 2018). These young voters may be unsure whether or not to make one of the parties a key part of their identity, but even if they are wrestling with that decision, they aren't being approached by parties for help in deciding. This generation hasn't been widely marketed to or approached by major parties, unlike the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, when political party

identification was more prominent. A 2019 Gallup News Poll concluded that the number of Americans who identify as independent has increased each year since 1951 (Jones, 2019). Perhaps this choice comes from feeling excluded or overlooked by major parties. By combining this lack of exposure to the parties with Generation Z's desire to belong to a group, it could indicate an important opportunity for political parties to market themselves to young, independent and unaffiliated voters.

If these parties can understand how to obtain voters' loyalty at 18 when they're entering adulthood, they are more likely to remain loyal party voters for the rest of their lives (Green, Palmquist, & Schickler, 2002). The key will be garnering their support when they begin voting, and that lies in understanding their political stances. Generational differences and the political and social contexts in which people come of age (especially of voting age) are correlated with voter turnout and political participation (Highton & Wolfinger, 2001). Fisher claims that political ideologies embraced early on in adulthood remain fairly constant as time goes on, becoming "highly resistant to more than transient change" (Fisher, 2018). He proposes that the "generational replacement" of eligible voters aging out of the system and new ones coming of age has the power to deeply alter U.S. politics in coming years due to extreme ideological differences among the youngest voters and the oldest voters (Fisher, 2018). The political leanings of Generation Z stem from growing up around "global terrorism, the aftermath of 9/11, school violence, economic uncertainty, recession, and the mortgage crisis" (Williams, Page, Petrosky, & Hernandez, 2010). The more social side of their political ideologies may stem from the same-sex marriage Supreme Court case that was passed during their lifetimes, as well as racial diversification in the United States and their witness to the first African-American president (Brauer, 2018).

A Pew Research Center study indicated that the president's approval and popularity at the time of Americans' formative years had a strong correlation with how they voted at 18 (Kohut, et.

al., 2011). For the older Generation Zers, that means that Bush's low approval ratings may cause them to vote Democratic when they have the chance; for younger ones, perhaps Obama's high approval ratings inspired them to vote Democratic as well. In general, though, Generation Z is not as fiercely liberal as Millennials have been branded; 78% of Gen Zers considered themselves liberal to moderate on social issues while 83% labeled themselves moderate to conservative when it comes to financial issues, indicating an opportunity for politicians of either party to gain their votes in 2020 (Seemiller & Grace, 2016). To get the attention of these potential voters, political candidates must be relevant on the forums they frequent: social media sites.

Generation Z and Social Media

Social platforms are dominated by young people, who have near-constant online presences. According to the Pew Research Center, 94% of Americans ages 18 to 24 are active YouTube users (Anderson, M., & Jiang, J., 2018). Although Pew's data only includes adults (and only the 18- and 22-year-olds would be considered Generation Zers), there are also numerous YouTube users under 18. There isn't an accurate estimate of just how many young people under 18 have accounts on YouTube, but YouTube's user policy allows children 13 and up to create accounts. Including minors, there is a large portion of Generation Z that is represented by these statistics. This social video streaming site has essentially replaced cable television for young Americans, and in order to reach them, people must put out entertaining content for them to pay attention to because of the wealth of other sources they can choose from.

Many Generation Zers are on social networking sites "on a regular basis to interact with these information sources" (Fox & Rainie, 2014). Social media is mainly accessed through cell-phones by Generation Z, and there are fewer homes with landline phones and more cellphone-only households, as 90% of adults in the U.S. own a cell phone and 81% own a smart phone, according to Pew Research Center (2017). Seventy-eight percent of older Generation Zers had a phone

before they arrived at college (Madden, et. at. 2013). All of these technologies have lent themselves to the prevalence of social media networks for both personal and professional use. Social media was initially created out of a need to connect with friends in an online format but has quickly become a platform for everything: socializing, gaming, organizing and attending events, receiving entertainment news, streaming and watching media, business and professional networking, and, increasingly, engaging in politics.

Social Media and Politics

The utilization of social media outlets for political news and information is relatively new, as popular social media platforms have garnered widespread popularity and increased exponentially within the past decade (Clement, 2019). From 2005 to 2019, the percentage of Americans with active profiles on at least one social media site increased by 67% (Pew Research Center, 2019). According to Statista, 79% of Americans (roughly 244 million) had at least one social media profile, as of March 2019. Statista predicts that that number will increase to 257 million by 2023 (Clement, 2019). The main platforms Americans use political communication are Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and Instagram. Although people still seek out news on television, in newspapers, and on radio, the prevalence of the internet and social media increases the likelihood of users being indirectly exposed to news, whether that was their intention or not (Gil de Zúñiga, Weeks, & Ardèvol-Abreu, 2017). In Colorado specifically, 39.1% of residents said they receive political information on Facebook, 24.5% on Twitter, and 27% on YouTube (Stapleton, C., Sokhey, A., & Adler, E.S., 2019).

Some political campaign strategists understand the importance of being where the voters are and using those forums to understand who is going to vote, what they care about, and how they communicate about it. President Obama was one of the first presidential candidates to reap the benefits of social media use and engage with segments of the voting population that he perhaps

otherwise wouldn't have been able to reach, as noted in the book by Walker, Brooks, and Goings (2017). "By bolting together social networking applications under the banner of a movement, they created an unforeseen force to raise money, organize locally, fight smear campaigns, and get out the vote that helped them topple the Clinton machine and then John McCain and the Republicans" (Carr, 2008). Obama's engagement and understanding of where voters congregated and discussed, particularly young voters like Millennials, clearly helped him in both the 2008 and 2012 elections, in which he garnered two-thirds and over three-fifths of Millennial voters, respectively (Fisher, 2018). Obama had a 7.2% lead in the popular vote against McCain in 2008, and 80% were Millennials (6.8 million out of the 8.5 million voters that made up 7.2%) (Walker, Brooks, & Goings, 2013). In fact, without the Millennial vote in 2012 specifically, Obama would not have won his re-election bid. As the oldest Millennials are deep into adulthood at 38, Generation Z is the new young voting population that political strategists must learn to understand.

While many politicians have attempted to insert themselves into these mediums, many of the candidates and their social media strategists are not native to the platforms. People that were "not born into the digital world but have, at some later point in life, become fascinated by and adopted many or most aspects of the new technology" are referred to as "digital immigrants" (Prensky, 2001). These individuals are type-casted as immigrants because they learn "to adapt to their environment" and "always retain, to some degree, their 'accent', that is their foot in the past" (Prensky, 2001). In contrast, Generation Zers are "digital natives," who are users that "have spent their entire lives surrounded by and using computers, video games, digital music players, video cams, cell phones, and all the other toys and tools of the digital age" (Prensky, 2001). Prensky notes that older generations are basically learning a new language by using social media and the internet, and that "language learned later in life goes into a different part of the brain" (Prensky, 2001). This can cause older people to have a foreign-like presence on social media sites, and that

can do more harm than help when it comes to older political candidates using social media
campaigns to relate with young people. Gen Z highly values authenticity, as "realness is a core
value of the current generation" (Williams, Page, Petrosky, & Hernandez, 2010). This means they
will be able to tell when posts or interactions are not genuine, and that places many older
politicians on social media in danger with young voters. This may be fatal in competitive races for
already endangered politicians, like Colorado Senator Cory Gardner, who was called "the most
vulnerable Republican Senator of 2020" if they do not act strategically (Rothenberg, 2019).

Gardner's Re-Election in a Purple State

Cory Gardner is running for re-election in Colorado after serving his first term in the U.S.
Senate. After two consecutive terms in the U.S. House of Representatives, Gardner was elected to
the Senate in 2014, a midterm that marked the "largest turnover in Senate seats since 1958 and
gave the GOP its largest Senate majority since 1930" (Draper, 2015). Gardner has never known
the Senate outside of the Republican majority. Of the 14 Senate races in 2014 that were in states
Obama won, Colorado was one of only three states that the Democrats lost, which was an
incumbency upset in "a competitive purple state" (Draper, 2015).

The term purple state comes from the combination of the typical colors representing
Republicans and Democrats: red and blue, respectively. Colorado has been considered a purple
battleground state over the last several decades, as it was relatively Republican pre-1992 but
recently has been deemed a "blue-leaning swing state" (Preuhs, et. al., 2018, pg. 179). Swing
states are those that have competitive races with a 5% voting margin, which usually include
Colorado, Florida, Nevada, Ohio and Virginia for a total of 75 electoral college votes (Draper,
2015). Colorado is unique in that it is a longer-wave swing state, not a contemporary swing state,
which means that a political party controls the state "for two or three election periods and then
reverses course" (Preuhs, et. al., 2018, pg. 179). This could potentially make it easier to determine

which way the state will lean in 2020. Political analysts say Colorado will experience "a very close and highly contested presidential election in 2020" as 36% of voters in 2017 were unaffiliated while Democrats and Republicans accounted for around 31% each, meaning either party needs half of the unaffiliated voters to win (Preuhs, et. al., 2018, pg. 183). Large contributors to Colorado Democrats include urban growth, population growth due to more people moving to the state, and increasing Latino population and political participation, while the consistency and high turnout of rural and older voters give Colorado Republicans strong numbers each year (Preuhs, et. al., 2018, pg. 198). While both major parties continue to fluctuate according to these factors, another increasingly-associated determiner for state election turnout is the nationalization and ties to presidential elections.

Nationalization in Senate Races

Senate elections in particular have become more nationalized in recent years as a result of growing party loyalty and partisan divides. Nationalization is "an increasing linkage between presidential voting patterns with subpresidential contests at the federal, state, and local level" (Sievert & McKee, 2019). In 1980, the same political party that won the presidential election also won 52% of its Senate elections. However, by 2012, the political party that won the presidency also won 84% of its Senate elections (Sievert & McKee, 2019). This increasing nationalization can be dangerous for Republican senators heading into the 2020 election with a same-party president whose national approval rating is around 40%, according to Gallup News Poll (McCarthy, 2019). Sievert and McKee say that "the electoral fortunes of the president's co-partisans may be determined by political decisions and forces far beyond their immediate control" (Sievert & McKee, 2019).

Republican senators are also impacted by the growing ideological divide between Senate Democrats and Republicans, which "is now larger than at any time in the past century"

(Abramowitz & Webster, 2016). This divide has drastically increased straight-ticket voting among those with a party preference, with the American National Election Study finding the highest levels of party loyalty and straight-ticket voting since their first surveys of party identification in 1952 (Abramowitz & Webster, 2016). In 2012, 90% of voters straight-ticket voted in the presidential and Senate elections, breaking the 89% record from 1960 (Abramowitz & Webster, 2016). There is an increasingly strong effect of presidential partisanship on Senate races, as Abramowitz and Webster's regression indicates that "the effect of state presidential partisanship increased considerably over time with the largest increases occurring during the past two decades" (Abramowitz & Webster, 2016). While presidential partisanship gains power over Senate races, Senators lose the power of incumbency (Abramowitz & Webster, 2016), which is a crucial advantage for Gardner in 2020.

