

UNDERSTANDING THE FORMATION AND EXPRESSION OF PUBLIC OPINION : HOW DONALD TRUMP LED TO THE “#STOPTHESTEAL” MOVEMENT

ADITYA NATH¹

¹B.A. Programme Student (in Political Science and History), St. Stephen's College, Delhi University, New Delhi INDIA

ABSTRACT

The emergence of social media networks has had a significant impact on politics and ground level decision making. Certain platforms have come to be strongly viewed as information outlets by users and have therefore regularly, featured political content and news. A lot has been written on the use of social media by political representatives in moulding public opinion and setting or even validating certain pre-existing agendas in the society in a way that is distinct from traditional media but those works have rarely examined the origin and after-effects of the same. The paper tries to ascertain if political representatives maintain their online presence solely through their own efforts or by acting in concert with their core political demographic. Indeed, the growth of political discourse and the encouragement provided to them by political entities have to be studied to arrive at a deeper understanding of political mobilisation in democratic societies today. This paper takes a deeper look at the recent January 6 Insurrection in America or the growth of the #StopTheSteal movement as enabled by Donald Trump by exclusively analysing his Twitter usage to answer exactly how leaders frame public opinion and encourage its manifestation. This paper uses both primary and secondary sources to sufficiently gauge the role that social media networks play in the formation of public opinion. It finds that leaders like Trump who try to manufacture charisma to mould public opinion employ a wide variety of techniques - not on the entire population - but on their key voter base/demographic. In certain senses, their online presence seems to indicate that they attempt not to convince the entire population but only to validate the already held beliefs of their core demographic. Thus, it has important implications with regards to democratic discourse and the ability to dissent on online platforms.

KEYWORDS : Public Opinion, Social Media, Politics, Decision-making, Donald Trump, 2020 Presidential Elections, #StopTheSteal, American Politics

INTRODUCTION

Ever since Rousseau mentioned the term “l’opinion publique”, public opinion or, as it was initially called, will of the people, has occupied a prominent place in the study of society and politics (Price, 1992). To examine the various conceptions and definitions of the term “public opinion” is beyond the scope of this paper. However, in order to illustrate many of the points made herein, the definition provided by Erikson and Tedin (2016) can prove to be useful. Public opinion is the preferences of the adult population on matters of relevance to the government; such an opinion can be expressed verbally or through riots, demonstrations and marches. In order to holistically understand the causes and influences behind public opinion and how it can manifest in the society, we need to look at the role of contemporary sources in its formation.

This paper takes a look at social media and how the greater ease of access afforded by social networking platforms like Twitter, Facebook, etc. has impacted politics and the formation of public opinion. Taking advantage of the institutionalization of politics on such platforms, political leaders are able to set the agenda and influence public opinion writ large. They are able to reach a vast majority of people

and with the online presence of their existing voter bases, are able to inform public opinion. They do this in three ways : a.) highlighting the issues and narratives they consider important and worthy of public attention, b.) framing the adequate responses to such issues, and c.) delegitimizing and attacking those with a different opinion and consequently, legitimizing the views of those who agree with them. The paper also contends that such behavior is motivated by the vested interest of maintaining an active voter base and doing well in the next election. To illustrate these aspects, close focus shall be on the rise of Donald Trump and how his use of Twitter led to the emergence of the “Stop The Steal” movement.

PUBLIC OPINION : EFFECT OF CHARISMA AND SACRALISATION OF POLITICS

The idea that political leaders exercise significant influence over the public and shape their opinions is not a new one. Decades ago, Max Weber attributed the power of a leader to do so to their charismatic authority (Weber, 1947). According to Weber, charisma endows on a leader an aura of divine origin and the leader’s claim to power is thus considered to be legitimate. Identification with the leader provides the followers the courage to overcome the limits of daily existence (Dow, 1978). They thus acknowledge the

individual's claim to 'specific gifts of body and mind' as a valid basis for their participation (p. 83). Charisma therefore has the potential to generate not only large scale mobilization of the people but also to condition public opinion towards certain events and people. Being highly contingent on the leader's own arbitrary outlook, charisma can sometimes turn public participation into something far more nefarious and endanger public institutions. Some scholars judge charismatic authority as being unstable but whilst in operation, legitimizing the ruler's rule (Kendall, 2010).

