

The Presence of Politicians on Twitter

Social media platforms have exacerbated political demagoguery, and while politicians on social media began quietly, there has been an increase in headline news within the past few years surrounding their online presence. In having a presence on social media, public figures have the opportunity to expand their influence and provide critical updates in national or local situations. Before social media, there was a limit to when and where public figures had access to communication with the general public. With their presence on social media, it has become increasingly obvious that this ability for public figures to be more accessible proves to be both beneficial as well as disagreeable. While increased communication from politicians can be helpful, the openness of social media has also become a space for misinformation and hateful and divisive messages.. Marginalized groups and immigrants and refugees seem to be some of the most common targets of this messaging. This blog discusses how politicians can exploit online platforms to create division and hate or use their platforms to share information and unify constituents. The tension between free speech and ethical communication raised in this discussion acknowledges the importance for politicians to be held accountable for their messaging.

A prime example of the attention to politicians' social media presence came around the election of former President Donald Trump. Donald Trump first created his Twitter account in 2009. Anything he tweeted prior to becoming President immediately followed him into his presidency. While he was given the official POTUS Twitter account, he chose more often to use his own personal account to offer his Presidential statements for his time in office, which made his words a reflection of the United States of America. This lack of separation between personal and political ideologies is something that can be seen so clearly in the language used on his, now suspended, personal account.

Time and time again, Trump targeted [Muslim communities](#) for both political and personal reasons. Even after being reprimanded by the [National Security Advisor](#), who hoped to stop Trump from using “unhelpful” language surrounding terrorism, Trump refused to stop using demagogic language. The notion that certain acts of terrorism are inherently tied to the Islamic faith unfairly demonizes the religion and all those who practice it. Former President Barack Obama [refused to use the term "radical Islamic terrorism"](#) because it lumps millions of peaceful Muslims with the unjust actions of extremists. Clearly, Trump's decision to ignore that reality is incredibly telling as he did not care about the threat posed to Muslim communities by continuously using the term.

In addition to Muslim communities, Trump attempted to ostracize Asian American communities once he dubbed COVID as the “China Virus.” According to a recent poll conducted by [NPR](#), one in four Asian households reported fears that their race or ethnicity made them more vulnerable to being attacked or threatened due to the racist discourse around the COVID outbreak. In attaching location and ethnicity to the name of a disease, the likelihood of negative perceptions and xenophobic attitudes towards Asian Americans would undoubtedly be the result. Trump's decision to refer to COVID as the “[Chinese Virus](#)” and the “[China Virus](#)” on his Twitter account seems to have directly impacted and increased hateful behaviors directed towards the Asian American community.

To be fair, Trump is not the only one who misused Twitter to spread divisive language. Representative Marjorie Taylor Greene is another politician who has been removed from the site for misuse of the platform. Although it was her [personal account](#) that was permanently suspended, it does not detract from the fact that she used her position as a trusted government official to spread harmful misinformation. There is something to be said, however, about the fact that it took multiple violations to Twitter's policies for the company to act. This kind of discourse seeks only to cause harm and should not be tolerated with political figures. Trump and Greene's divisive language seem to exemplify the "us vs. them" mentality, appealing to both their supporters and their constituents. While they often used Twitter to advocate for their political endeavors, they would also use their accounts to appeal to anyone who agreed with their beliefs.

Twitter can be polarizing, but it can also be a chance to unite groups of people to enact change. Locally, for instance, we have representatives like [Ayanna Pressley](#) who uses her platform "to break concrete ceilings & shake the table." She uses her platform to unite her constituents rather than create division. She is not the only one either. [Representative Ilhan Omar](#), [Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez](#), [Senator Lisa Murkowski](#) and [Senator Susan Collins](#) are embracing social media in order to spread positivity and enact social change for the betterment of the United States. More often than not, these politicians use their platform in order to appeal only to their constituents. While there are instances in which they address a broader population, the primary purpose of their online presence seeks only to communicate to the people who put them in office. Whether individuals support them as politicians or not, there has been no evidence of divisive language or demagoguery used towards a particular group of people on their Twitter accounts. Regardless of one's political party, the kind of public platform that social media allows is something that should be taken very seriously. Given the opportunity to share information with millions of people, sharing information/posting should require tremendous thought and consideration. Personal ideologies that spread or encourage hate should have no place on social media.

Considering that there are [76.9 million American citizens](#) on Twitter, as of January 2022, it is undeniable that the platform enables tremendous opportunities for politicians to broadcast political initiatives and stances. However, as mentioned above, it also gives them the opportunity to send out divisive messages and spread misinformation and hate. It goes without saying that politicians, regardless of intent, are entitled to use their freedom of speech on social media. Which explains why social media platforms demonstrate a hesitancy to intervene and infringe upon that right. However, when the language enacted on a platform like Twitter is harmful and unjust, people in power should be held accountable. With Elon Musk buying [Twitter](#) for a staggering \$44 billion dollars and his goal to have the platform follow free speech principles closer than before, it is unknown what the new platform policies will be. As a society, we have entered, and are navigating, the battle between free speech and ethical communication, a battle that is especially pertinent for those who hold positions of power and have significant influence. The outcome is unknown, but how we respond to misinformation and divisive language is more important than ever.

The world in which we are living today is increasingly digital. The presence of social media is not shrinking so it is understandable that the political realm will continue to be entangled with it for the foreseeable future. It is uncharted territory, but with an awareness of a political presence online, there are things that we can watch out for. When a politician uses divisive language, such as terminology that unfairly ostracizes groups of people or spreads misinformation around critical situations, it is important to recognize these actions are dangerous. Extremism is something that cannot be tolerated, and it is something both social media platforms and individuals should be concerned about. People have the power to hold

politicians accountable and the online public arena should be no different, we have the power to make sure their choices do not endanger the public.