Gardner's Incumbency

Incumbents typically have more established voter bases and fundraising networks, while challengers often have fewer resources. This means that incumbents are theoretically much safer electorally with name recognition and funding which often deters them from using "social media in the same way as challengers and underdogs who must turn to all available means to promote and organize their campaigns" (Auter & Fine, 2017). This could be detrimental for Senator Gardner, who may perceive his incumbency advantage as greater than it actually is. Candidates in competitive races embrace social media to increase their chances of success in heated contests, but if Gardner does not recognize his need to engage on social media, his re-election campaign could prove unsuccessful (Auter & Fine, 2017). This is particularly dire, as his main challenger to date is former Colorado governor and former 2020 presidential candidate John Hickenlooper.

Incumbents are not only losing their advantage through presidential partisanship, but also through quality challengers, especially former governors. Governors who seek election to the

Senate receive the largest boost in votes over any other type of challenger, as they received an additional 13.4% of votes over the last the 10 election cycles, from 1994 through 2012 (Duquette, Mixon & Cebula, 2017). With many of these factors challenging Gardner, perhaps it is more important than ever that he engage on social media with younger voters who had the ability to turn the tide for President Obama and could potentially have the same effect for him.

Gardner and Generation Z

In 2017, the Colorado State Demography Office reported that there were 1.3 million Generation Zers in the state (or what they call "Post-Millennials"). This is the second largest age demographic in Colorado behind Millennials. While not all of the Colorado Gen Zers will be of voting age by 2020, a significant portion will be able to cast their first ballot and, as stated earlier, are very impressionable and likely to be independent. Since young voters typically have lower turnout in elections, campaign strategists don't often devote time or resources to winning their vote. The U.S. Census indicates that voting rates for 18- through 29-year-olds had decreased from 50.9% in 1964 to 38% in 2012 (File, 2013). However, in the 2012 election, Colorado was one of 14 states with statistically higher youth voting rates than the 45% national average, with Colorado's young adults turning out at a rate of 55.7% (File, 2013). The Census says that while youth voter turnout has decreased in the past 60 years, "historical age-based voting patterns are not set in stone" (File, 2013).

Recent statistics from Pew Research Center also indicate that youth turnout could be changing, as the three youngest generations (Gen X, Millennials, and Gen Z) outvoted all older generations in the 2018 midterm election due to an increase of 21.9 million votes for the younger generations from 2014 to 2018, compared to a 3.6 million vote increase for the older generations over the same period (Cilluffo & Fry, 2019). By combining only the Gen Z and Millennial vote, these young people accounted for a quarter of all midterm votes in America in 2018, with Gen Z

casting 4% of all votes. Pew projects that they'll account for 10% of potential voters by November 2020 (Cilluffo & Fry, 2019). With this in mind, it could be worthwhile for candidates like Gardner to try to connect with the eligible voting portion of the 1.3 million Generation Zers in Colorado. The opportunity to gain these young, undecided voters is clear, and the chief manner in which to reach them is online.

The "adoption of social media has the potential to change the playing field for candidates who were previously restricted to target audiences and voting demographics and assist in swaying formerly hard-to-reach demographics, such as young voters" (Straus, et. al., 2016). Younger people are more likely to use social media to access and share news, and a regression shows that younger people in the U.S., as well as the UK, Spain, Australia, Germany, and Ireland are more likely to follow politicians on social media than any other age demographic (Newman, et. al. 2017). These voters are untapped potential with their combined lack of party affiliation, constant online presence, and strong peer influence, but it will take more than just being present on social media sites to hold their attention.

The ratio of *intended* use to *actual* use on social media for politicians is 57% to 30% (Marcinkowski & Metag, 2014). A survey found that six weeks prior to elections, candidates claim to plan on using social media while three days before the election, only a handful actually did (Marcinkowski & Metag, 2014). They also found that candidates use social media more symbolically, as "it is less the expectation to win votes that leads candidates to use social media but the hope not to lose voters (young voters in particular) by portraying oneself as modern, open minded, and up-to-date" (Marcinkowski & Metag, 2014). Generation Z, with their avid use of social media as digital natives, understand the difference between politicians truly being authentic and wanting to engage youth voters and politicians simply having an account because they believe it represents their digital competency. If politicians want to appeal to Gen Z voters, it will take

more than just having a Twitter or an Instagram account; they must be authentic, engaging, and relevant on those accounts.

Campaigning on Social Media to Gen Z

In order to use social media forums accurately in a way that will speak to Generation Z users, politicians must be authentic. One way to do that is implementing a balanced strategy on Twitter, meaning that tweets should include both professional and private aspects of their lives as opposed to strictly professional aspects (Colliander, et. al., 2017). A longitudinal study showed a balanced strategy increased both interest in the politician's party and intention to vote for that party, regardless of users' prior political interest, social media usage intensity, gender, or, most importantly, age. (Colliander, et. al. 2017). Twitter and other social media networks can also be beneficial in free advertising for candidates if their message is favorited or re-tweeted, because "non-followers" are exposed to campaigns' Twitter messages when someone in their social network retweets their posts to a broader audience (Marwick & Danah, 2011). This could potentially increase the reach that politicians can have on social media if they are generating quality content and interacting with constituents in such a way that their posts are being disseminated amongst social networks. One way to increase popularity and generate conversation among constituents is to identify what their concerns are and actively address them.

Senators who are nearing the end of their term without a re-election bid are less attentive to voter preferences than those seeking re-election (Griffin & Newman, 2005). Therefore, senators like Cory Gardner who are up for re-election in 2020 may have a prerogative to understand the issues their potential voters care about and campaign with those in mind. Since they cannot possibly speak with every single constituent in their state or engage with every single voter on social media, they hear and respond to potential voters "who are politically engaged and active because they are more likely to follow electoral campaigns than rank-and-file voters" (Lloren &

Wüest, 2016). The same etiquette that once applied to campaigning to politically active

constituents in the pre-internet era applies today on social media: make your voice heard to the

influencers, the opinion leaders, and the politically-engaged citizens who may have large networks

of "non-followers." If these prominent figures share or mention a politician's content, that could

be a huge boost for their social media presence and their re-election campaign, all for free.

In addition, by using social media authentically, politicians can remove themselves from

traditional media gatekeepers and communicate their platforms directly with the public and control

their content "without fear of distortion by journalists and other media" (Gainous & Wagner,

2014). In a study of the U.S., UK, Spain, Australia, Germany, and Ireland, young voters from the

United States have the lowest overall trust in the news and are most dissatisfied with mainstream

news media, which explains their appeal to authenticity and "desire to hear directly from

politicians without the information being filtered by others" (Newman, et. al., 2017). This

indicates that authenticity will go a long way with younger voters.

Being the most technologically-centered, most diverse, and most educated generation will

surely impact their role in political campaigns and elections moving forward. This up-and-coming

voting bloc will be crucial for candidates to reach in 2020, particularly if they are running in

competitive elections in battleground states like Gardner. For political candidates to run a

successful campaign with this demographic, they must understand the lens of technology,

education, and diversity through which Generation Zers view the world. These characteristics

create a rather moderate voter, often branded as socially liberally and economically conservative,

that may be persuaded by candidates from any party. This will be a key detail in purple states

where Republicans are campaigning, as the GOP has not garnered much youth support in the past

few elections and midterms. Instead of overlooking this demographic and continuing to rely

heavily on the votes of older generations, perhaps younger members of the GOP like Gardner can

capitalize on this opportunity to change the way Republicans campaign and target the youth

population more directly by maintaining an authentic social media presence to potentially win

their vote and gain their loyalty for years to come.

Chapter 2: Creative Work

Creative products of this project include social media data analysis, multiple in-depth interviews, a long-form text-based story with data interspersed throughout, multiple videos and an interactive website showcasing all of these elements. The intended audience for this final project is the Council on Undergraduate Research National Conference in the Media and Politics Discipline. The conclusions drawn from the social media analysis will also be useful for an audience of politicians and political strategists, as well as individuals who maintain large-scale social media accounts. In addition, the entire package will be presented to faculty, students, and attendees the Norlin Scholars Conference in April 2020. As a Norlin scholar, I will showcase my work at this interdisciplinary conference featuring various creative, research, and scholarly works.

Data Element

The data analysis component stems from the social media accounts (Twitter and Instagram) of Senator Cory Gardner and his major opponent for 2020, John Hickenlooper, as well as Representatives Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY-14) and Dan Crenshaw (R-TX-2). I selected Gardner and Hickenlooper because their Senate race is the main case study for my analysis of social media and Generation Z voters. I also chose to incorporate Rep. Crenshaw and Rep. Ocasio-Cortez because they are social media "stars" with millions of followers. They each embody what a "successful" politician on social media looks like on both the Republican and the Democratic side.

The social media analysis surveyed the overall statistics of the candidates' personal and congressional accounts (number of followers, frequency of posts, etc.), as well as engagement with other social media users and the content that is disseminated. This analysis is important because it compares how each candidate is utilizing social media for their campaign and/or their office and determines whether or not those tactics resonate with Generation Z in particular. Both Ocasio-Cortez and Crenshaw, like Gardner, are running for re-election in 2020. I chose to

juxtapose their social media activity with Gardner's to determine which candidates are capitalizing on the two mediums in the most effective ways as they prepare for the election this fall.

I gathered this data over the course of six months, from September 2019 to February 2020. After it was categorized, I transformed it into a variety of charts and graphs that make it easier for the audience to understand. This will allow readers to visualize the differences and understand the data in a different way. It will break up the long stretches of writing and keep the readers interested in the work as well.

Journalistic Element

The written element is a long-form, journalistic piece, approximately 6,000 words. I performed 12 in-person, phone, and email interviews with all of the characters quoted in the story. I interviewed eight Generation Zers who care about politics and have different political ideologies. It was also important to me that I interview a diverse group of Gen Zers with varying educational backgrounds (no college, some college, post-college.), socioeconomic backgrounds, geographic backgrounds, as well as varying lifestyle characteristics (mothers, military members, married individuals, full-time employees, etc.). I also interviewed three members of academia who perform extensive research on digital and political communication, social media usage, and political campaign strategies. Lastly, I interviewed the communications director for Senator Gardner's campaign to understand the behind-the-scenes social media strategy.