Indeed, when Weber was talking about the extraordinary qualities of a leader, he unwittingly hit upon the sacralization of politics. Gentile and Mallet (2000) argue that the sacralization of politics is a process where politics comes to acquire a religious dimension that "is distinct from, and autonomous of, traditional religious institutions" (pp. 21-22). Here, a sacred status is conferred on an earthly entity such as the state, the country, the race, the class etc. In his formulation of charisma, Weber detects a similar status endowed by the *vergemeinschaftung*, or the leader's band of followers, on the leader. It is the followers who create the idea that their leader is endowed with extraordinary powers and arising at a time of great need would deliver astounding success. Hence, they consider their leader to be above board and are ever ready to follow the leader's directions. However, when the leader fails to routinize charisma for the eventuality that is political demise in modern democracies, they might attempt to manufacture charisma. Exactly how attempts by leaders to manufacture charisma have changed in the recent decades need to be researched if one is to develop an updated understanding of politics and public opinion.

THE INSTITUTIONALISATION OF POLITICS ON TWITTER AND USERS INFORMATION CONSUMPTION

In order to understand why Trump's usage of Twitter was instrumental to his rise as the President of the United States and the capitol riots four years later, we first need to understand how politics came to be institutionalized on the said platform by his predecessor. Barack Obama soared to victory in 2008 through an extensive reliance on social networking sites and having a Facebook co-founder run his campaign (Lewin, 2008). In fact, throughout his tenure, Obama realized the utility of social networking sites in informing public opinion (Freking, 2017) and was in fact the first president to institutionalize the use of social networking sites like Twitter through the @POTUS Twitter account (Bogost, 2017). The account, designed exclusively for the use of the President, was used by Obama to gather public support for policies and issues regarding governance (Sabochik, 2011). Although Obama tweeted only 352 times during eight years, (National Archives and Record Administration, 2017)

he addressed a range of issues from minimum wage reform to procuring diapers for newborns. To use Twitter to drum up public support by changing public opinion was a routine matter for the Obama Administration.

His successor was consequently more active on the platform, sending a total of 26,239 tweets during his term as President ("Trump Twitter Archive", 2021). Like the archetypal charismatic leader, Donald Trump arose at a time of great need (Sandel, 2020, p.18). Rising levels of inequality, economic losses due to globalization and anti-immigrant sentiment stirred his voter base into action, all of whom were ready to believe that he could truly solve America's biggest problems (Qiu, 2016). Twitter had been central to Trump's campaign in making him the front runner within the Republican Party (Schroeder, 2018) and in also getting him elected as it allowed him to popularize issues central to his campaign. In fact, the popular slogan – "Stop the Steal" – was coined during his Presidential campaign in 2016 (Hayden, 2020).

Before turning to how Donald Trump gave shape to public opinion and action, we need to analyze the role that social networking sites have come to play in people's lives. Social media has increasingly become associated with a purpose that it was not originally intended to fulfill – keeping people up to date with current events (Bialy, 2017). The emergence of mobile technology increased accessibility of the people to these sites and made the exchange of "opinions, views, and agendas" cheap (p. 72). Searching for content, the users started to perceive platforms like Twitter as suited for amassing information. Moreover, traditional media like newspapers use social media content for publishing reports of their own. As such, almost anything that gets shared on social media can become news, especially in the absence of gatekeepers or stringent rules that threaten immediate action against such content.

Even political leaders enjoy a significant following on Twitter. Near the time of the elections, Donald Trump had more than eighty eight million followers on his Twitter account (Beer, 2020). The ability to reach his target audience and disseminate "news" and opinions made the outlet viable for a leader whose claim to authority depended solely on his charisma and his claims of extraordinary achievements. Since Twitter had little to no editorial control as compared to traditional media outlets, Trump was able to push unconventional agendas that would not have otherwise found a place in mainstream media (Schroeder, 2018). These positions were then prominently taken up in mainstream media reports which guaranteed him more coverage and a broader reach.

