

IDENTITY POLITICS, SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE 2016 PRESIDENTIAL  
ELECTION

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## CAPSTONE ABSTRACT

Identity Politics, Social Media and the 2016 Presidential Election

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This capstone project explored the impact social media had on the presidential election of 2016. As social media became integrated more into American culture, presidential candidates took advantage of the ability to connect to their constituents on a personal level. The American public was also able to become current on national and global events, allowing them to become political watchdogs. As Americans became more informed, they found that their position in politics and identity politics was seen as their ideologies were not being met and the government did not provide for them. Their personal views on various issues may not be met by the current system, thus they aligned with candidates that shared similar ideologies. Social media allowed the candidate and the public to speak together to voice their concerns. Politicians aimed to meet the needs of the public and the public used social media identities to leverage their voting power. Though identity politics is seen on both sides, Trump was able to speak to a “silent majority” repeatedly on social media on a personal yet broad level, attracting voters that the previous president seemed to have ignored. Hillary Clinton appealed to specific social groups that could *possibly* have had their political needs unmet elected. This paper provided an overview of how each candidate used social media to appeal to a politically divided nation in 2016. Facebook and Twitter are the two main social media platforms discussed in this research.

## **Introduction**

The American electoral process has transformed greatly since the election of 2008 as a result of technology innovation and the creation of social media. Constituents are able to view greater amounts of information in a shorter amount of time due to the convenience and accessibility of media and media platforms. Candidates are monitored more closely by the electorate. Voters are able to directly connect to the candidates to gain a better understanding of the person as well as the politician. Candidates also are aware of this communication ease when they have complete autonomy over what they can say. Since the election of 2008, the candidate who used social media the most efficient won the election (Pew Research Center, 2016).

Modern technology allows individuals to gather larger amounts of information through platforms like social media. These individuals are more politically aware than before their predecessors as information is pushed to the user rather than the user seeking out information (Smith, 2015). This allowed the public to become more aware of varying aspects and elements of American culture and political climate. Every day, numerous alerts and updates are sent out by major news sources and personal social media accounts, keeping the user up-to-date and informed on current events. Over time, the individual begins to form opinions based on current events and actions.

The election of 2016 evolved from previous elections successes seen through media activity in efforts to connect to the voters. Republican candidate Donald Trump and Democratic Hillary Clinton were both able to speak directly to their constituents. Previous candidates, primarily Barrack Obama in the elections of 2008 and 2012, experienced favorable results when they spoke directly to the public using online social

media (Pew Research Center, 2016). The election of 2016 was no different, as Donald Trump used social media to better speak directly to a “silent majority” previously underserved by the Democratic Party, thus winning the election. Trump voiced his distaste of rival candidates and provided solutions to issues and concerns. Both candidates attempted to use social media to better relate to a politically divided nation during the election of 2016.

### **Defining Identity Politics**

The definition of identity politics has changed over time. Identity politics has been a part of American politics since the rise of “large-scale political movements, including second wave feminism, Black Civil Rights in the U.S., and the gay and lesbian liberation, based in claims about the injustices done to a particular social group” in the 1960’s (Heyes, 2016). Participants aim to advance or secure political freedoms associated within their “larger context” or issue. Also, these social groups believe that these like-minded individual’s identities are oppressed and they are not pleased with societal status-quo (Heyes, 2016).

The range of political movements that fall within the definition of identity politics is quite broad. These movements include “struggles living within western capitalist democracies... nationalist projects, or demands for regional self-determination”. What makes identity politics difficult to define is because there is “no straightforward criterion” that determines if a group or individual may be oppressed or struggling within any given system to the point where said group or individual may use a “blanket description that invokes rage or a tacit political failings (discussed in Bickford 1997)” (Heyes, 2016).

Multiple political divisions occurred over the past decades as identity politics evolved. “Among the most interesting aspects of this era of personalization has been the rise of large-scale, rapidly forming political participation aimed at the variety of corporations, brands, and transnational policy reforms” (Bennett, 2012). These divisions may be cause-based, anti-nuclear or environmental conservation, or “group identities”, women, minorities, immigrants, or native people. Over time, these have been joined by diverse, “heterogeneous mobilizations”, or groups that operate independent and hoped to gain both societal and political credibility. Recently, more diverse mobilization, became more “personalized expressions” (Heyes, 2016). Calhoun (1994) argued that these mobilizations expressed identities that were negatively viewed within dominate political institutions because these identities have been repressed, de-legitimated or devalued (Bernstein, 2005). Armstrong (2002) argued that identity politics is defined as “a ‘political logic’ whose purpose is to overcome alienation through creating, expressing, and affirming collective identities”. Groups sought change in laws and policies to transform society’s economic and political structures (Bernstein, 2005).

Mary Bernstein states that “identity politics is assumed to be cultural not only because identity is [assumed] unrelated to institutional structures and the political economy, but also because these scholars see identity as groups advocating for recognition and respect for their cultural differences” (Bernstein, 2005). The end goal of identity politics, according to Kauffman, is “geared toward personal expression and self-transformation” (Bernstein, 2005). The goal is for identity expressed on a human level and is personally related to like-minded individuals existing within a political philosophy in effort to gain recognition.

## **History of Identity Politics**

Identity politics gained force in the mid twentieth century focused on “large-scale political movements [that included] second wave feminism, Black Civil Rights in the U.S., gay and lesbian liberation, and the American Indian movements” (Heyes, 2016). These movements focus on oppression of group members. As identity politics rose from new social movements in the 1960s, they centered themselves around cause issues that included economic justice, environmental protection, and war and peace. A new political left rose during the 1970’s stems from an era of economic globalization resulting in economic polarization from inequality seen in various economic platforms, such as... healthcare, energy, and transportation. These were viewed from local to national or national and transnational (Bennett, 2012). With this, current political movements that fit into identity politics are quite broad.