This component incorporates quotes and different perspectives from all of the stakeholders that I am studying in this project. It will allow readers to hear from voices other than my own and bring a creative spirit to the overall product. The intended audience for this specific piece is anyone, but particularly Coloradans, interested in politics, social media, and young voters. I hope to publish my piece with a regional news outlet, such as *The Denver Post,* or a national political news outlet, like *National Review* or *POLITICO Magazine*.

Visual Element

       After conducting video interviews with members of Gen Z, I created several short videos that address political issues they care about (and don't care about), politicians they enjoy following on social media and why, their recommendations for politicians using social media, and their observations and reactions to the social media feeds of Gardner, Hickenlooper, Crenshaw, and Ocasio-Cortez. I chose to create several short videos as opposed to a singular, long-form video because they can easily be shared on social media, and they truly embody the type of media that resonates with Generation Zers (similar to BuzzFeed or NowThis videos) and captures their attention. These videos will also allow the audience to pair a face with the quotes in the story and connect with the different viewpoints offered in the thesis. These audio-visual elements will make the project more dynamic overall, lifting the words and data off the pages and presenting them in a different, and perhaps more engaging, medium.

       I hope that my creative project resonates with readers of all ages who seek to understand more about social media, particularly with politicians who use the medium to communicate and campaign. This project brings attention to the interaction between politicians and young Americans on social media, and it emphasizes the increasing importance that social media will continue to have in American politics.

       All of the elements of my creative work are accessible on the interactive website that I designed: https://lini5389.wixsite.com/thesis. The story and video links are also available in Appendix A for reference, and the social media data analysis is located in Appendix B for reference.

Chapter Three: Discussion

Description

Conducting a literature review on Gen Z, social media, politicians, and re-elections allowed me to discover the different discussions around all of these topics and determine where to insert my own findings into the conversation. This up-and-coming generation will play an increasing role in transforming the political landscape of the U.S., and my literature review reiterated how important it is to understand them when looking towards the future of politics. With their varying political views and potential to comprise 10% of the electorate this fall, the opportunity for politicians and political parties to connect with them was unmistakable. Combining these characteristics with the rise of social media and politicians capitalizing on its power, I felt it would be important to study how politicians can succeed at reaching Gen Z.

By interviewing members of this generation, social media and political experts, and a member of Gardner's campaign staff, I was able to incorporate many different perspectives into the creative project and make it more personal. With each individual I interviewed, it became clear to me just how prevalent social media is in our society today, particularly for young people, and the unquestionable need for public figures to utilize it (and utilize it well) to connect with others.

As I was researching and reporting on these issues, politicians' efforts to be relevant and interactive on social media were more apparent each day with the Democratic debates, caucuses, primaries, and the impending 2020 election. In addition, the COVID-19 global pandemic has put politicians and world leaders in the spotlight more than ever as the public observes and scrutinizes their every move. It has been fascinating to watch breaking news stories play out on politicians' social media accounts as they grapple with the best strategies to share, interact, and engage with the American public on these digital platforms.

Evaluation

This project was strong in its ambition and creativity, but perhaps limited in tangible data and conclusions. Combining several, broad topics together was a daunting task. Social media, Gen Z, and re-elections are all in-depth topics themselves, let alone after intersecting them. However, I believe that the creative project contributed something unique to the conversation regarding young voters and social media. It is difficult to make concrete claims because the circumstances surrounding each politician are vastly different. Their age, party, personality, and campaign strategies all factor into how much connecting with Gen Z on social media matters to them. If they are searching for suggestions to bolster youth support, perhaps this could be useful to them.

If I were to expand upon this project in the future, I would be interested in finding more campaign staffers of high-profile politicians (such as Obama's social media manager). This project predominantly focused on the perspectives of Generation Z, but if I were to conduct it again, I would try to incorporate more individuals who work in political social media strategy. In addition, it would be interesting to interview politicians of varying ages and ideologies to understand their personal thoughts, reservations, and experiences with social media.

Reflection

This project radically evolved over the last year. I was first inspired during my semester interning in Washington, D.C. While living, learning, and working in a city filled with other young people interested in politics, it became clear to me that these were the future political leaders of America. Yet, there was often a disconnect between older and younger politicians and staff members. I witnessed major generational disparities when it came to technology and strategy, and I felt that the root of these differences must be explored to have a greater understanding of the future of politics. I am grateful to have had this opportunity and hope to return to Washington D.C. after graduation to continue researching and reporting on political issues.

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Appendix A

Re-tweeting your way to Re-election
Written by Lindsey Nichols

Tech-addicted. Disengaged. Social justice warriors. Entitled. Anti-social. Shallow.

First it was Millennials, and now it's Generation Z—young people can't seem to escape stereotypes about their political behavior.

But Generation Z is so much more than that.

It's a single mother in the Army, a rancher, a beauty blogger, an oilfield worker, a former pageant queen, a barista, a Latinx advocate, and a future teacher.

It's kids turning eight and entering third grade, learning about the presidency and their civic duty to vote.

It's also kids turning 18 and carrying out that civic duty to cast ballots this fall in the 2020 election for the first time.

Generation Z includes people born between 1997 and 2012, and it is the second-largest age group in Colorado behind Millennials, as well as 10% of all potential voters nationwide. For politicians, it's also a largely ignored part of the electorate.

These young people belong to the most racially-diverse, the most educated, and the most digitally-connected generation in American history, and they can tell us a lot about the future of Colorado and of the nation.

Domonique Quintana, 21, studies political science at the University of Colorado Boulder. She landed her dream position as an intern for Colorado Senator Michael Bennet in Washington, D.C., but quickly learned how often young people are discounted when it comes to politics.

"I loved my time there, but it's like because we're young we automatically don't know enough, or our opinions aren't strong enough, or we aren't involved enough," Quintana said. "There were at least 500 interns just like me who were there because they loved politics and they couldn't get enough of it, so what don't they get? Why are we overlooked?"

Perhaps politicians typecast young people as unlikely voters due to their historically low turnout rates and political involvement. The U.S. Census indicates that voting rates for 18- through 29-year-olds decreased from 50.9% in 1964 to 38% in 2012, as opposed to 25- to 44-year-olds, who decreased from 69% to 49.5% in the same period.

However, in the 2012 election, Colorado was one of 14 states with significantly higher youth voting rates than the national average, and Colorado's young adults turned out at a rate of 55.7%. The U.S. Census says that while youth voter turnout has decreased in the past 60 years, "historical age-based voting patterns are not set in stone."

Data from the Pew Research Center showed that in the 2018 midterm election, America's youngest voters (Gen Z and Millennials) accounted for a quarter of all votes nationwide. Gen Z cast 4% of ballots across the country in one of the first major elections that many were eligible to vote in. Pew projects that Gen Zers will account for 10% of potential voters by November 2020.

Not only do they have the numbers to make an impact in the election, but they are also in a crucial stage for developing their political opinions.

Some research states that they may be more conservative than their Millennial predecessors. A survey conducted in 2016 by the Hispanic Heritage Foundation polled 50,000 Generation Zers across race, ethnicity, and gender and found the majority of them identify as Republican.

But while Business Insider claims that Gen Z "is more conservative than many realize," nearly half of the 1,800 Gen Zers they surveyed did not identify as either liberal or conservative, and the other half was evenly split between the two identities.

In fact, the 2016 book, "Generation Z Goes to College," showed that 78% of Gen Zers consider themselves liberal to moderate on social issues (with 80% supporting same-sex marriage) while 83% label themselves as moderate to conservative when it comes to fiscal issues.

It seems that these young Americans are not simply the next most liberal generation, but rather one that blurs the lines between typical party affiliations and political ideologies.

Meet Gen Z

Taylor Schalk, 21, a senior at the University of Colorado Boulder, said she likes to avoid branding herself with a party affiliation when her views "don't fit in the boxes that the two major parties have reduced themselves to."

"I'm pretty socially liberal, but at the same time I am very fiscally conservative," Schalk said. "I feel like most people in our generation have mixed views like that, we don't like to be put in a box and labeled as just Democrat or just Republican."

Elisa McMillan, another 21-year-old University of Colorado Boulder student, calls herself "a moderate mix of my conservative dad and liberal mom."

Other Gen Zers like Chelsea Peters, 24, a legislative aide at the Colorado State House of Representatives, use more specific terms when describing political ideology.

"I call myself a conservative constitutionalist versus a Republican, because I feel like putting on party labels is just breeding negativity in the era of polarization we're already in," Peters said. "So I would rather get down to the meat and the bones of what I believe in and call it like it is."

For Roice Hanks, 24, an engineering student at the University of Wyoming, his ideologies land "somewhere between a conservative and a libertarian."

Wherever these Gen Zers fall on the political spectrum, their beliefs inform the political decisions they make and the issues they care about.

"Being fiscally responsible is at the top of my list, and depending how you look at it, that covers lots and lots of different issues, like post-secondary education, immigration, health care, it's a lot broader than just taxes," Hanks said. "After working in ranching my whole life and going to the oilfield after college, I just can't justify going to work if it's all going to be taxed away and that's my biggest concern with this election."

Some conservative Gen Zers, like Peters, feel that the entire generation is unfairly branded as "liberal college kids," and that causes politicians "to dismiss young people and assume they know what every young person cares about."

"I guess I'm non-traditional because I went to school as an unmarried mother with a one-month old, working on my degree so far with literally a child on my lap," Peters said. "And I'm not anything like the liberal college kids the media portrays as our generation, I don't support free college for all or mandated healthcare, and I want politicians to hear that too."

Peters joined the Army right out of high school, serving two years of active duty and attending Fort Hayes State University online in pursuit of her bachelor's degree in political science.

"I'm sorry, but I feel no remorse for people that are taking out enormous loans and then complaining about it afterwards," Peters said. "As someone who got an education, I was technically and am now a single mother again, and I figured out a way to go to school, so that's something I'm so annoyed hearing about repeatedly."

Others, like Savannah Hart, 21, didn't pursue a college education after high school and are more concerned with government overreach in the 2020 election. The young, stay-at-home mother works as an associate market builder by selling hair products through social media.

"The U.S. was supposed to be a citizen-ran country and the government is trying to take over and tell us how to live our life when we should be telling the government how to run our country," Hart said. "It's not our duty to work for somebody else to live for free I think that is so dumb."

It's the opposite for Quintana, as she believes too much importance is placed on economic issues and bases her candidate decisions on their efforts towards "social justice, criminal justice reform, pro-choice, LGBTQ rights, women's rights, and equality."

