

SOCIAL MEDIA AND ITS IMPACT ON LOCAL INSURGENT CAMPAIGNS IN THE
BRONX

by

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this thesis is to examine the role that social media played in two insurgent political campaigns in the east Bronx during the 2017 and 2018 election cycles. The research consists of a content analysis of the candidates' Facebook pages, measuring reactions, comments, shares, and total posts, as well as the campaigns' spending on social media as opposed to other forms of political advertising. The results hold that aggressive, issue-based social media action can be an effective organizing tool for local campaigns that are strapped for resources.

INTRODUCTION

The rise of social media during the new millennium has been a potent force in politics in the United States and around the world. With this rise in online platforms comes new avenues for people to participate in political discussions. A major question that arises in this new era is whether or not campaigns are keeping up with the advancements in mass communication that social media provides and whether or not it can have any significant impact on local elections.

There is no doubt that social media use already has begun to leave its mark. Social media was an important element of Barack Obama's new age campaign for president in 2008.¹ Obama's campaign made it clear that social media is part of the future of national campaigns, and it became a much more frequently used tool after that year in most presidential campaigns. However, one often ignored section of American political discourse is the field of local politics and elections, despite the fact that local politics often has a direct impact on the everyday lives of citizens. This lack of attention is no different in the field of social media. Most literature published on social media in American politics focuses on national campaigns, while local elections tend to be ignored.

¹ Borah 2016

In the Bronx, local candidates occasionally challenge incumbents and established politicians, historically to little success. However, it appears that as campaigns have become more adept at using social media as a means of organizing, they have found more success. In 2018, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez ousted Congressman Joseph Crowley, a well-funded incumbent who chairs the Queens Democratic Party and was a top contender for the Speaker of the House of Representatives. Later that year, Alessandra Biaggi won her primary against incumbent state senator Jeffrey Klein, the leader of the Independent Democratic Conference and coalition leader in the New York State Senate. Both of these campaigns had rather aggressive social media campaigns compared to other insurgent campaigns before them in terms of frequency and variety of online posts.

The focus of this research is to fill the gap in research between national and local races by beginning to answer the question of whether or not aggressive social media campaigns have any real impact on local elections with regard to specifically insurgent political campaigns. For the operational purpose of this paper, an “insurgent” campaign is defined as any campaign that challenges either an incumbent or other politically well-established individual and is comparatively underfunded. The research will focus on two candidates, one of whom is Alessandra Biaggi. The other candidate is John Doyle who ran for the New York City Council against Mark Gjonaj, a State Assembly member at the time of the campaign. Both of these candidates well fit my definition of an insurgent candidate based on their funding and political connections. I will only examine primaries for these races because the winner of the Democratic primary in the Bronx is typically the de facto winner of the election due to the Democratic Party having a massive voter advantage in the Bronx.

The research will be comprised of interviews with people from both campaigns, an analysis of the social media tactics used in the months before the primary election, and an analysis of how much money was put into social media use in each campaign, which is available from the campaign finance boards for the New York City and New York State. All of this will be guided in part by the previous research done on social media and elections in general. Additionally, the primary social media platform to be examined in this paper will be Facebook, due to its near universal use by campaigns and its amount of researchable content. Based on comparisons between the two campaigns, it will be possible to draw connections between how aggressively these specifically insurgent campaigns used social media and whether or not they were successful in their respective primaries.

CHAPTER 1: PREVIOUS RESEARCH

There is a wealth of knowledge on the topic of social media's use in elections, primarily at national levels. There are well documented cases of the impact that social media can have in the political sphere as both an advertising tool and an organizing tool. However, there is also some debate on social media's effectiveness in these regards and to what its limitations are as a campaign tool. There are studies done on the use of social networking sites (SNS's) in general as well as specific tools, strategies, and metrics within SNS's to create and measure an efficient social media campaign. Much of the research done on this topic is with regards to youth and their participation on different varieties of political action. Additionally, studies that touch upon the sociological aspect of social media can aid researchers in understanding which mechanics and uses of SNS's are most practical for campaigns.