The term, identity politics was first used in 1979 to “refer to activism by people with disabilities to transform both self [identity] and societal [cultural] conceptions of people with disabilities” (Chua, 2018). This period saw a rise in progressive liberalism seen in the civil rights movement, Great Society initiatives under President Lyndon Johnson, and Marxist initiatives during the Cold War era. These movements allowed members to decide their society’s basic principles without regard to race, gender, religion, or wealth (Chua, 2018). Politically, the left concerned itself with the oppression of minorities and those who felt disadvantaged during the post-World War II era. In the 1980’s and 1990’s, however, conservative initiatives set forth by Ronald Reagan rectified policies that aided “group consciousness, group identity, and group claims” associated with the oppressed and attempted to break down race, gender, religious, and even

national boundary barriers (Chua, 2018). After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the left's dissolved anti-capitalist rhetoric, "redistribution politics" transformed into "politics of recognition" and created modern identity politics. Those who felt oppressed demanded recognition, not for a universal humanity, but for groups who were seen as "different". However, at the 2004 National Convention, Democratic Candidate Barack Obama reverted to the initial mantra of identity politics as he declared "There's not a black America, white America, Latino America, or Asian America, there's the United States of America" (Chua, 2018).

This vision of a *United States of America* was not seen leading up to the election of 2016 as previously oppressed group's needs began to be recognized by the Obama administration. The political right felt ostracized with this change and identity politics shifted on the political spectrum. The idea of exclusion, rather than inclusion at its foundation, was the theme of identity politics leading into the election of 2016. The political left "shift[ed] their tone, rhetoric, and logic" and attempted to turn against "universal-ism" as they "view[ed] it as an attempt to erase the specificity of the experience and oppression of historically marginalized minorities". A culture war began and is rooted in the idea that groups have "exclusive rights" to their own histories, symbols, and traditions (Chua, 2018). The shift from "universal" to "division" did just that, divided America into numerous factions that ultimately showed numerous groups oppressed. The identity of America was lost.

Both presidential candidates in the 2016 election attempted to define the American identity.

"At it's core, the problem is simple and fundamental. While black American's, Asian Americans, Hispanic Americans, Jewish Americans, and many others –

indeed, encouraged, to feel solidarity and take pride in the racial or ethnic identity, white Americans have for the last several decades been told they must never, ever do so” (Chua, 2018).

Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton supported the social progressive identity and Republican candidate Donald Trump used the traditional “white” American identity, thrown on them by the left, as his foundation. In 2016, the political right used the same “discriminated” calling the left used during the 1970’s.

### **Social Media’s Recent History in Presidential Elections**

Both major parties from the elections of 2008 and 2012 used social media in attempts to gain attention and recognition. As social media platforms, primarily Facebook and Twitter, became a cultural norm, Democratic candidate Barack Obama and Republican candidate John McCain attempted to attract voters as they targeted groups and used various forms of social media during the 2008 election. In 2012, social media was a staple in both Barack Obama’s and Mitt Romney’s campaigns. In both elections, the candidate who engaged in social media more than the other candidate won.

#### 2008: John McCain vs Barack Obama

According to a Pew Research Center survey in the spring of 2008, there was a significant increase in social media activity since the 2006 midterm elections. “The percentage of all adults who have posted someone else’s political commentary or writing has doubled, from 5% in the fall 2006 to 11% in the spring 2008” (Smith and Rainie, 2008). Younger adults were more likely to than their elders to use a social networking site; 66% of 18-29 year olds and 18% of those ages 30 and older (Smith and Rainie, 2008). Younger adults used internet sites to gain information about politics and the political process.



In terms of political parties, 78% of Republicans, 74% of Democrats, and 76% of independents used the internet in 2008. However, Democrats used the internet for political information more than Republicans – 61% to 45% (Smith and Rainie, 2008). Even though both parties used the internet similarly, younger voters leaned Democrat on the political spectrum. Also, more than one-third of online Democrats (36%) had a social networking site as compared to 21% with Republicans (Smith and Rainie, 2008).

John McCain and Barack Obama used similar forms of social networking and provided links to said social networking sites. McCain and Obama both used Facebook, YouTube, Flickr, and Myspace (Pew Research Center, 2016) as well as Twitter. Another similarity is that McCain and Obama used the campaign website to target specific voter groups. Obama's campaign website had links dedicated to twenty specific voter groups including African Americans, Latinos/Hispanics, LGBT, rural Americans, seniors, students, and women. McCain's campaign website had links dedicated to eighteen specific voter groups that were similar to Obama's. Some of McCain's targets that were different than Obama's included lawyers, bi-partisans, future leaders (ages 25 – 45), sportsmen, and small business leaders (Pew Research Center, 2016).

Obama set the stage for the internet era of the political world. According to Graham-Felsen, Obama's head blogger, "Obama demonstrated that he was a different kind of candidate with his online base". Obama joined Twitter in March of 2007 and by the election of 2008 he had more than 118,000 followers compared to McCain's 4,924. Obama would use twitter several times a week. He also had four times the amount of MySpace users than McCain (844,927 to 219,404) (Fox, 2012). His online dominance continued in his re-election campaign in 2012.

## 2012: Mitt Romney vs Barack Obama

Barrack Obama continued his internet campaigning success into the 2012 election against Republican Mitt Romney. Prior to the election, Obama had a technological advantage over Romney. “If presidential campaigns are in part contests over which candidate masters changing communications technology, Barack Obama on the eve of conventions holds a substantial lead over challenger Mitt Romney” (Pew Research Center, 2012). Obama campaigned online four times the amount and used twice the amount of technology platforms than Romney. Both candidate’s digital campaigns used similar platforms seen in 2008 including Facebook and YouTube but Obama used Twitter on a much greater level to talk to his base. For example, after the primary season, Obama tweeted 404 times as opposed to Romney’s 16. Obama also nearly doubled the amount of Facebook likes over Romney - 1,124,175 to 633,597, Twitter Retweets - 150,106 to 8,601, and YouTube Comments/Likes/Views - 839,933 to 399,225 (Pew Research Center, 2012).