McMillan is most interested in hearing about a candidate's background and "how they treat others" before making political decisions.
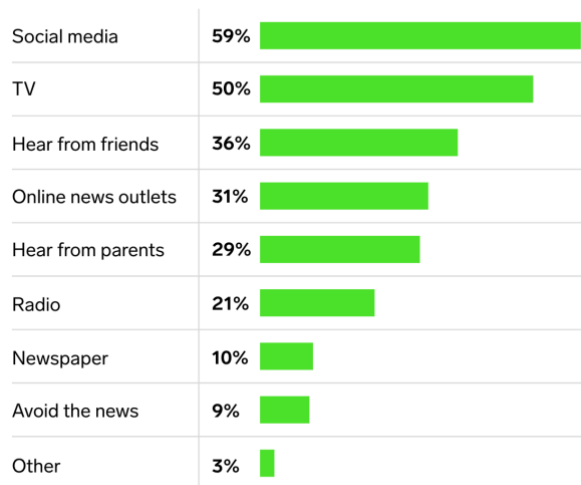
"I care a lot about immigration, overall equality in spaces and equality money-wise," McMillan said. "I like hearing about candidates' background and where they come from, and most importantly how they view people and equality issues."

While the generation obviously differs in beliefs, two things seemed to ring true for all: the search for jobs post-college was at the forefront of their concerns, and their main source of political news gathering is social media.

Gen Z and Social Media

In 2019, Business Insider conducted a survey of Gen Zers, concluding that 59% of them use social media for political news, particularly Instagram. There are 120.7 million Instagram users in the United States, with 72% of all teens using Instagram. And 65% of Gen Z says they check the site daily, including Peters.

How Gen Z finds out what's going on in the world

Social media	59%
TV	50%
Hear from friends	36%
Online news outlets	31%
Hear from parents	29%
Radio	21%
Newspaper	10%
Avoid the news	9%
Other	3%

Source: Business Insider

"I check Instagram daily, and a lot of my political news I'm just exposed to at work," Peters said. "Social media and working in politics make it easy to just receive the news, without really ever having to seek it out."

That passive reception of news makes it more challenging for politicians to reach younger voters who aren't actively seeking out their profiles or their posts. Politicians are slowly making their way to the platform, following after young Congress members, including Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-New York), who are popular with the young audience.

Andrea Colmenero, 23, who serves as a legislative aide at the Colorado State House of Representatives, is one of Ocasio-Cortez's 4.2 million Instagram followers.

"We're in an age where people like transparency with how they drive their social media, and that's attracting a lot of people if you see how many followers each of them has," Colmenero said, when referring to young politicians. "I think it's because we're seeing a new movement in the social media era where we're seeing Congress members be more transparent about the work they're doing and about how Congress works."

Across the aisle, Representative Dan Crenshaw (R-Texas) has garnered 1.2 million Instagram followers for implementing the same transparency and engagement.

Peters follows him due to their similar military background, but also for his educational and relatable content.

"I think where the Republican Party is failing is that they're not having these fun, energetic, young, different-looking people in front of the camera and that's why I like Dan Crenshaw, he's the literally the only one that has truly utilized social media," Peters said. "I love that Crenshaw gives you the facts and makes it very interactive, very understandable and it's appealing to me to not just see that he believes in something but why he believes in something."

Peters thinks his ability to use the Story feature on Instagram to engage voter feedback in real-time has been "ingenious" and what young voters would love to see more of. Crenshaw also has a

recurring video segment entitled, "Here's The Truth," in which he breaks down the facts of varying issues, from the impeachment process to the coronavirus.

In a social media minute, while 347,222 people are scrolling through Instagram, 87,500 people are posting on another key social media platform utilized by Gen Zers for politics: Twitter.

There are 48.4 million monthly active Twitter users in the United States, meaning they follow at least 30 other accounts and are followed back by one-third of those accounts. Thirty-eight percent of these users are between 18 and 29-years-old.

Morning Consult surveyed Gen Zers and concluded that over 50% of the older members of the generation (17-21) use Twitter, which is critical for politicians trying to reach youth coming of voting age.

One politician who has built a distinctive presence on Twitter is President Donald Trump, who has shared over 50,000 tweets with his 74.9 million followers.

"I only follow like seven people on Twitter, and Donald Trump is the reason I even downloaded it," Hanks said. "I like seeing his take not media-filtered, if he tweets it, it's coming out of his mouth, and it's actually kind of nice."

Toby Hopp, an advertising, public relations, and media design professor at the University of Colorado Boulder, studies how online political communication affects democracy. While social media platforms like Twitter have become increasingly popular for politics in the era of Trump, Hopp cautions that "social media offers democratic opportunities and while also enacting democratic costs."

Hopp said Trump "does, of course, command a substantial amount of attention on Twitter. That being said, I don't think he provides much in the way of a template that can be used for other politicians. He often times tweets politically inadvisable content, content that is factually incorrect, and/or content that is in violation of Twitter's terms of service."

Yet some conservative Gen Zers like Jonathan Roesch, 24, an economics graduate from Metropolitan State University and a full-time rancher, enjoy following the Trump precisely because he's politically incorrect and stirs up controversy.

Hear from Gen Zer Jonathan

"Young people are on their phones 24/7, and the only real Republican that's prominent on social media that you really hear about is Donald Trump," Roesch said. "None of the, like, senators or anything like that are really on it, that you hear about anyway."

This may be of particular interest to re-election hopeful, Colorado Republican Senator Cory Gardner, who Roll Call deemed "The Most Vulnerable Senator of 2020."

Though his opponent for the fall isn't guaranteed, the Democratic frontrunner is John Hickenlooper, the former Colorado governor.

Incumbent senators typically have the advantage in states that lean towards their party, and they may rely on name recognition and approval ratings to win re-election. However, Gardner is running in a purple state against another prominent Coloradan who also possesses name recognition. And in the 2018 election, Colorado's voters leaned more blue, electing a Democratic majority in both the state house and state senate, and electing Democrat Jared Polis as the nation's first openly gay governor.

Shannon McGregor, a communication professor from the University of Utah who studies politics and social media, says that incumbents may be tempted to assume safety in more competitive states and "may not see a huge benefit from devoting time, staff resources, and financial resources to these social media accounts."

But newcomers and challengers, who have to introduce themselves to voters and advertise their campaigns, are more likely to harness the power of social media and reap its benefits.

"To the extent that people can build really big followings or have some of these viral moments, and I'm talking about newcomers or challengers, that's where you can see social media be really powerful and you can see an incumbent be sort of forced to respond," McGregor said.

"Challengers are able to create these really compelling viral moments or build up a strong social media following which then of course generates news coverage, which then gets their name out even more, and that's when we see the power of social media really sort of be influential."

Since both Gardner and Hickenlooper have track records in Colorado politics, they may be tempted to rely on name recognition and past voter turnout and not tap into the power of social media. But as 2020 is a presidential election year, voter turnout will be higher in general, making the Senate race all the more potentially contentious.

As the election draws nearer and political messaging increases, these two politicians must maintain an engaging social media presence to cut through the noise and establish a voice, now more than ever.

Anand Sokhey, a political science professor at the University of Colorado Boulder, said that social media will "play an increasing role as we look towards the 2020 election."

"With the COVID-19 social distancing measures, in many places it will essentially be the only real interaction that campaigns have with voters," Sokhey said. "So, I'd say that it was going to play a big role, and now it's going to play an unprecedented role -- it's an open question what that will look like."

Jerrod Dobkin, the communications director for Gardner's re-election campaign, said that social media is "a really good way to directly communicate with the voters."

"We still use traditional news media and Senator Gardner does interviews with anywhere from the Denver Post to CBS4, your local news channel," Dobkin said. "But if you want to talk directly to the voters, you can use social media and it's a great way to do it."

Perhaps politicians like Gardner can "talk" to the voters through social media by tweeting or posting, but it isn't much of a conversation if the voters aren't responding, or even following the politician's social media.

Many Gen Zers like Roesch, who share the same party as Gardner, don't follow him on social media.

"I think he's alright, he was raised around agriculture like me and I think he's an advocate for agriculture more than other politicians," Roesch said. "But I wouldn't go out of my way to follow him because it doesn't seem all that informative or interesting to me, like Trump."

Similarly, Hanks said that he only follows politicians who give him a reason to follow them.

"I like the rawness of Trump's Twitter, and I wish politicians would be more genuine like that," Hanks said. "I don't know if Cory Gardner has a Twitter or anything like that but if he does I haven't heard of it, 'cause he obviously doesn't tweet anything worth reading."

To find out if his social media was truly "worth reading" to Gen Zers, I conducted an analysis comparing the Twitter and Instagram accounts of Gardner, Hickenlooper, Ocasio-Cortez, and Crenshaw.

Politicians on Social Media

The numbers for Gardner and Hickenlooper paled in comparison to Ocasio-Cortez and Crenshaw, who are considered social media "stars." As of March 1, 2020, Hickenlooper (@Hickenlooper) had 169,300 Twitter followers and 4,730 tweets, while Gardner (@SenCoryGardner) had 138,700 followers and 5,174 tweets on his congressional Twitter. In contrast, Ocasio-Cortez (@AOC) tweeted 9,894 times to her 6.4 million followers and Crenshaw (@DanCrenshawTX) tweeted 1,358 times to his 774,000 followers.

Gardner, Crenshaw, and Ocasio-Cortez all have congressional Twitter accounts (@SenCoryGardner, @RepDanCrenshaw, and @RepAOC) as well as personal Twitter accounts (@CoryGardner, @DanCrenshawTX, and @AOC). Yet while the two representatives mainly use

their personal Twitter accounts, Gardner opts for his official, congressional account instead. His personal Twitter account only had 19,000 followers and 1,620 tweets as of March 1, 2020.

Dobkin said this is because Gardner has been more focused on posting about his work in office.

"For us, our official Twitter account for the past five years has been much more active because we weren't in the middle of actively campaigning," Dobkin said. "Now that we're ramping up our campaign twitter account, we've tried to do posts every day and it will grow more and more."

But even if a politician is not actively campaigning, they can still utilize their personal accounts to connect with young voters and post more authentic, interesting, and relatable content outside of their official, congressional content – which is something that both Crenshaw and Ocasio-Cortez do regularly.

Gardner can utilize both profiles, but the staff members that assist with congressional social media accounts must be separate from the staff members that assist with campaign social media accounts.

"By law, the official staff that runs Gardner's official Twitter doesn't know what the campaign staffers are doing on social media, and vice versa," Dobkin said. "I've worked in both places and Senator Gardner is involved kind of with what goes up on Twitter accounts, he'll send his ideas over and it runs past him. He oversees both and is involved in both."

In an email interview, Hopp partially attributed the personal versus official account usage to generational differences between "non-traditional politicians" like Ocasio-Cortez and "non-digital natives" like Gardner.