Social Media and Human Behavior

Because political science is a social science, a look at the relationship between social media and human behavior can help explain why it could be useful to a campaign. Researchers have found a positive relationship between social media use and extraversion, which they define as “set of characteristics related to general needs for belonging, and is associated with talkativeness and adventurousness.”² Through a variety of surveys in 20 countries, researchers have measured extroversion in survey respondents by asking if they “Like to start conversations” or if they “find it difficult to approach others,” among other general questions.³ These results were then examined alongside survey data on why people use social media. For this measure, “social media news use

² de Zúñiga et al 2017, 540

³ Ibid 551

was assessed by asking people how frequently they used social media to stay informed about ‘current events and public affairs.’”⁴

The positive relationship between extroversion and social media use would make social media an ideal method of recruiting potential supporters and even volunteers for a campaign. The implications on political participation in this study show more mixed results. In terms of political participation, researchers state that “being interested in politics makes people use less frequently social media overall, and less likely to use it for relational purposes or interacting with others. However, it will be a positive predictor of using social media to get information about political and public affair issues.”⁵ In other words, people who are interested in politics are less likely to use social media, but more likely to use it to find out more about candidates than for other reasons, according to these researchers. While this particular study examines political interest and social media use, it does not look at things like direct action as other studies have. However, the link that it finds between social media and human behavior provide an answer as to why social media can be useful in campaigns.

Other studies have looked directly at social media use as it relates to political interest. Based on data collected from an analysis of “comments” sections of candidates’ MySpace profiles, discussion forums, and emails to MySpace users found that “candidate profiles mainly gratify visitors’ need for social interaction with other candidate supporters, as well as information-seeking and entertainment needs.”⁶ This was similarly established by analyzing the results alongside a survey of MySpace users who were asked if their “use of MySpace [was] for information seeking; engaging in discussions with candidates; finding out what other people have to say to candidates;

⁴ Ibid 541

⁵ Ibid 545

⁶ Ancu and Cozma 2009, 576

meeting other candidate supporters; [and] making up their mind about which candidate to support.”⁷

This is consistent with the de Zúñiga study, which established a connection between extroversion and SNS use. Potential voters were visiting candidate profiles as a way of digitally “befriending” candidates. But the study found no direct link between SNS use and “voters’ levels of political efficacy, campaign involvement, and campaign interest.”⁸ Important to note that this study focused primarily on MySpace and was published in 2009 when political social media use was still in its earlier stages. Being aware of how social media relates to human behavior in general, it then begs the question of whether studies have identified social media’s effectiveness with regard to political participation.

Social Media’s Effectiveness

One question that is deeply explored in electoral politics is how to effectively predict an election result with the highest degree of accuracy possible. It is no surprise that social media has been research as a possible predictor in election results. Sentiment analysis, the use of identifying specific posts as negative or positive, was compared to traditional polling techniques for accuracy and found to have similar rates of reliability despite not necessarily being representative of the population in other demographics. The analysis compared the results of sentiment analysis on Twitter of a presidential election in Brazil with traditional polls for the same election.⁹ Insurgent campaigns could use a SNS as a means of improving the overall look of a campaign in this regard.

⁷ Ibid 572

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Oliveira 2017, 38

A campaign that might not have the resources to rely on traditional polling practices could potentially use this as an alternative to measuring voter interest.

Studies on the concept of “second-screening,” the act of looking up information while engaged in watching or reading other forms of media, have found that second-screener “proactively seek information and elaboration of TV news while it is being aired but also tend to discuss political issues on social networks more than their peers.”¹⁰ One analysis looked at Twitter who were tweeting while specific political talk shows (*The O’Reilly Factor*, *The Rachel Maddow Show*, and *Anderson Cooper 360*), and thus fit the definition of second screeners. The researchers “constructed a list of all the Twitter followers who posted a tweet while the show was broadcast,” as well as measured “the number of internal ties involving individuals of the same orientation.”¹¹ In this regard, social media can be used to foster discussions about political issues, but researchers in the same study have also noted the negative repercussions for political discourse, particularly the creation of echo chambers. Having assigned a Researchers noted that while second-screening did have a positive relationship with online participation, it did not encourage discourse across partisan lines, which is “disappointing from the broader perspective of studies of democracy and for hopes that the Web will promote healthy forms of democratic participation and discourse.”¹²