Barrack Obama spoke more to citizens directly on social media than Romney as Obama “made more substantial use of citizen voices” through his news blogs. His digital campaign was more localized than that of Romney’s. He added state-by-state content pages filled with local information (Pew Research Center, 2012) to reach his base personally. Obama also “largely eliminated mainstream press” (Pew Research Center, 2012).

“By using social media as an integral part of their campaigns, Obama and Romney expanded political membership to the online masses, giving social media users the opportunity to express their ideologies and party affiliation” (Hoffman, 2012).

Constituents had a unique opportunity and took an active role in the political process as they liked Facebook posts, retweeted posts, and commented on YouTube videos. In the 2012 election, Obama benefited more than Romney in the online world. Obama had 21,254,754 million followers on Twitter compared to Romney's 1,559,035 in October of the election year. Obama based YouTube videos were visited 253,407,036 times as opposed to Romney's 27,528,384 views. "There is a difference in the voting tendencies of those who use social media... 79% of liberals report using social media while only 60% of conservatives do... (Pew Research Center, 2012). The higher presence of Democrats on social media sites means undecided voters will be exposed to a higher concentration of liberally aligned posts than conservative ones."(Pew Research, 2012). The Democratic Party used the internet to their advantage and attracted undecided voters.

The use of cellphones increased during the election of 2012. "45% have used their smartphone to read other people's comments on a social networking site about a candidate or the campaign in general" (Pew Research Center, 2012). With the abundance of posts and social media information, 18% have used their smartphone to post their own comments on a social networking site (Pew Research Center, 2012). Fact checking began to gain force as "35% have used their smartphone during this election campaign to look up whether something they just heard about a candidate or the campaign in general was true or not" (Pew Research Center, 2012).

The media prematurely nicknamed the election of 2008 the "Facebook Election" but it was just the beginning as the election of 2012's use of social media skyrocketed. Data showed Democrats took advantage of the social media boom as Democratic voters

used social media and the Internet more than Republican. Campaigns received aid from another media source, the public.

### **Social Media Usage during the 2016 Election: Hillary Clinton vs. Donald Trump**

After tremendous usage and success seen throughout the previous two elections, both candidates embraced the internet campaign strategy during the election 2016. With smartphones commonplace more commonplace in American culture, social media alerts and news notifications were a societal norm. Smartphone users were able to set alerts that kept them informed on specific issues, politicians, world and national news. Both Presidential candidates during the election of 2016 took advantage of the opportunity and reached constituents by creating a barrage of taglines and headlines. This created a national election culture that would boost or bust the candidates.

Trump saw greater public engagements and reactions than Clinton through their respected social media posts. During the time studied, “Trump’s posts on Twitter, for example, were retweeted 5,947 times compared with just 1,581 for Clinton (Pew Research Center, 2016 analysis of posts on Facebook and Twitter from May 11-31, 2016). On Facebook, Donald Trump had 8,367 shares, 5,230 comments, and 76,885 reactions. Clinton had 1,636 shares, 1,729 comments, and 12,537 reactions (Pew Research Center, 2016). Trump saw nearly five times the amount of his information shared than Clinton, three times the amount of comments, and six times the amount of reactions. Trump also had more Twitter followers than Clinton at the time of the study, almost 10 million to 7 million (Pew Research Center, 2016). Regardless of positive or negative responses, Trump saw much more activity than Clinton and his content spread to

more viewers. 80% of Hillary Clinton's retweets were directed towards her staff or her campaign's other accounts (Pew Research Center, 2016).

The following pertains to the candidate's media campaigns at the end and shortly after the primary season (May – June of 2016), focused on social media. Donald Trump's usage of social media evolved from Barack Obama's 2012 and 2008 elections. Like Obama's use of citizen voices through his blogs, Donald Trump reached out and interacted with the public through social media. Even though neither candidate retweets frequently, "On Twitter, Trump stands out for retweeting ordinary people more often than Clinton..." (Pew Research Center, 2016). Trump differed from Clinton as he retweeted the general public 78% of the time as opposed to 0% by Clinton. Out of Trump's retweets from May 11-31, 2016, 78% "were of people who were not famous and had no discernable ties to news media, government or other organizations – in other words, the general public". During the time studied, "Clinton..., on the other hand, never retweeted the public" (Pew Research Center, 2016).

Trump and Clinton differed in the way they connected their social media accounts. Trump linked 78% of his Facebook and 48% of his Twitter posts to news media in comparison to Clinton's 15% of Facebook and 25% of Twitter posts. Clinton primarily linked her 80% of her Facebook and 60% of her Twitter to her campaign site while Trump linked his never linked his campaign site to Facebook and rarely linked his Twitter (20%) to his campaign site (Pew Research Center, 2016).

### **Identity Politics and America's Persona at the time of the Election of 2016**

Both candidate's party's aimed to influence the American voices, or identities, to gain votes in the presidential election of 2016. Steven Bannon, one of Donald Trump's

chief campaign strategists, thought identity politics are great for Donald Trump's chances of winning. "[T]he longer they [Democrats] talked about identity politics, I got 'em. I want them to talk about racism every day. If the left is focused on race and identity, and we go with economic nationalism, we can crush the Democrats" (Lopez, 2017). A divided America, in terms of what America stands for and the persona that is associated with the nation placed the concept of "us" vs. "them" and "majority" vs. "minority" at the forefront of America's identity.

Pluralism, or the make-up of social groups "has been noted as a source of stability for the American peace and democracy" (Mason and Wronski, 2018). More recent, "many of the social divides in American politics have moved into alignment with political parties, concentrating the 'multiplicity' of social divisions along a single partisan line". (Mason and Wronski, 2018). Generally, political divisions include race, religion, age, and gender on a personal level. However, social mindsets vary in great numbers and are related to political agendas (left vs. right) with personal interests. Examples in the election of 2016 include abortion, gun control, LGBTQ, moral values and standing, and role of government.

There was an overlap between physical divisions, political agendas, and personal interests of an individual's decision to support a candidate. Both the Republican and Democratic parties formed coalitions leading up the election of 2016. "The fundamental demographic changes taking place in this country – an aging population, growing racial and ethnic diversity and rising levels of education – have reshaped both party coalitions" (Pew Research Center, 2016).