"My guess is that in her [Ocasio-Cortez's] pre-political life she used social media in a way not so dissimilar from you and I - to stay in touch with friends, learn about things going on in the world, and so on," Hopp said. "Once she became a political figure, she simply modified this behavior to help her achieve her political and electoral objectives. As a non-digital native, Gardner is a bit different. He's using social media in a politically instrumental (i.e., personally inauthentic) way

insofar as he sees it as a one-way communication tool that has potential primarily as it relates to top-down brand management."

This inauthentic use of social media is evident to Gen Zers because, as digital natives, they have never known life outside of the Internet, cellphones, or social media. Growing up around this technology is like growing up and learning a language—you become fluent in it, and you can easily identify a "non-digital native" when they attempt to communicate without fully understanding or speaking the language.

Each social media platform has its own, distinctive "language" that requires different etiquette. Twitter, a text-based medium, differs from Instagram, a predominantly visual outlet.

On Instagram, the "stars" actually had fewer posts than the two Colorado politicians' pages, with Gardner at 743, Hickenlooper at 640, Crenshaw at 528, and Ocasio-Cortez at 416.
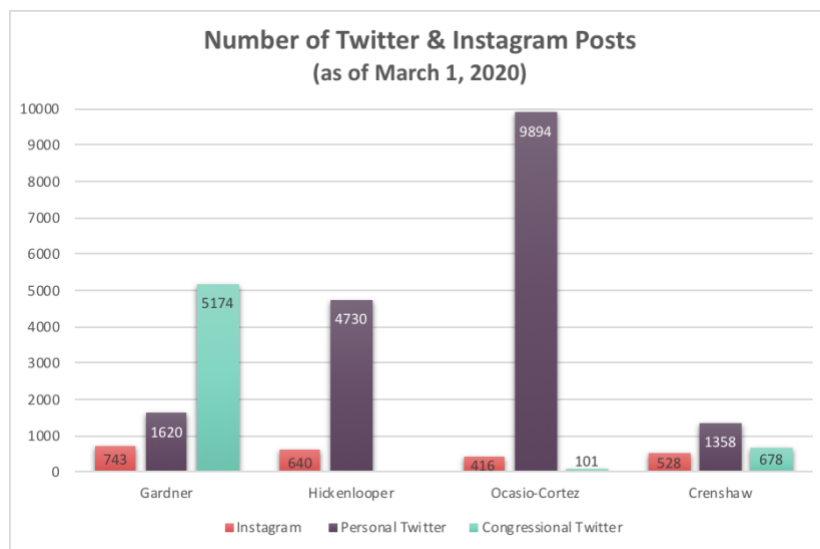
However, Ocasio-Cortez has nearly 700 times as many Instagram followers as Gardner with 4.2 million to his 6,058. Crenshaw similarly has almost 200 times as many followers as Gardner with 1.2 million.
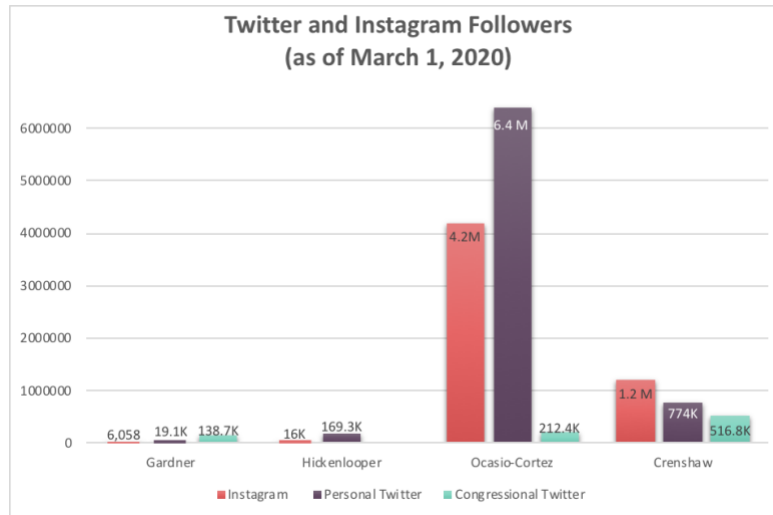
This indicates a quantity versus quality dynamic on Instagram that was not as apparent on Twitter. While politicians often tweet several times per day on Twitter, this chiefly visual medium calls for people to post quality, on-brand, original content, and less of it so as not to "clog up the feed."

Hart says that with her profession depending on social media, she has learned to balance posting often enough to stay relevant with not posting too often that you "clog up the feed of potential clients because they see that you clearly don't know how to use Instagram."

"There's no point of being on social media if you're not following the, like, so-called unofficial rules of the site," Hart said. "We can tell when somebody doesn't get it when they put like six pictures up in one day, they're not edited, they have either cringey captions or like overused quotes and hashtags, and it's just fake, fake, fake."

So while Gardner and Hickenlooper may post more often than Crenshaw and Ocasio-Cortez, Instagram is not a site in which quantity is desirable.

"I compare it to people becoming a beauty blogger where you can't just post a bunch of stuff on Instagram if it's like sub-par content, and expect to gain followers," Schalk said. "It's the same with anybody, it takes work and you have to post stuff that you're passionate about and genuinely put time and effort into getting people's attention."

It's also important on Instagram to utilize the Story function to post polls, live videos, question-and-answer sessions, or simply "behind-the-scenes footage that young people crave."

"AOC shares behind-the-scenes footage and just really gives her followers a deep dive into every stage of the political process," Colmenero said. "It's not only her policy work, but her own personal views and personal life, and I think it's so important."

McGregor has performed extensive research regarding how politicians utilize various social media platforms.

"We see someone like AOC using Instagram for not only some official stuff but also to talk about her cooking, her skincare routine, like really personal things," McGregor said. "There is research that suggests that that makes people feel more connected to a politician and feel more favorable about them because then they feel like they know who they are and have some relationship with them."

While Ocasio-Cortez has recently been posting on her Instagram only about once a month, she still retains her 4.2 million followers. Like celebrity users, it seems that the quality and relevance of her content outweighs the misconception that a large quantity of posts implies success.

"Social media is kind of like being the popular kid in high school versus being the smart kid who has really good ideas, but nobody wants to listen to them," Hart said. "The popular kid who knows how to present themselves and be relevant to the most people is going to be able to convince them of things more than the smart kid, even if the smart kid has better ideas."

With the rise of social media, perhaps politics may turn into more of a popularity contest.

Hear from Gen Zer Savannah

"The most relatable stuff is real life, and when you can capture that on your social, that's when you reach thousands if not millions of people," Hart said. "Like why are you trying to be fake or

quote other people? Be realistic, be true and honest, because everybody can see bullshit from a mile away, and if you can't then you really need to, like, get off social media."

What Do They Tweet About?

After following the Instagram and Twitter accounts of the four politicians for six months, the content of their posts is broken down here with how many times they posted and the content of the posts.

Each week, I selected a different day to analyze the politicians, two at a time with one Republican and one Democrat. For example, during the first week of September, Gardner and Ocasio-Cortez were analyzed on Sunday, Sept. 1, and Hickenlooper and Crenshaw were analyzed on Monday, Sept. 2. The next week, Gardner and Ocasio-Cortez were analyzed on Monday, while Hickenlooper and Crenshaw were analyzed on Tuesday, and so on for six months.

The content of their posts was broadly and narrowly categorized to display differences.
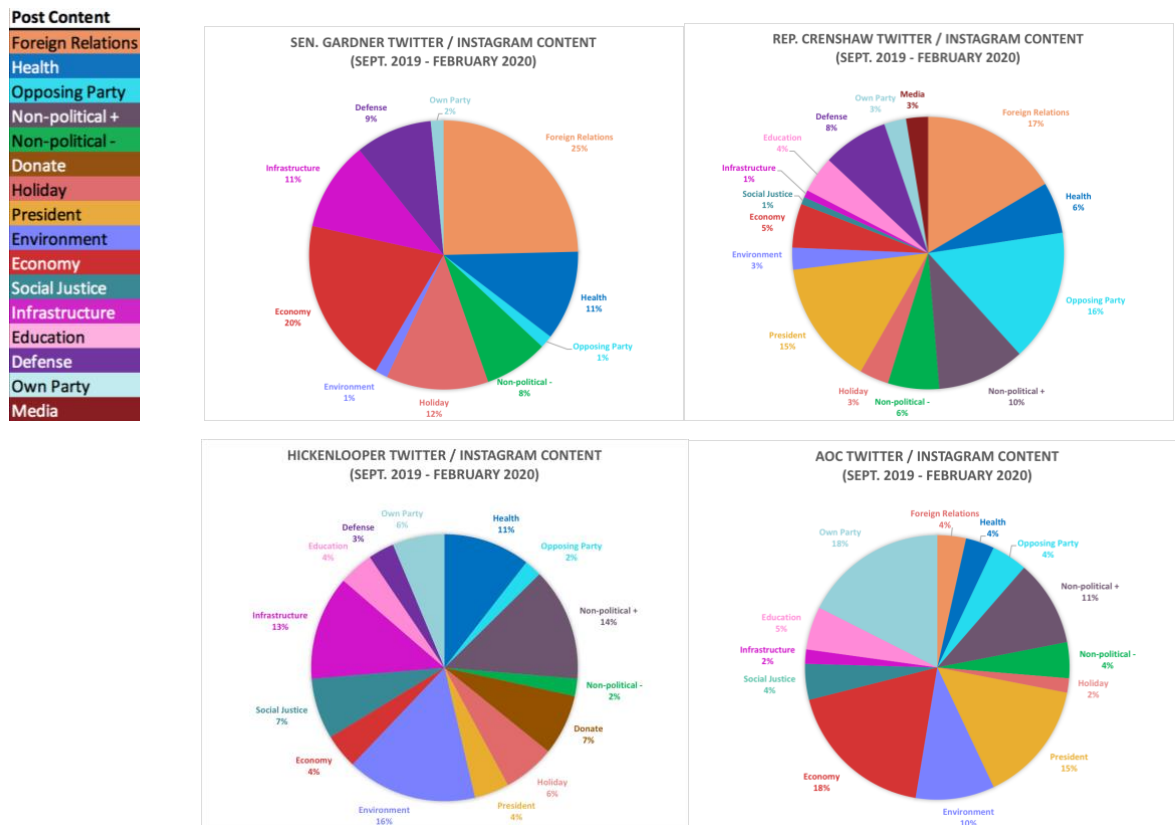
Comparing the Republican content charts on the left to the Democratic content charts on the right, it's clear that foreign relations is the most common category for the two Republicans and the economy, the environment, and the president are the most common topics for the two Democrats.

Between the two Coloradans, Gardner posts about foreign relations and the economy most often, while Hickenlooper focuses on the environment and state infrastructure. Hickenlooper's feed is more diversified among categories and Gardner's is concentrated on only a handful of issues.