As this paper will focus on Facebook campaigns, it is also important to note the previous research on the use of “likes” as a means of measuring popularity and electoral viability. Looking at Facebook likes on Indian campaigns, researchers have tested “its use as a research tool to make predictions about election outcomes...with positive results,” particularly with regard to the month before the election.¹³ Researchers recorded the daily number of likes on fan Facebook pages for

¹⁰ Hayat and Samuel-Azran 2017, 293-4

¹¹ Ibid 298, 303

¹² Ibid 304

¹³ Barclay 2015, 157

major parties during three periods of the 2014 campaign cycle in India and compared them to the election results, finding that Narendra Modi, who ultimately won the election, had the most likes during the entirety of the campaign period. In a country that at the time was recording “the fastest growth in Internet use in the world,” it could seem logical to conclude that a greater number of Facebook likes could lead to more votes on election day.¹⁴ However, follow up studies that have taken a more comprehensive look at the issue say otherwise. Particularly, a study on Australian and Malaysian elections has measured not simply the sheer number of likes but the likes of posts and the frequency of posts over a campaign cycle. The methodology in this study differed slightly. Researchers here analyzed not only the number of likes, but the frequency of posts on campaigns for legislative districts in Malaysia. The study held that:

the number of likes generated on the candidate’s FP [Facebook page] does not depend solely on the number of posts posted, leading to some interesting questions on what makes a post more attractive and able to incite high number of likes. Moreover, is the number of likes really the best variable to use in measuring performance? What about the number of comments?¹⁵

Khairuddin and Rao hold that likes can be used a measure of electoral support if measured the right way by analyzing the frequency of individual posts. In looking at these additional factors, it is evident that with more active posting, “the chances of the candidate winning the election increases. However being active is also not an assurance of winning. There are 17 FP [Facebook pages] that posted above average ... but out of these 17 active candidates, four ...lost the election to opponents who were less active.”¹⁶ However, an additional and important point that is brought

¹⁴ Ibid, 134

¹⁵ Khairuddin and Rao 2017, NP

¹⁶ Ibid, NP

up at the conclusion is the potential uses of other measures of Facebook activity, such as comments. Further research has looked into what kind of content fosters comments and online discussion. The research presented in this paper will also touch on additional metrics available to Facebook users, such as shares.

Frequency of posts was a factor that was examined in a study of Barack Obama's first presidential campaign. After databasing the Facebook posts of major candidates during the 2008 and 2012 presidential election cycles, it was found that Barack Obama not only posted more frequently than his opponent John McCain but also posted much more positive content than McCain. Additionally, while Mitt Romney posted much more frequently than the incumbent Obama in 2012, Romney's Facebook campaign was far more negative than that of Obama.¹⁷ The author mentioned that "Research from political advertising literature shows audiences often dislike negativity in advertising" and that "posts, which were coded as enthusiastic, were also liked and shared."¹⁸ The contributes to the lasting discussion on whether or not negative advertising is an effective strategy for a political campaign. Research on the two Bronx campaigns highlighted in this paper will also examine the relative effectiveness of negative posts with regards to positive and neutral posts. Most notably about the Obama campaign, Borah said, is that "Obama's utilization of social networking in the 2008 election is often cited as an example to demonstrate how a candidate is able to successfully reach the audience, particularly the youth."¹⁹

¹⁷ Borah 2016, 333

¹⁸ Ibid, 335

¹⁹ Ibid, 326

Youth, Politics, and Social Media

Age of voters was another factor that played a partial role in the two races examined in this paper. Social media's ability to mobilize particularly young voters into political action has been well documented in previous research. On one hand, researchers have noted the potential drawbacks of social media with regard to participation from young people, such as the critics who have "warned that so-called 'slacktivism' could undermine revolutionary movements as time spent on virtual activism is time not spent on real activism that carries very real risks ... it cannot change the world in the way protest can."²⁰ In other words, those who spend too much time "liking" or "sharing" articles on social media will not create real change without actually getting involved in direct actions such as protest and door-knocking. Others worry about the reliability of social media as a news-sharing tool in the absence of the gatekeepers who run traditional media outlets given that "social media influences youth participatory politics without formal instructions or scrutiny, [so] it may have repercussions for the overall development of the society."²¹