Democratic Party is "becoming less white, less religious, and better-educated at a faster rate than the country as a whole, while aging at a slower rate. The

[Republicans] are becoming more diverse, better educated and less religious at a slower rate than the country generally, while the age profile of the GOP is growing older more quickly than that of the country” (Pew Research Center, 2016).

Like the Democratic Party, Republicans are also becoming less white and more diverse.

Both parties becoming less white is due to the increase in minorities in America in the past decades. Each candidate in the election of 2016 responded different in how they answered the call to the changed American “face”.

Traditional media such as television and newspaper adapted to the SNS Social Networking Service (SNS) based around controversy. “The traditional news media’s focus on scandal based stories facilitated the creation of new online media sources” (Ellis, 2017). Competition formed between media outlets that resulted in scandal based stories. “An example of the rising online media sources is the right-wing news outlet, [created in 2007], Breitbart News” (Ellis, 2017). Trump supporters began to read and watch stories on this heavily biased right-winged internet based SNS. This hurt the Clinton campaign as there were fewer left-wing leaning SNS’s. “Many of Clinton’s followers used traditional news media like The Washington Post, CNN and the New York Times (Benkler et al., 2017)” (Ellis, 2017). “A study in The Columbia Journal Review found that the clearly partisan right-winged sites exceeded the number of left-wing sites” that created more right-wing sites (Benkler et al., 2017) (Ellis, 2017). When these partisan sites were created, the public had the opportunity to view potentially biased news in “limitless capacity” (Ellis, 2017), and an already politically divided nation began to further split.

## Top Issues in the Election of 2016

After various exit polls were examined, the electorate shared concern over similar issues. Even though these are exit polls, it is assumed that the concerns listed below were seen leading up to the election as the candidates focused their social media content on the following exit polls top voting issues.

### *Pew Research Center: Top Voting Issues in 2016 Election*

Economy 84%	Education 66%
Terrorism 80%	Supreme Court Appointments 65%
Foreign Policy 76%	Treatment of racial, ethnic minorities 63%
Health Care 74%	Trade Policy 57%
Gun Policy 72%	Environment 52%
Immigration 70%	Abortion 45%
Social Security 67%	Treatment of gay, lesbian, transgender people 40%

### *CNN Exit Polls*

	Trump	Clinton
Foreign Policy	33%	60%
Immigration	64%	33%
Economy	41%	52%
Terrorism	57%	40%
Gender		
Male (47%)	52%	41%
Female(53%)	41%	53%
Race		
White (71%)	57%	37%
Black (12%)	8%	89%
Latino (11%)	28%	66%
Religion		
Protestant (27%)	59%	36%
Catholic (23%)	50%	46%
Muslim (n/a)	(n/a)	(n/a)
Other (7%)	32%	58%



*New York Times Exit Polls (November 6, 2016)*

	Trump	Clinton
Foreign Policy	34%	60%
Immigration	64%	32%
Economy	42%	52%
Terrorism	57%	39%
Illegal Immigrants		
Offer chance to become citizens	34%	60%
Deport	84%	14%
Gender		
Male	53%	41%
Female	42%	54%
Race		
White	58%	37%
Black	8%	88%
Latino	29%	65%
Religion		
Protestant	58%	39%
Catholic	52%	45%
Muslim	n/a	n/a
Something Else	62%	29%

*Gallup Poll (January 11, 2017) (The Divided States of America?)*

	Republicans Trump states	Democrats Clinton states + DC
Affordable Care Act Disapproved	58%	47%
Refugees trying to enter Europe and N. America	58%	44%
Importance of own religions: very important	57%	44%
Climate Change	54%	41%
Government regulation of business too much	52%	40%
Pro – Life on abortion	51%	37%
Values: government should promote traditional values	51%	38%
Values: government should not favor any values	46%	56%
Pro – Choice on abortion	40%	58%

*Fox News Exit Polls*

When asked “Which ONE of these four issues is most important facing our country?  
(Check one)”

	Trump	Clinton
Foreign Policy (Total 13%)	33%	60%
Immigration (Total 13%)	64%	33%

The Economy (Total 52%)	41%	52%
Terrorism (Total 18%)	57%	40%
Gender		
Male (47%)	52%	41%
Female (53%)	41%	54%
Race		
White (71%)	57%	37%
Black (12%)	8%	89%
Latino (11%)	28%	66%
Religion		
Protestant (52%)	56%	39%
Catholic (23%)	50%	46%
Muslim	n/a	n/a
Something else (8%)	29%	62%

*Cultural issues* – Gender, Race Religion – were analyzed alongside *political issues* – foreign policy, immigration, economy, terrorism, abortion, values, etc. Donald Trump won the vote of those hesitant of a changing American demographic. The white, protestant, traditional American face adhered to both the Republican ideology and to Donald Trump’s voice through social media. Trump used this base as he targeted the public and used social media, primarily Twitter, and promised these American’s their nation would adhere to the traditional status quo. Political issues – economy, national security, terrorism, climate change, and role of government – ranked more important than cultural issues – abortion, treatment of minorities, etc. These issues and demographics aligned to each candidate consistently throughout the exit polls. Trump used social media and aimed to unite divided America under a Democratic administration while Clinton used the Democratic platform promoting various cultural identities and divisions who gained progress through the Obama administration.

## **How Trump and Clinton's used Social Media during the Election of 2016**

The use of social media among presidential candidates increased tremendously since the election of 2008. Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton looked to build on the previous two elections and target key individuals in efforts to gain votes. "The Clinton campaign has been very targeted and focused on specific issues and specific topics. It has not been run-of-the-mill, drive by tweeting type of situation. It looks as though it's the execution of a strategy rather than just random posts" says Bill Jasso, professor of politics with a specialty in public relations, at Syracuse University's Newhouse School of Public Communication (Brousell, 2015). The goal of the Clinton campaign was to make her more relatable and genuine to the public. If a political "gaff" or negative element was seen in the opposition, campaigns made attempts to inform the public through social media to for an immediate, potentially negative, impact.