HIGHLIGHTING AN ISSUE AND EVOKING A RESPONSE: THE 59TH PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION OF THE UNITED STATES

Efforts to stop the election from slipping away had started as far back as September 2020 when Jack Posobiec and Ali Alexander tweeted and built a website, respectively to mobilize Trump supporters to oppose the coming elections (Atlantic Council's DFR Lab, 2021). Within a short while, several Facebook pages supporting Trump and the cause also sprang up and reached millions of people. Even though Trump had refused to publicly decry these groups and their issues, which surely must have provided encouragement, his explicit support to these issues via Twitter did not come till October 30th, 2020 where he implored people to become a "Trump Election Poll Watcher" ("Trump Twitter Archive", 2021).

Through this tweet, Trump sought to do two important things :

- i.) highlight an already existing issue that he considered to be important – namely, electoral fraud and
- ii.) suggest an appropriate response to that issue by way of becoming a poll watcher.

Notably, this was not a solution that Trump came up with all on his own. Approximately, three days before this tweet, the leader of the Oath-Keepers – a far-right, anti-government militia organization – Stewart Rhodes had publicly claimed that members of his organizations would be stationing themselves at various polling locations across America to protect the voters (Johnson, 2020). Trump identified an already existing sentiment among his voter base and amplified it through his social media usage. Stewart Rhodes, like other loyal members of Trump's *vergemeinschaftung*, truly believed that the country was under attack and in great need of a leader to save it. Rhodes believed that certain Democrats and leftists on China's payroll had an active hand in waging a proxy war in America (para. 2) and unless something was done, there would be a "communist flag flying over the White House". Rhodes also made a parallel between his militia group fighting the so-called left and the Founding Fathers dealing with British loyalists during the war for independence (para. 6).

He justified violence against the left as being necessary to protect the rights of individuals and the continuation of democracy. This brings us back to the sacralisation of politics and how in a democracy, the right of an individual to vote and the conduct of free and fair elections are seen as sacrosanct. The violation of either of these evokes a response from the citizenry, proportionate to the perceived amount of danger either of these are in. In the case of Stewart Rhodes and the Oath-Keepers, the perceived danger to both of

these was quite high. Rhodes feared that members of the Antifa and the left would physically harm Trump supporters and might even prevent them from voting (para. 5). The response as thus, was not necessarily seen as a bad thing but was seen as important for preventing an alleged breakdown of democracy and a hostile takeover from the "deep state." Poll watching and other responses began to be seen as a positive and necessary action in light of this alleged danger. In fact, the political salience and sacrosanct nature of voting and free and fair elections were emphasized by Trump through a series of tweets in the weeks leading up to election day. Any explanation of the January 6 Insurrection and more generally, of why people participate in mass movements likely to get violent, must take the appeal of 'sacralized' political entities and concepts into account.

Within a week of Trump's tweet, protestors including Republican Paul Gosar, gathered outside the Maricopa County Elections Department with arms (Evoy, 2020). Such protests were to become a regular feature of American political life in the coming days. However, merely highlighting a response cannot ensure its acceptance. In other words, the political leader must also reject all other alternate avenues of actions or responses – Trump also had to lead everybody to an adequate response. He did this once more by legitimizing already present routes of action by bringing them into the mainstream and rejecting other alternative ways of action. By supporting poll watching, he led the people to believe that was the correct and appropriate response to be followed. By rejecting other alternative actions like invoking the Insurrection Act, like a lot of his right wing supporters wanted him to do (Marathe, 2020), he further cemented the legitimacy of the previous response.