Gardner completely omitted posts in the education, social justice, and presidential categories. Hickenlooper had no tweets or posts regarding foreign relations, while Gardner's is the exact opposite with the bulk of his content focusing on those issues, such as trade, immigration, and international news.

Another interesting dynamic to observe is how the social media stars both devote 15% of their tweets to the president, with Crenshaw's mostly positive and Ocasio-Cortez's mostly negative. The two Coloradans barely address Trump, perhaps to dissociate themselves with the commander-in-chief's social media antics entirely as they look to win the Senate race in a purple state. Sokhey noted that it may be harmful for politicians to link themselves to Trump, his tactics, or the highly controversial content shares.

"If you make a mistake on social media, most politicians are not going to be granted the same leeway as Trump by the public," Sokhey said. "So, while I think you'll continue to see politicians use social media to reach out, endorse, give opinions, few will try to do the free-wheeling, stream of consciousness thing that Trump does."

Broadening these categories into four major content areas illustrates another dichotomy. The categories include "Issues of the Day," meaning topics that were trending in the news; "Politics," meaning they posted about the government, the opposing party, or the president; "Election," meaning they discussed their own party and efforts to remain in (or be elected to) office; and "Other," which mostly encompassed non-political posts, such as holidays.

Hickenlooper Post Content
Sept. 2019 - Feb. 2020

Gardner Post Content
Sept. 2019 - Feb. 2020
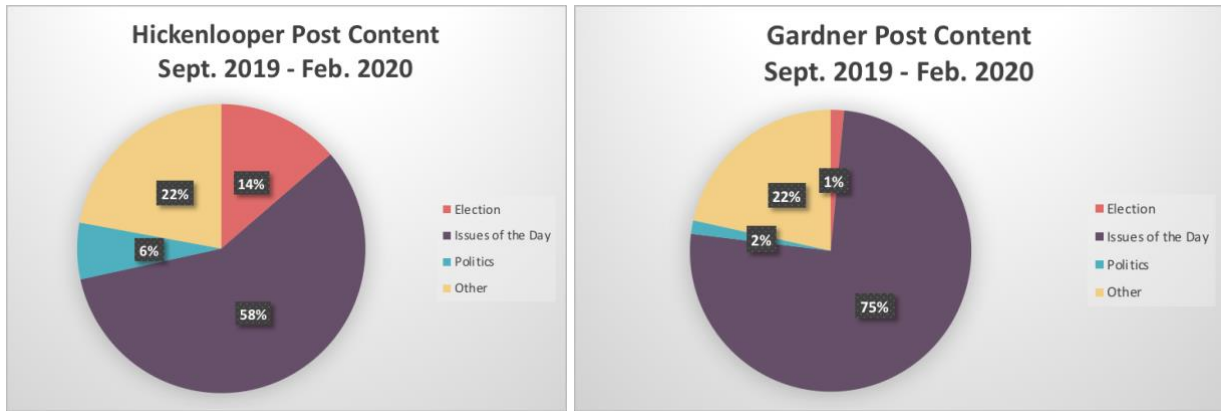
Gardner's combined Instagram and Twitter feeds feature three-quarters "Issues of the Day," and about one-quarter non-political "Other" posts. Hickenlooper's feed contains fewer "Issues of the Day" and more posts regarding his election. This is partly attributable to the fact that Gardner mainly posts on his congressional accounts, not his personal accounts. On his official accounts, he must focus on his duties as a senator and cannot post about his campaign.

Nonetheless, Gardner could still post about townhalls, his personal views on issues, or other politicians running for election to generate election content (for example, Ocasio-Cortez endorsing Bernie Sanders on her page is considered an "Election" post). But his singular election-related post in the analysis came at the end of February regarding precinct caucuses.

In contrast, the social media "stars" have a more balanced feed to cater to their millions of followers. Crenshaw posts more about politics (in regard to the president, the opposing party, and the government) than any of the other three politicians, while Ocasio-Cortez has the most evenly distributed "Election," "Politics," and "Other" posts.

Crenshaw Content
Sept. 2019 - Feb. 2020

AOC Content
Sept. 2019 - Feb. 2020
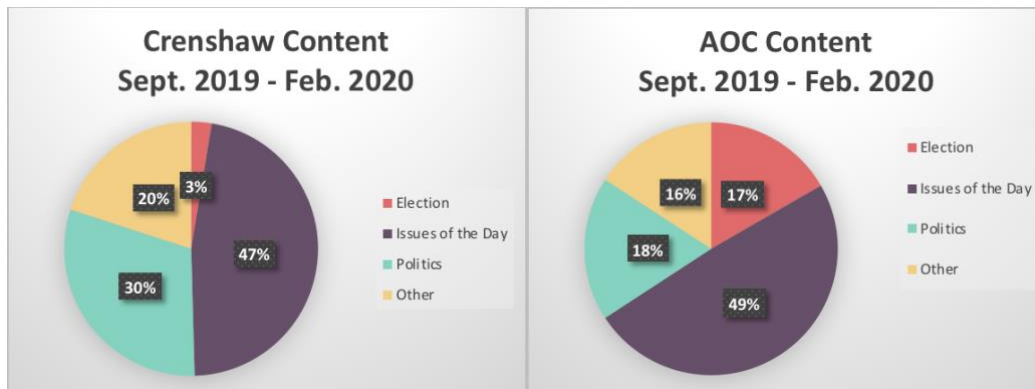
And while 75% of Gardner's posts are "Issues of the Day," on the same day that the other politicians were addressing the whistleblower news and the impeachment hearings (Sept. 25 for Gardner and Ocasio-Cortez and Sept. 26 for Hickenlooper and Crenshaw per the weekly analysis schedule), Gardner was the only one that didn't address the matter. It seems as though Gardner addresses issues that aren't particularly contentious and avoids posts that have anything to do with the president or the Democratic party.

Another concern with Gardner's social media is his tendency of "getting ratioed." This occurs on Twitter when a tweet receives more replies than favorites and the replies are critical, negative, or controversial.

After comparing the ratios of Hickenlooper's and Gardner's tweets during the last week of February, both averaged around the same number of tweets as well as favorites per tweet. Hickenlooper tweeted 27 times with an average of 146 favorites, and Gardner tweeted 26 times with an average of 141 favorites.

However, Hickenlooper's tweets received an average of 9.5 comments and Gardner's tweets received more than ten times that with an average of 95.6 comments per tweet.
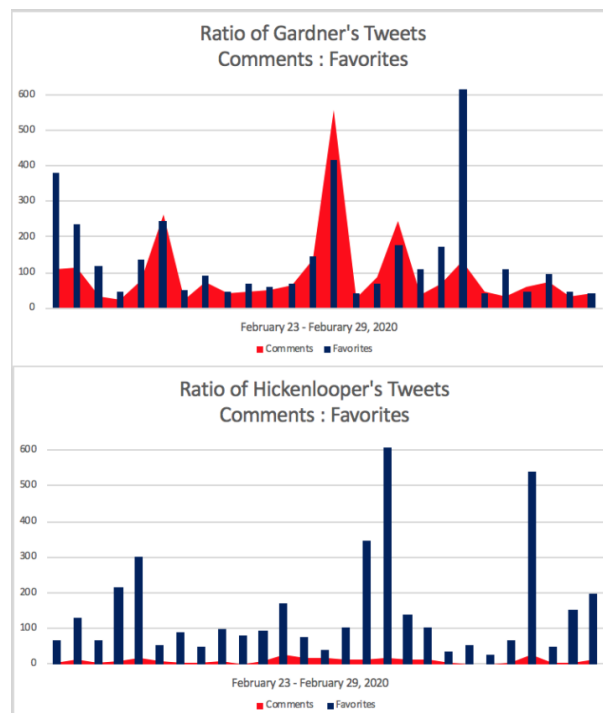
For some, this may be cause for concern. But Hopp doesn't believe it has too much of an effect on the senator.

"His presence on Twitter is unremarkable," Hopp said. "The comments under his tweets give upset constituents a place to yell at him. Obviously, this doesn't help his reputation. Does this actively 'hurt' him, electorally speaking? Probably not in any measurable, cause-and-effect type way."

Gen Z Perceptions of Politicians
Gardner's content and behavior on social media does impact how Gen Zers perceive their senator, however.

"I know that all generations are starting to get on social media, but our age group, like, all of this looks really boring to me," said Schalk. "It's not an account even if I'm really passionate about Cory Gardner and his message and his mission, I would not follow him because it would just, like, clog up my feed instead of be stuff that I would, like, want to pay attention to I guess because t's not innovative or creative, it's just boring."

As an intern in Washington, D.C., Schalk worked for U.S. Rep. Joe Neguse (D-Colo.) and often drafted posts for his social media, though he was always involved in keeping his own thoughts at the forefront of his account.

"I think him having a voice and what he wanted on his social media made it more authentic," Schalk said. "I feel like looking at Cory Gardner's feed, I don't know really what his voice is, like I can't tell what kind of personality he has, or what he cares about, and that doesn't feel authentic."

Quintana said she did a lot of research as a congressional intern to find out what other politicians were saying on social media and find the conversations that her boss could join. When users specifically reply to a tweet with a sarcastic, witty, or bold remark, it's called a clapback, and Quintana said it's "obvious that most of them just don't get how important those are."

Hear from Gen Zer Domonique

"I think strategically you need to play on what's going on, on what politicians are tweeting, and just kind of go at it that way, like a creative way," Quintana said. "In our office, how we looked at Trump's tweets and clapped back at him, and a lot of politicians don't really know how to clapback at each other they just let it be, and no, I think it's important."

One of Ocasio-Cortez's most-favorited tweets, with 416,500 likes, is a clapback at Donald Trump, indicating how much attention nine words can generate.

Representative Crenshaw also garners quite a bit of attention for his clapback tweets.
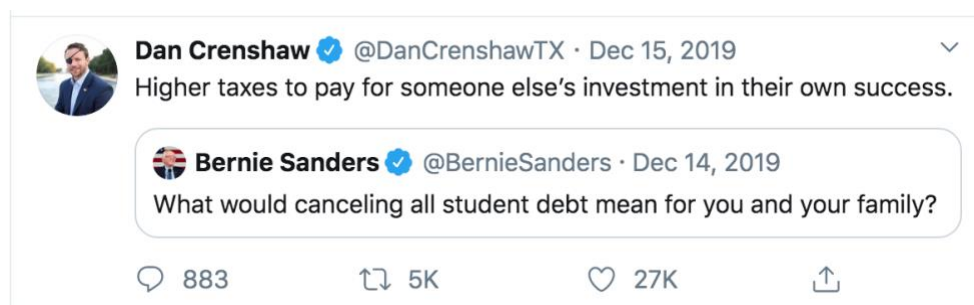
Not only do these tweets display an understanding of how the social medium works, but also how to interact with other users, as opposed to being impersonal and only posting on one's own profile while ignoring other users on the platform.