The University of Edinburgh research analyzed the 50 most viral tweets for each candidate during the final 68 days of the 2016 election campaign between September 1 and November 8. They divided tweets into pro-Clinton and pro-Trump categories and dissected the use of "slogans, mentions of swing states and the credibility of linked news sources" (Rossman, 2017). Close to two-thirds of the 3,450 viral tweets, retweeted 26 million times, either attacked Clinton (39%) or supported Trump (23%) while the other third either supported Clinton (14%) or attacked Trump (19%) (Rossman, 2017). Clinton sent 331 positive tweets about herself and 363 attacking Trump. Her use of social media leading up to the election was not focused on her campaign, but attacks on her opponent. On the other hand, Trump boosted himself 446 times and denounced Clinton 246 times (Rossman, 2017). The study noted this "suggests that Clinton expended more energy

attacking her opponent than promoting herself, while Trump did the exact opposite” (Rossman, 2017). In addition, “about 85% of the days, Trump-friendly tweets were retweeted more than those favoring Clinton”. The study also shows how Trump supporters were closer to Trump than Clinton’s (Rossman, 2017).

### **Social Media and “Fake News” in the 2016 Election**

A common phrase during the 2016 election in reference to social media was “fake news”. Fake news is defined as “news articles that are intentionally verifiably false, and could mislead readers” (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017). “Social media platforms such as Facebook have a dramatically different structure than previous media technologies” (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017). Information was shared by third party social-media users without “filtering, fact checking, or editorial judgement” (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017).

The distribution of information was seen at similar rates as main stream news outlets.

According to Allcott and Gentzkow, the 2016 election saw...

“... 1) 62 percent of US adults get news on social media (Gottfried and Shearer 2016); 2) the most popular fake news stories were more widely shared on Facebook than the most popular mainstream news stories (Silverman 2016); 3) many people who see fake news stories report that they believe them (Silverman 2016); and 4) the most discussed fake news stories tended to favor Donald Trump over Hillary Clinton (Silverman 2016)” (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017).

A survey administered by Allcott and Gentzkow presented new data and consumption of fake news prior to the election of 2016. Data was drawn from 1,200 in a post-election survey people who browsed the web. This included a database of 156 election-related news stories that were categorized as false by leading fact-checking websites in the three months before the election (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017).

Even though 14 percent of American adults viewed social media as their “most important” source of election news, the data showed these stories favored Trump. “Our

database contains 115 pro-Trump fake stories that were shared on Facebook a total of 30 million times, and 41 pro-Clinton fake stories shared a total of 7.6 million times” (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017). Top U.S. news sites were visited 48% of the time through “direct browsing” and 10.1% on social media. In contrast, fake news sites were visited 48.1% of the time through social media and 30.5% of the time through direct browsing. Fake news was distributed through social media more than direct browsing, search engines, or other links (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017).

There were incentives and motivation for the distribution of fake news. Reports provided a “partial picture” of the providers of fake news stories. Separate studies provided by *BuzzFeed* and the *Guardian* “revealed that more than 100 sites posting fake news were run by teenagers in the small town of Veles, Macedonia” (Subramanian 2017)” and the distributor shared four of the ten most popular fake news stories (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017). Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) provided incentives on why fake news was produced. The first was economic. “News articles that go viral on social media can draw significant advertising revenue when users click on the original site” (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017). The teenagers in Vele produced pro-Trump and pro-Clinton stories and profited “tens of thousands of dollars”. Another fake news producer, Paul Horner, “created pro-Trump stories for profit even though he did not support the candidate” (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017). The second incentive is ideological. A Romanian man ran a fake news site that favored Donald Trump as he hoped to help Donald Trump’s campaign (Townsend 2016). The opposite occurred as the political left wanted to “embarrass those on the right by showing that they would credulously circulate false stories (Dewey 2016, Sydell 2016)” (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017).

Fake news was distributed on social media platforms because they were cost-effective and logistically sound. “Fixed costs of entering the [social media] market and producing content are vanishingly small” (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017). The short term goal of providing aide to a candidate cut down the “long-term reputation for quality” (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017). Also, Bakshy, Messing, and Adamic (2015) “showed that Facebook friend networks are ideologically segregated” (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017). Facebook users who shared content were less likely to reach those of those who did not share political ideologies; 18 percent for conservatives and 20 percent for liberals (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017). Facebook also determined a way to learn political affiliation based off user activity as well as those associated with the activity. Donald Trump paid for his ads to be shown on those considered moderate in efforts to attract undecided voters (Merrill, 2016).

Allcott and Gentzkow determined that the majority of news sources were pro-Trump. The Republican candidate repeatedly spoke out against the credibility of mainstream media during his campaign. Also, “Pro-Trump (and anti-Clinton) storylines may simply be more compelling than pro-Clinton (and anti-Trump) storylines due to particulars of these candidates, perhaps related to the high levels of media attention that Trump received throughout the campaign” (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017).

#### Top Fake News Stories of 2016

The following is a CNBC.com report (2016) taken from figures depicting the “biggest fake news stories of 2016”. The majority of news stories are either pro-Trump or anti-Clinton.

1. “Pope Francis shocks world, endorses Donald Trump for president”. This story was originally published by a website called WTOE 5, currently shut down, before being copied by a popular fake news publisher *Ending the Fed*. By election time, this story picked up 960,000 Facebook engagements, according to *Buzzfeed*. Over a month before the election, Pope Francis spoke about the election for the first time and stated “I never said a word about the electoral campaigns”.

2. “Donald Trump sent his own plane to transport 200 stranded marines”. Published by *Americanmilitarynews.com* in May of 2016, this story had a total of 893,000 Facebook engagements. This article claimed that Donald Trump sent his personal plane to help stranded marines after Operation Desert Storm in 1991. Popular conservative political commentator Sean Hannity still has this story on his website, *Hannity.com*. A Trump branded plane, Trump Shuttle Inc., contracted out to the U.S. army picked up the stranded soldiers but it was not his personal plane.