However, even those who have pointed out these repercussions have also noted social media's potential to increase voter participation. A survey of university students at the University of the Punjab, Lahore found that "youth participation in institutional/formal political activities was lower compared to that through facebook," meaning that SNS's can be a new avenue to reach voters who may not be involved in other traditional forms of politics, such as joining political parties.²² They have also credited social media as "becoming instrumental in changing traditional political space and have drawn the attention of scholars towards increasing youth participatory politics in the wake of Arab Spring."²³ Noueihed and Warren have also documented social media's

²⁰ Noueihed and Warren 2012, 56

²¹ Ahmad and Sheikh 2013, 359

²² Ibid

²³ Ibid 353

“revolutionary” part in “forming instant networks that rallied thousands of people around a single cause,” “spread[ing] their message faster and to more people than was possible before,” and “creating a sense of communal fearlessness” during the Arab Spring.²⁴

The potential inroads to young people are also documented by various surveys that have recorded public perception of citizenship norms such as voting, serving on a jury, and reporting crimes. From these surveys, researchers have found that “Electoral participation – especially voting – is positively related to age ... However, protest and internet activism are negatively related to age.”²⁵ In other words, young people are less likely to vote but more likely to engage in internet activism, often through SNS’s. While this correlation worries those who criticize slacktivism, other studies have documented cases of college students using internet activism as “an excellent medium for dissemination of information, mobilization, social interaction, and even entertainment,” according to a content analysis of college Facebook groups in presidential swing states.²⁶ The study holds that active use of SNS’s can be a tool for improving voter engagement, including active involvement, as evidenced content analysis of college students’ use of social media on pro-Obama Facebook groups during the 2008 campaign cycle. The analysis confirmed the hypothesis that “that pro-Obama groups would be more active than the pro-McCain groups,” as evidenced by a higher number of posts in the pro-Obama groups compared to the pro-McCain groups.²⁷ Clearly, social media use, if done right, can actually result in more than just slacktivism. The research of this paper will also examine the role that groups can play as well as apply a content analysis of campaign Facebook pages.

²⁴ Noueihed and Warren 2012, 53, 53, 55, 55

²⁵ Dalton 2008, 86

²⁶ Fernandes et al. 2010, 654

²⁷ Ibid 664

Strategies for Successful Campaigns

Besides measures of successful internet campaigns and the ability of social media to engage young voters, there is the question of what exactly the strategy of a social media campaign should be. Research in this regard has identified ways in which one could put together a comparatively strong campaign using SNS's. An analysis of Tea Party supporters commenting on Facebook pages of identified Tea Party candidates in 2010 found that they were successful in using Facebook to create a sense of identity, as "The supporters saw themselves as participants in a new political group; consequently, it was imperative to establish an online identity that could withstand outside pressure."²⁸ Evidently, this is emphasized by the fact that "Although the candidates ran as Republicans, they consistently stressed their Tea Party credentials. As such, we argue that the candidates we chose exemplified the prototypical Tea Party politician both in their respective platforms and overall campaign tone."²⁹ In other words, the candidates became reflections of the new identity that was forged by Tea Party supporters on Facebook. If a social media campaign has no concrete goal, such as creating an identity for the group, then it has a major flaw. This will become apparent in the analysis of the campaigns highlighted in this paper.