McGregor pointed out that this may be tempting on Instagram because it has less direct interaction between strangers, but in order to truly immerse yourself the medium and gain followers, you have to be somewhat personal.

"The more visual you get, like Instagram, the more personal it is with so many images of us and our family, it's a very personal medium," McGregor said. "So politicians who are good at it know that and are personal on it because you have to be, it would be weird if you were very business-only like you might be on Twitter on a platform like Instagram."

"Weird" is exactly how McMillan, the CU Boulder environmental design student, described Gardner's Instagram feed for not being able to discern his party affiliation after scrolling through several weeks of posts.

Quintana noted that Gardner and Hickenlooper are often "by themselves" in their Instagram pictures, which isn't a "positive thing for them."

"While they're standing in an office or staging a picture at a townhall, AOC is posting pictures with other people, about other people, and that's just more someone I feel like would care about my concerns," Quintana said. "She uses social media and uplifts other women and doesn't seem all for herself, which to me is more authentic."

McMillan found authenticity in a photo on Hickenlooper's Instagram, though, that changed her perspective from "a boring old guy" to "someone who I'd trust in office."

"He's eating at my favorite Mexican restaurant, talking with Latinas about issues, and I'm a Latina," McMillan said. "That's something I can relate to, like I see that and I say, 'Maybe he'd care about what I have to say too.'"

Hickenlooper also received style points from Gen Zers for his "cohesive color scheme" and for his Instagram biography that demonstrated an understanding of the cleverness of the medium:
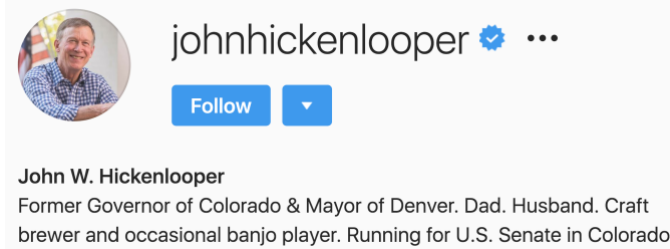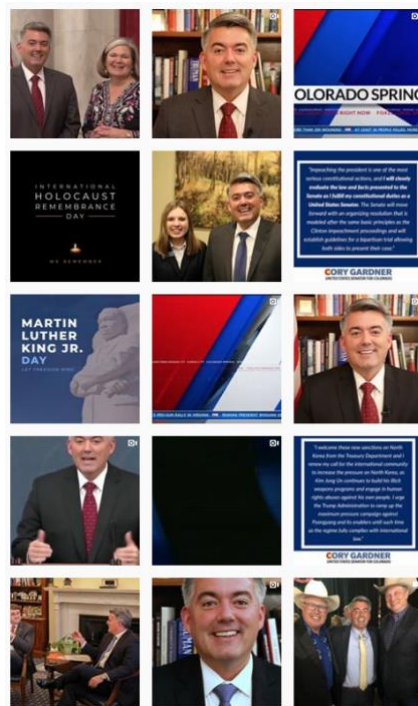
"Former Governor of Colorado & Mayor of Denver. Dad. Husband. Craft brewer and occasional banjo player. Running for U.S. Senate in Colorado."

Hickenlooper's Instagram
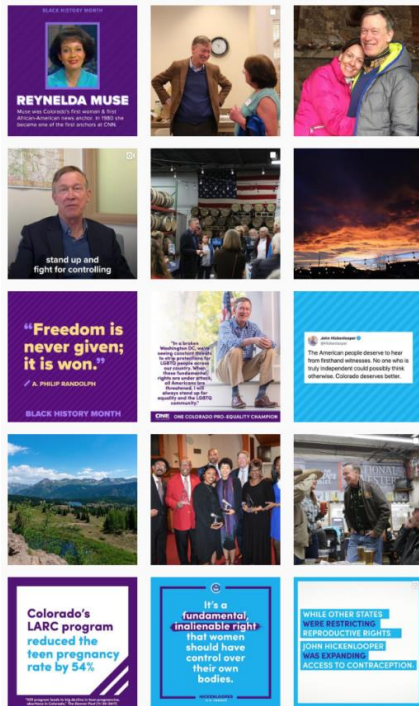
Gardner's Instagram

Nonetheless, several Gen Zers like Schalk indicated "when you look more into it [Hickenlooper's Instagram], it is kind of 'blah.'"

Hopp suggests that social media can be used to stimulate young people's interest in politics, but it must be the "product of smart strategy."

"Using social media effectively requires a strategy and substantial effort," Hopp said. "It takes time and resources and a desire to use a given platform to connect with others. If political figures are willing to put in this time and effort, they can, potentially, see gains, particularly as they relate to the ability to articulate one's personal and political brand."

Dobkin said the Gardner campaign is actively looking for a digital director to manage the senator's social media, which is one of Dobkin's job responsibilities currently. They also plan to ramp up their physical outreach to younger voters.

"We'll be doing all sorts of other things, college campus visits with college Republican groups and things like that," Dobkin said. "We need to do more of those, because I think no vote should ever be looked over for every single person."

McMillan said that mainly Democrats have visited her college campus though, yet she hopes that Gardner's team will follow through on their plans to change that standard.

"I think getting out into the public and going to these places where kids are is important, because like, Bernie Sanders came to CU Boulder and so we all know him and we feel like he will listen to us 'cause he came to us," McMillan said. "Whereas, like, Donald Trump, when we came to Colorado, he didn't come to the universities because he didn't think that he could get our vote, so why would he even try then?"

While physical presence is important, the Global Web Index shows that Gen Zers spend an average of 3 hours and 38 minutes on their phones every day. Social media continues to be their arena of choice for entertainment, news, and politics. That makes it more important for politicians to learn the "language" of major social media platforms to increase their chances that the youth vote will turnout in their favor this fall.

In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic has placed an even greater significance on social media, especially for politicians to gain the trust and loyalty of the public.

"It's tough to say how exactly how social media will influence politics in the future. We're living in an unprecedented moment of political, social, and economic uncertainty," Hopp said. "Even before COVID-19, people didn't have much trust in their elected officials or government. One worry that I have is that social media can be used to further undermine what trust currently exists, further distancing people from their governments and creating conditions amenable to anti-democratic actors."

Time is of the essence for politicians, and Dobkin said that Gardner's campaign recently launched their campaign Instagram account in hopes to reach a more youthful audience.

"In terms of strategy we want to reach every voter, every Coloradan, whether that person is 80 years old, 50 years old, or just turned 18, our strategy is to hopefully win over their vote," Dobkin said. "We recently launched the campaign Instagram and we hope to build that up, and I'm assuming a lot of those followers will be younger voters."

Though this may be the strategy, the reactions from Gen Zers don't entirely reflect that sentiment. Simply creating an account and posting "sub-par content" is not enough to generate follows. Social media users have to be engaging, relatable, and authentic if they want to gain followers, and the same rings true for Gardner.

In fact, many were turned off by Gardner's social media, and Republican Gen Zers reiterated their appreciation for the "authenticity and reality" present in Trump's social media.

"You don't hear about prominent Republicans on social media," Roesch said. "I think that's big play that they're missing out on to connect with young people."

While Hopp does not recommend that politicians follow Trump's "politically inadvisable content," he does suggest that Gardner must do something about the dry content that left Gen Zers confused, bored, and wanting more.

"Perhaps the main thing you can take away from Trump's behavior is that it communicates a sense of personality and authenticity," Hopp said. "This can be contrasted to Gardner's accounts, which tend to be dry, administrative, and, frankly speaking, quite boring. I'm not saying Gardner should start typing things like 'that's lit af fam,' but giving voters some idea of who he is as a human being might not necessarily be a bad thing."

Appendix B

Background

I analyzed the Twitter and Instagram accounts of Senator Cory Gardner (R-CO), former Colorado governor John Hickenlooper, Representative Dan Crenshaw (R-TX-2) and Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY-14) over the course of six months, September 2019 - February 2020.

Sen. Gardner, Rep. Crenshaw, and Rep. Ocasio-Cortez are all up for re-election in 2020, and Hickenlooper is the current Democratic frontrunner challenging Gardner's Senate seat. The two Colorado politicians are older than the two "social media stars" who have millions of followers on social media, many of whom are the platforms chief audience: Millennials (1981-1996) and Generation Zers (born 1997-2012).
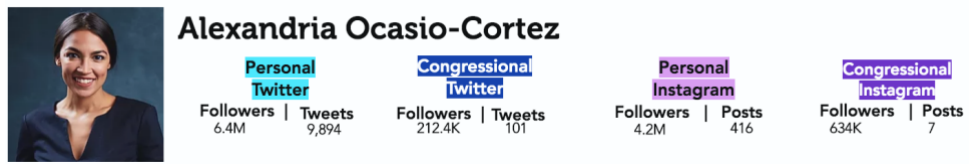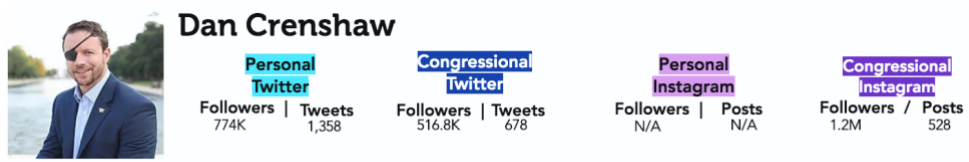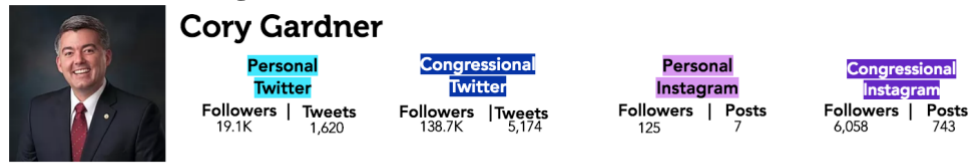
Methods

Starting on September 1, 2019, I counted the number of Instagram and Twitter posts from one Democrat and one Republican, and then counted the same for the other Democrat and Republican the next day, September 2, 2019. I also summarized the content of the post and categorized them over time.

I began with Gardner and Ocasio-Cortez first day, a Sunday, and then Crenshaw and Hickenlooper on the next day, a Monday. The following week, I analyzed Gardner and Ocasio-Cortez's feeds again on Monday and Hickenlooper's and Crenshaw's on Tuesday, and so on for six months.

Below are additional findings that don't appear above, as well as their social media statistics and examples of their content.