3. “WikiLeaks confirms Hillary sold weapons to ISIS... Then drops another bombshell”. This article was published after an interview by WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange that generated 789,000 engagements before election-day. This article states that Assange “contended ‘Hillary Clinton and her State department were actively arming Islamic Jihadists, which included ISIS...’”. Assange actually said that a Hillary Clinton-led State Department had approved weapon shipments to Libya during the 2011 intervention. Those weapons later ended in the hands of jihadists.

4. “FBI agent suspected in Hillary email leaks found dead in apartment murder-suicide”. This article was originally published by the popular fake news website *Denver Guardian*, no longer active, on November 5, 2016. According to the *Denver Post*, “There is no such thing as the *Denver Guardian*, despite that Facebook post you saw”. The *Denver Post* noted that the contact address of the *Denver Guardian* is actually a vacant parking lot. Nevertheless, the story saw 567,000 engagements on Facebook leading up to the election.
  
5. “FBI director received millions from Clinton Foundation, his brother’s law firm does Clinton’s taxes”. This article saw 538,000 Facebook engagements after being posted by the *Ending the Fed*. Much of the content was referenced from *Breitbart*, a right-wing news site. The only connection made between FBI Director James Comey to the Clinton Foundation is that Comey worked for past organizations who donated money to the Clinton Foundation.
  
6. “ISIS leader calls for American Muslim voters to support Hillary Clinton”. *World News Daily Report* is a “self-confessed fake news outlet” that notes their content is to be seen as satire. Trump supporters “racked up over half a million engagements” prior to the election. This story was reposted by several other fake news sites along with the Twitter hashtag #ISISwithher.
  
7. “Hillary Clinton 2013: ‘I would like to see people like Donald Trump run for office, they’re honest and can’t be bought’”. This article was published by several fake news sites but gained the most attention on ConservativeState.com, “one of the best performing



Macedonian news outlets”. This headline was taken out of context. In a private speech to Goldman Sachs, Clinton actually said “that she would like to see more successful people in business enter politics”.

### **Social Groups and Identity Politics in relation to particular tweets.**

Research showed that Trump spoke directly to the public more than Clinton. His use of social media related directly to the electorate and focused on the top issues of the American people taken from exit polls during the time of the election. The following section provides specific tweets by Donald Trump during the election in 2016 as reported by the Washington Examiner on December, 30, 2016, two weeks prior to the election. Donald Trump focused his Twitter campaign on the electorate as he attracted voters directly tied to the top issues of the election. Below are examples on Donald Trump’s tweets aligned with top political issues taken from major media outlet exit polls.

January 3, 2016 – 9:27am: “Hillary said that guns don’t keep you safe. If she really believes that she should demand that her heavily armed body guards quickly disarm!” (18,500 comments and liked 30,200)

This tweet attempted to attract gun policy (fifth most important issue according to Pew Research Center) and terrorism (second most important issue).

February 20, 2016 – 11:42am: “I wonder if President Obama would have attended the funeral of Justice Scalia if it were held in a Mosque? Very sad that he did not go!” (17,100 comments and 28,200 likes)

This tweet had a religious element as well attacked the previous president who supports Hillary Clinton. Religious affiliation played an important role in determining how one voted. Islamic extremism related to terrorism was a top four category in all exit polls listed above regardless of party affiliation.

May 5, 2016 – 1:57pm: “Happy #CincoDeMayo! The best taco bowls are made in Trump Tower Grill. I love Hispanics!...” (114,000 comments and 124,000 likes)

Trump attempted to identify with Hispanic voters in response to heavy criticism of his immigration policy primarily focused on Mexican – American immigrants as well as border control.

June 12, 2016 – 11:43am: “Appreciate the congrats for being right on radical Islamic terrorism, I don’t want congrats, I want toughness & vigilance. We must be smart!” (51,500 comments and 68,900 likes).

Hours after the terrorist attack on Pulse nightclub in Orlando Florida, Trump aimed to convince others that he was correct about growing concern of *Islamic* terrorism and national security. Trump spoke to the public about what he wants to achieve.

October 2, 2016 – 6:22am: “I know our complex tax laws better than anyone who has ever run for president and am the only one who can fix them. #failing@nytimes” (26,000 comments and 38,000 likes).

With the economy being the number one political election in the 2016 election, Trump related to the public by using his business background and assured Americans that he was capable of fixing the tax system. This tweet also showed a popular trend in the election, biased or “fake news” as he criticized New York Times for ridiculing his candidacy.

This sample of Donald Trump tweets leading up to the election in 2016 showed his ability to communicate directly to the public in addition to focused attention on top issues. His focus throughout his Twitter campaign appealed to the American and supported specific demographics that may have been outspoken or democratically aligned in the past. These demographics included immigrants, women, lower economic status, and religious minorities in America. Regardless of the perception of Donald Trump in

the media, he spoke directly to specific demographics that in turn increased his percentage points from previous elections (NY Times Exit Polls, 2016). Overall, Trump aimed to unite a politically divided nation in order to #MakeAmericaGreatAgain.

The following is a sample from Twitter's list of tweets from Hillary Clinton's Twitter account leading up to the election of 2016 (Twitter, 2016). These tweets showed how Hillary Clinton focused her use of twitter to denounce Donald Trump as well as to defend specific identities and demographics.

June 9, 2016 – 11:27am: "Delete your account" (551,858 retweets, 28,000 comments and approximately 710,000 likes).

This was the most retweeted and most engaged tweet for Hillary Clinton of the 2016 election. This tweet responded to a Donald Trump tweet that noted former president Barack Obama's endorsement of "Crooked Hillary". Even though this was the twitter highlight during the election as it was engaged more than any other post, it lacked political substance.

July 21, 2016 – 10:55am: "Introducing #TrumpYourself: Discover what @realDonaldTrump thinks about people like you. TrumpYourself.org" (4,042 comments and 4,946 likes).