DELEGITIMIZING DISSENT AND ENSURING UNIFORMITY OF OPINION : THE CASE OF THE SURRENDER CAUCUS

Trump further emboldened these attitudes and opinions by unequivocally supporting violence by Trump supporters on Twitter such as when they derailed a Biden campaign truck in Texas, or supporting the "right of self-defense" of the far right protestors against Antifa, or when they echoed the views of those who claimed that recounting in Georgia was a scam (Atlantic Council's DFR Lab, 2021). Far more interesting is the traction his tweets generated and how they contributed to a growing discourse. Indicative of this is how Trump handled his opponents and the opinions it created for his supporters.

On December 12th, Trump supporters called out and promised violence against members of the Republican party on their failure to keep Trump in power (Atlantic Council's DFR Lab, 2021). The next day an official list of enemies started circulating online. Soon enough, Trump started

tweeting about members of the Republican Party who, in his opinion, were refusing to do their duty by accepting the results of the election. He kept on labelling them as “weak and ineffective ‘guardians’ of” America, unsuited to uphold the sanctity of a democracy (“Trump Twitter Archive, 2021). This trend continued till two days before the Capital Insurrection (Brewster, 2021).

This “Surrender Caucus” soon found itself at the target of a majority of Trump supporters and white supremacists as websites, forums, and social networking platforms contemplated violence and “storming congressional offices” (Atlantic Council’s DFR Lab, 2021).

This application of public pressure and public opinion on House Republicans achieved the very important result of trying to ensure a uniform party line by containing deviant behaviour and dissenting attitudes. At the same time, it gave confidence to those Republicans who were in favour of not accepting the results of the latest election, as an enormous outpouring of support must surely have made their stances feel vindicated. Here again, we see the role of a ‘sacralised’ people come into play. One could also argue that the threat of violence and that of being labelled as disloyal to the party must have disincentivised certain politicians from speaking out and expressing reservations about Trump’s tactics earlier on. Unfortunately, there is no way of knowing by what degree these factors inhibited dialogue and people from expressing their opinions as there is no official data maintained in that regard. However, it is safe to assume the same owing to how politics, as a career profession, values a uniform party line particularly in the United States.

People’s opinion and decision in this regard was facilitated by a process called Information Cascading (Enjolras and Steen-Johnson, 2017). This is a process wherein people make decisions sequentially by being able to observe the decisions others take in order to draw rational inferences from them and imitate them based on their inferences. We make such choices every day in life with regards to what we choose to eat, what we choose to wear, etc. What makes social media particularly interesting is the availability of information and reference points to draw inferences from. The small world network structure where people can easily see what choices their connections are making, enables them to model their own decisions on the basis of that.

By noticing that the people they elected to represent them had refused to support a leader that they chose to back, the people reasonably inferred that their Congressmen were not discharging their duty of representation which is vital in a liberal democracy. They believed that they were “Traitors” (Atlantic Council’s DFR Lab, 2021). People started planning to storm the capitol and send buses for protests on January sixth for the same, having finally expressed the intensity of

their opinion in the form of a violent insurrection – an opinion that was peddled, encouraged and ultimately, sanctioned by the sitting President of the United States.

CONCLUSION : LIMITATIONS AND GUIDELINES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Quite interestingly then, bulletin boards, websites and most importantly, social networking sites seem to be fulfilling the purpose of coffee houses and parlours as centres of political criticism and as institutions of the public sphere, in the Habermasian sense of the term (Habermas, 1962). The same phenomena has been observed in the opposition of the right wing to groups like Antifa and other threats. Twitter and other social networking sites have appeared as sites where information is easily available for individuals to make their decisions on. Combined with the strategic responses of a charismatic political leader, this aspect of Twitter has the potential to shape public opinion and guiding public action.

In further distilling the mechanics of how leaders influence political action on social media, we need to map out clear connections between the actual act and the leader by visualising social media actors as nodal points through which information flows. Owing to the controversial nature of the insurrection, many of the original tweets and pages have been deleted which might make said mapping of connection harder. In order to overcome such externalities, internet archives need to be employed skilfully. Furthermore, the magnitude of causation provided by each factor or node should also be examined.

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