Quantitative Analysis
Twitter & Instagram Statistics (as of March 1, 2020)

Cory Gardner

	Personal Twitter	Congressional Twitter	Personal Instagram	Congressional Instagram
Followers	19.1K	138.7K	125	6,058
Tweets/Posts	1,620	5,174	7	743

John Hickenlooper

	Personal Twitter	Congressional Twitter	Personal Instagram	Congressional Instagram
Followers	169.3K	N/A	16K	N/A
Tweets/Posts	4,730	N/A	640	N/A

Dan Crenshaw

	Personal Twitter	Congressional Twitter	Personal Instagram	Congressional Instagram
Followers	774K	516.8K	N/A	1.2M
Tweets/Posts	1,358	678	N/A	528

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez

|	Personal Twitter	Congressional Twitter	Personal Instagram	Congressional Instagram
Followers	6.4M	212.4K	4.2M	634K
Tweets/Posts	9,894	101	416	7

Hickenlooper only has one Instagram account and one Twitter account, while Crenshaw has one Instagram account and two Twitter accounts: an official, congressional account and a personal account. Both Gardner and Ocasio-Cortez have four accounts: a personal and a congressional Twitter account, and a personal and a congressional Instagram account. Crenshaw and Ocasio-Cortez post more often to their personal accounts, while Gardner posts most often to his official account.

Qualitative Analysis

Not only do the "stars" have a more balanced feed, but they seem to understand the platform and do not get "ratioed" nearly as often as Gardner. Being ratioed on Instagram or Twitter is when you receive more comments than likes or favorites on your post, indicating that it was not popular for the medium. Many of the comments on Senator Gardner's tweets are negative feelings from constituents, regardless of the tweet's content.

During the last week of February (Feb. 23 - Feb. 29, 2020), I analyzed the ratio of comments to favorites on all of Gardner and Hickenlooper's tweets. While both politicians had around the same number of tweets during that week (26 and 27, respectively), the engagement they generated was vastly different.

Gardner averaged around 141 likes on his tweets, while Hickenlooper averaged around 146 likes. However, Hickenlooper's tweets received an average of 9.48 comments and Gardner's tweets received more than **ten times** that with an average of **95.57** comments per tweet.
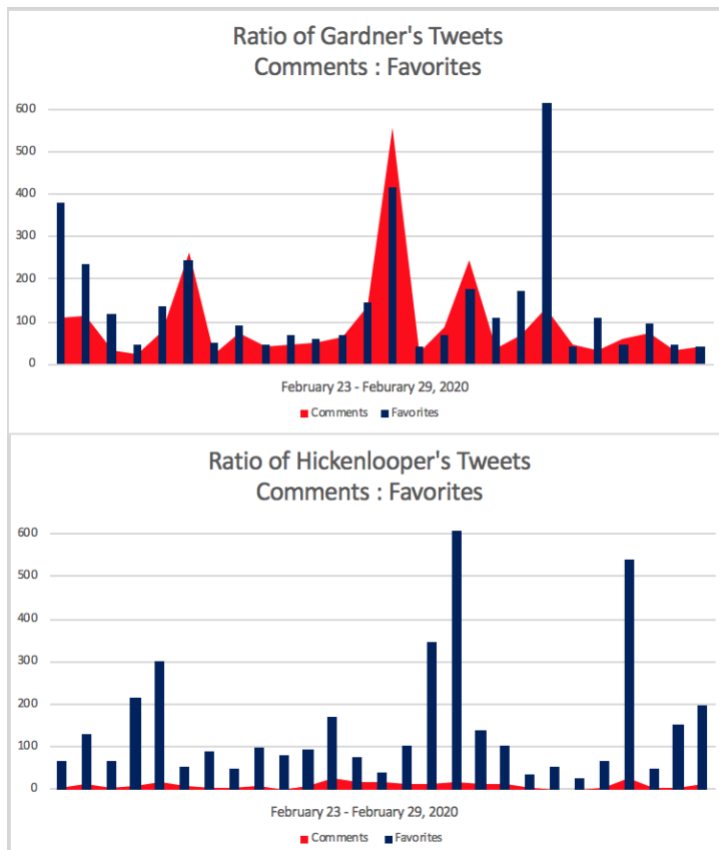

Many of these comments are not generating positive engagement for the senator. This begs the question as to why he is even on social media in the first place if he is not trying to create a positive brand for himself or uses it to interact with the constituents, as many of the comments go un-replied to.

In one of the ratioed tweets on February 26 that received 416 likes and 556 comments, Gardner shared a report ranking him #1 for bipartisan legislation.

Some comments included:
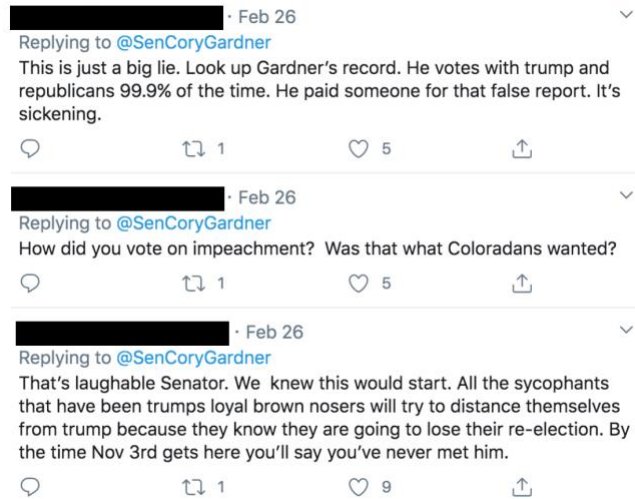
In contrast, Crenshaw and Ocasio-Cortez receive such a substantial amount of likes on their tweets and posts that they are nowhere near the breakeven ratios that Gardner often boasts. While they also receive negative comments, the large scale of supporters and followers still allows them to avoid getting ratioed.

A key social media tactic that these two representatives have also mastered is the "clapback," which occurs when someone responds to something posted by someone else on social media in a witty, clever, sarcastic, or critical way.

One of Ocasio-Cortez's clapbacks to President Trump in June 2019 received 193,000 favorites on Twitter.

This tweet illustrates that, while social media followers may be about quantity, social media usage is quality over quantity. Gardner has nearly 4,000 more tweets than Crenshaw, but Crenshaw is rarely ratioed and often has tweets that trend on Twitter.
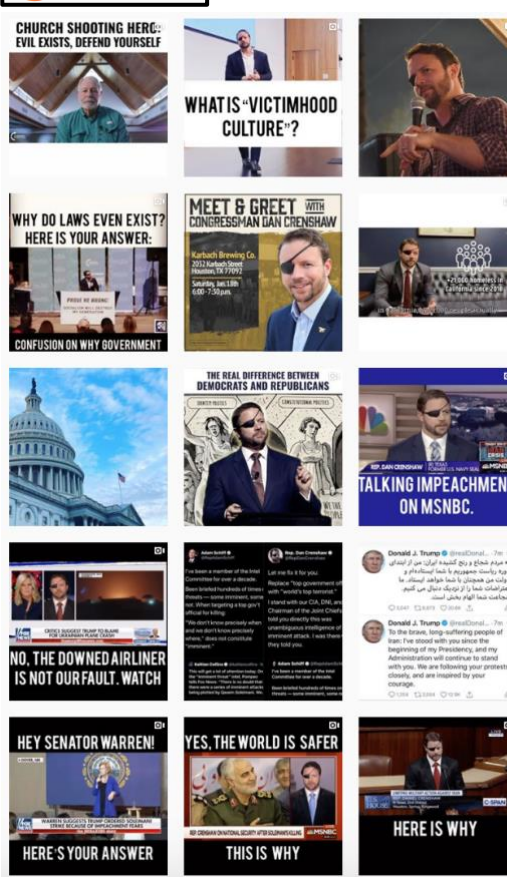
While Instagram is less about ratios and more about posting visually-appealing and genuine content, it is still just as important to understand the etiquette and norms of the medium.

Below are comparisons of screenshots from the four politicians' Instagram grids for a qualitative analysis.
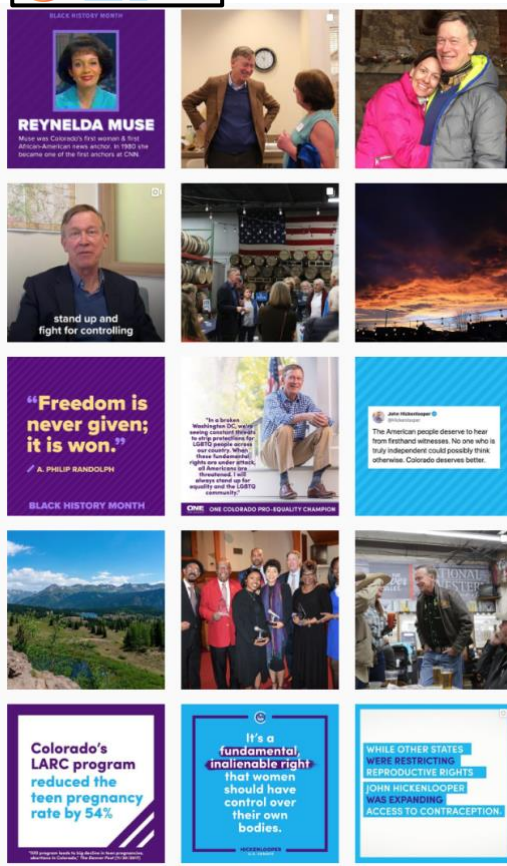
Qualitative Analysis from Gen Zers

Three key issues arose when Gen Zers were exposed to these Instagram feeds: maintaining a clear and cohesive brand; posting relatable and interesting content; and upholding authenticity.

Clapbacks, authentic posts, original content, and aesthetically-pleasing pages are all strategies that demonstrate an understanding of social media platforms like Twitter and Instagram. Politicians who maintain an active account simply to *say* that they have an account, not necessarily as part of a broader strategy to target young voters on the platforms, are missing the point. When it comes to social media, posts and tweets are about quality over quantity. It's one thing to constantly post a stream of average content and treat social media as somewhat of an afterthought, which may result in being ratioed or simply ignored, but it is another thing to post authentic, relevant content strategically and receive thousands of likes, create viral moments, and generate real engagement.

As greater portions of the youngest generations reach voting age, it will become more of a necessity for politicians to not only maintain active accounts on social media, but to truly understand the nature of each platform (or hire staff members who do) by implementing legitimate strategies that take building a social media brand seriously, because that is ultimately what will help them connect with young Americans.

To read more about what experts and Gen Zers had to say about the politicians' feeds, visit the 'Data' page on https://wixsite.lini5389.com/thesis/data