Hillary Clinton attempted to provide an opportunity for social media users to a social media tool called "TrumpYourself" that allowed users to overlay Trump's most controversial statements on their Facebook profile photo. Two examples provided by a Mashable.com article (Ruiz, 2016) displayed a Facebook profile picture of a woman with the quote "Fat Pig – Donald" and a picture of an assumed homosexual man with the quote "Donald Trump doesn't think I should be able to get married" and a picture of

Donald Trump saying “Your’e Welcome”. However, according the Gallup Poll survey, the treatment of gay, lesbian, transgender people was at the bottom of most important issues seen by 40% surveyed.

September 26, 2016 – 6:19pm “I never said that’ – Donald Trump, who said that #debatenight.” (1,200 comments and 154,000 likes).

Hillary Clinton responded to Trump’s tweet and implied that he never stated that global warming was a Chinese made conspiracy in order to make U.S. manufacturing “non-competitive”. Like her “delete your account” tweet, this lacked political substance.

September 10, 2016 – 12:04pm: “Except for African Americans, Muslims, Latinos, Immigrants, women, veterans- and any so called ‘losers’ or ‘dummies.’” (6,700 comments and 86,000 likes).

Hillary Clinton responded to Trump’s tweet days before September 11<sup>th</sup> and attempted to specifically speak to traditional democratic supporting demographics. Donald Trump tweeted “While Hillary said horrible things about my supporters, and while many of her supporters will never vote for me. I still respect them all!”

Hillary Clinton used more of a vague approach with optimism and broad statements on Twitter to reach the voters. Other social media examples that were not listed include a picture of Hillary Clinton with the slogan “Let’s go win this together”, “I’m with her!”, and “History”. Also, the majority of Clinton’s tweets were linked to her campaign website and were liked or commented less than Trump’s tweets in 2016. Many of her popular tweets were anti-Trump while the majority of her tweets focused on American identities and progressives associated with identity politics.

## Analyzing the 2016 Election Results

Hillary Clinton overestimated the strength of a coalition based on identity politics (Judis, 2016). There was a rising American electorate that would differ from 2006 to 2008 and was predicted by political pollsters, including Stanley Greenberg and Celinda Lake, leading up to the election.

Clinton ran ads targeted at these voters, including more than 2,500 Spanish-language ads from January through September. Clinton anointed singer Katy Perry and television star Lena Dunham as surrogates to court the millennial vote and called on LeBron James, Beyonce and Jay Z to get out the black vote. And she campaigned hoping that her historic candidacy would appeal to key groups of unmarried women. At the Democratic convention, Clinton first appeared in a video showing her breaking a glass ceiling. (Judis, 2016)

Hillary pigeonholed voters by specifically trying to appeal to them separately. These groups did not add up to a sure majority.

The change in the American electorate helped Republican voters in the election. “Besides such traditional GOP constituencies as farmer, small business people and managers, three groups of voters have become increasingly Republican: the white working class, defined as whites without four-year-college degree; whites with four-year college degree but not an advanced degree, and seniors”. Donald Trump marketed to this coalition through social media.

“Trump used social media, and Twitter in particular, to build relationships with voters and create a word-of-mouth buzz from his brand. Clinton’s use of social media did not generate as much communication buzz” (Rivero, 2016).

The changing electorate had a decision to make during the election of 2016.

“On one hand, some people say that the America needs to continue discussing and fighting all of the issues relevant to identity politics... On the other hand, some people, particularly on the left..., argue identity politics have served as a distraction from issues they view as more important and politically palatable – the growing income gap between the rich and everyone else, the shipping of jobs

overseas, and the abuse and corruption in America's financial system" (Lopez, 2017)"

The former is related to the political left as the latter is related to the political right. Republicans and conservatives "leveraged identity politics for *decades*, pushing minority groups and women to demand that the opposing political party and liberals finally fight back" (Lopez, 2017). Trump used a lesser known idea of identity politics in the United States; "white identity". A UC Santa Barbara and Stanford University experiment told "white voters that minority groups would outnumber white people in the US by [the year] 2042". The result showed that those who "strongly identify as white became more likely to support Trump" (Lopez, 2017). By adhering to the tagline "Make America Great Again" and branded the social media hashtag #MAGA, Trump spoke to traditional America who felt their voice *potentially* threatened, while Clinton spoke to progressives about a *potential* change to the American identity.

At the heart of identity politics, few wanted to be left out as they wanted their voices to be heard. Trump supporters saw progressive identity politics as a threat, primarily those in areas hit by globalization (Lopez, 2017). Supporters view this identity politics as a zero-gain in what little they had at the time of the election and possibly with further economic setbacks. Trump supporters that were a part of the status quo felt their voices were muted because of political correctness. After interviewed, dozens of individuals at rallies supporting Trump, *Slate* columnist Michelle Goldberg wrote, "again and again, people told me how much they resented not being able to speak their minds... They said they hate being shamed on social media, though they usually didn't want to say what they had been shamed for" (Lopez, 2017). This silent majority spoke out at their

respected polling places as they supported the candidate who spoke to them on the very platform they were hesitant; social media.

*Politico* reported that Donald Trump’s “relentless use of social media and partisan outlets” in areas that lacked trusted local news “that were drawn from a comparison of election results and subscription information from the Alliance for Audited Media (AAM)” (Musgrave and Nussbaum, 2018). *Politico*’s study found a “clear correlation between low subscription rates and Trump’s success in the 2016 election, both against Hillary Clinton and when compared to Romney in 2012”.

“*Politico*’s analysis shows how [Trump] succeeded in avoiding mainstream outlets, and turned that into a winning strategy: Voters in so-called news deserts – places with minimal newspaper subscriptions print, or online – went for him in higher than expected numbers. In tight races with Clinton in states like Wisconsin, North Carolina, and Pennsylvania, the decline in local media could have made a decisive difference” (Musgrave and Nussbaum, 2018).

“Low subscription” regions were forced to rely on candidate’s social media posts with little ability to fact-check the content. Trump benefited as he used his own voice and spoke to a massive audience that was unable to fact-check him. Trump communicated directly to about 50 million followers during the primaries and general election. His number of Twitter followers far exceeded the number of mainstream news media outlets, print and digital. The irony of social media use is seen in this Donald Trump tweet, “I use Social Media not because I like to, but because it is the only way to fight a VERY dishonest and unfair ‘press’, now often referred as Fake News Media. Phony and non-existent ‘sources’ are being used more often than ever. Many stories & reports of pure fiction!” (Musgrave and Nussbaum, 2018). Trump’s diminished the credibility of mainstream news to a demographic that took him at his word with an inability to access said media sources. These individuals took him at his word. Penny Abernathy, a

University of North Carolina professor who has studied the decline of local media, referred to the lack of trust media in reference to social media, “without having the newspaper as kind of ‘true north’ to point you to issues, you are left to look for other sources... And because of the dramatic rise in social media, that ends up being your Facebook friends” (Musgrave and Nussbaum, 2018).

### **The Future of Identity Politics**

Trump gained the attention of a group that traditionally was not related to identity politics. Mark Lilla, political scientist and professor of Humanities at Columbia University, suggests that those on the left of the political spectrum are too diverse and identity politics has shifted toward the right. “In recent years American liberalism has slipped into a kind of moral panic about racial, gender, and sexual identity that has distorted liberalism’s message and prevented it from becoming a unifying force capable of governing” (Lilla, 2016).

In terms of race, political history dictates that a growing minority population would ultimately allow Democrats to gain future support in America as was seen in the 1970’s progressive movements. It depends on how an individual identifies. For example, “sociologist Richard Alba contended, when Hispanics intermarry with whites, they often identify their children as white” (Judis, 2016). It is also important to look deeper into the political issues outside of identity. For example, on the surface, Hispanics could have written off Trump with his matter-of-fact approach and negative labeling of those entering our nation through the Mexican border. It turned out that “Hispanics don’t necessarily rate immigration reform first among their concerns, and many of them are as leery of illegal immigration...” (Judis, 2016). In terms of age, where Democrats



dominated the 18 to 29 vote in previous elections, the 2016 election saw younger generations vote Republican more.

“In Iowa this year [2016], Trump and Clinton split the 18-to-29-year-old vote that Obama had one easily. In Missouri, where younger votes backed Obama by 58 to 39 percent in 2012, they supported Trump this time by 51 to 40 percent. And in national and several key state surveys, there is some evidence that Democrats are losing their sure grip on 30-something millennials” (Judis, 2016).

They key to winning elections is for the candidate to maintain their base as well as take a slice out of their opponents. For Trump this was the “silent majority” that Clinton did not speak to during her campaign. “Infused with the promise of a rising American electorate, Clinton wrote off the significant slice of voters Democrats need – in states like Ohio, Michigan and Wisconsin – to win majorities” (Judis, 2016). Outside of the female vote, Clinton did not relate to the changing America like Trump did. Identity politics is a changing, breathing entity wanting more from election to election. In the election of 2016, Trump spoke to the *current* American identity through social media, not the individual.

### **Conclusion**

The election of 2016 saw the shift in identity politics from inclusion to exclusion. The American electorate not only chose their preferred candidate at the polling place, but they also chose identity of the American face. The oppressed in the 1970s were the oppressors leading up to the election of 2016. Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton took advantage of a critical time. Both candidates used social media to support America’s future identity.

The American public still continued to support the media’s role as the government’s “watchdog” even though they were under scrutiny. Interest groups form

and political factions are created to either voice their concern with government action, or to promote a common cause due to oppression by government action or the current institution. These voices can be heard through social media, and politicians and election campaigns can interact with the voting public like never before.

Identity politics and social media played an important role in the election of 2016 as candidates aimed to target specific demographics to gain votes. Based off of the elections of 2008 and 2012, key demographics based on race, religion, ethnicity, and gender had aligned with the two major parties that set the stage of the election of 2016. Social media outlets allowed Americans to communicate their frustration but the nation had a more difficult chance to unite. During the election of 2016, Facebook CEO, Mark Zuckerberg, said “Facebook gives people a voice”. “In his summary, his view was that Facebook hadn’t made more people in America angry [during the election], enough to vote for Trump – they were already angry. Facebook simply gave those people a voice...” (Olson, 2016). As demographics remained constant leading up to the election, it is how individuals aligned at a sensitive time for American culture. Donald Trump spoke directly to America through social media to a nation that was hesitant to change the status quo and appealed to others who were previously aligned with the opposition.

Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton varied in their use of social media. Hillary Clinton primarily redirected the public to her campaign and didn’t use the public’s voice on social media during the primary season. Donald Trump, however, “retweeted” the general public the majority of the time allowing a direct relationship to the public and branding himself as the more relatable candidate. His social media foundation as used during the primary season and set the stage for media and the public to observe the use of

his accounts as they repeatedly reported his internet voice. This demographic heard the call of a President through social media and a brand that promoted an American identity, not an attempt to bring separate identities into one. This connection to the public on social media platforms was similar to the success Barack Obama saw in the elections of 2008 and 2012. Donald Trump also used issues of growing concern during 2016 in his social media posts. He used the top four issues (economy, terrorism, immigration, foreign policy) to his advantage and voiced his own concern to the American people promising to address the issue keeping the nation as his top concern.

A “silent majority”, concerned with the changing face of America and felt the previous president did not meet their concerns. Areas that were limited in the number of news sources indulged in the words and rhetoric Donald Trump offered, regardless of the credibility of the information. It was inconsequential that a limited number viewed social media as their most important source for news. Credible or not, content was engaged and shared by the public at an alarming rate that allowed a political culture established.

Hillary Clinton’s use of social media did not connect to her specific groups and her message did not “create a word-of-mouth” buzz as seen with Donald Trump. Her focus was to meet the needs of specific groups or identities that distracted from issues they viewed a more important. Trump was able to connect more than Clinton because of modern identity politics through use of social media. By focusing on the “silent majority’s” forgotten and united *American* voice rather than factions within the nation, Trump not only appealed more to the population, he spoke to the hushed voices of America as they hoped to establish his view of America’s identity.

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