In a comprehensive review of the use of Twitter in campaigns, which included interviews, survey data, case studies, and particularly a content analysis of user data, researchers identified a number of weaknesses in certain campaign strategies that involve SNS's. In the analysis, it was not uncommon for campaigns to focus more on posting personal content than other inherently political content such as direct action, fundraising, or policy discussions.³⁰ Twitter, also, was considered "not very likely to be used by resource-strapped campaigns, therefore, unlikely to

²⁸ Morin and Flynn 2014, 127

²⁹ Ibid 120

³⁰ Jungherr 2016, 76

significantly change power-relationship between parties or candidates.”³¹ Moreover, candidates were not using Twitter to “enable interactive dialogue between candidates and citizens or increase transparency” and only saw it as “an informal barometer for public opinion.”³² In other words, candidates historically have not used Twitter in a particularly aggressive manner. It was also held that “Twitter offers access to a data type that is representative for data collected by other online services such as Google or Facebook ... Thus, research using digital trace data on political behavior on Twitter might not only speak to Twitter, but also ... in general.”³³ This research will examine the Facebook pages of candidates who could be reasonably defined as “resource-strapped” insurgent campaigns.

Another major point that is discussed across all areas of campaigning, including traditional outlets, is the topic of negative advertising. Research on this topic, typically provided by survey respondents on various forms of political communication and advertising, has shown that voters typically do not respond well to negative advertising and that “Negativity as an advertising strategy rarely boosts vote totals or influences evaluations of the attacking candidate.”³⁴ This is not to say that negative ads should never be used, but rather that they are far less effective than perhaps calls to direct action or policy discussions. Negativity is one of the main measures that will be used in this paper as one variety of a post that can be made on a SNS, Facebook in this case. Effectiveness of negative posts will be measured against positive and issue-based posts by their popularity on Facebook, as a way of determining if these posts were an effective strategy for the two social media campaigns in question.

³¹ Ibid 84

³² Ibid

³³ Ibid 81

³⁴ Bratu 2013, 151

While likes are one indicator of the strength of a social media campaign, other research has noted that “Reply counts are ... a useful indicator of the value of or interest in that topic.”³⁵ Researchers coded the root, or primary, content of randomly selected posts and analyzed them alongside the number of replies to the post as a way of measuring which types of content that were better at generating discussions. Researchers had analyzed “more than 16,000 authors in 6 months from 20 political newsgroups.”³⁶ Himelboim looked into which types of posts are best at increasing online political discussions. Interestingly, the research found that “Of these root messages [with many replies], 95.4 per cent (310 messages) included imported content from sources on the World Wide Web as pasted raw articles or URLs and 4.6 percent (15 messages) included only original content.”³⁷ Although one could easily assume that campaigns that put work into creating original content would be more interactive, posts with exclusively original content were less likely to encourage online discussions than simply sharing outside sources. This will be put to the test in a content analysis of the Bronx campaigns in this study. Nevertheless, this provides an important and interesting, yet counterintuitive look into what types of posts foster interactive discussions for candidates who are running for office.

Previous research on social media in general as well as specific functions of social media will be major guiding points to this study. The ability for campaigns to use SNS’s that were used successfully during the Arab Spring cannot be undervalued to insurgent campaigns with limited money and resources. Moreover, different strategies that have been studied on SNS’s over time could serve as useful tools on how to measure a campaign’s effectiveness on social media. The

³⁵ Himelboim et al 2009, 772

³⁶ Ibid 776

³⁷ Ibid 783

methods provided by previous research will be useful in this case study of local elections in the Bronx. By extension, this will begin to fill the gap in research regarding local politics, an aspect of political life that is routinely ignored respective to big, national movements. There are signs that social media could be a key change in how campaigns are organized both at the local and national levels. News outlets have already noticed a switch to social media. In a *New York Times* article which, in part, covered one of the races in this study, the writer noted that “challengers’ victories boosted the emerging progressive narrative that the old political model — buying expensive television ads, cozying up to real estate, corralling union support — had been displaced by vigorous grass-roots organizing.”³⁸

Additionally, the article noted that while Alessandra Biaggi, the challenger, was vastly outspent by the incumbent Senator Klein, she had spent far more on social media advertisements, as was true for other challengers as well. At the national level, political action committees are already looking into using social media more aggressively. Guy Cecil, chair of the influential Priorities USA super PAC, recently said in an interview that “We will not operate off of a television-first strategy ... We’re going to identify our targeted voters and we’re going to develop a paid media program that reaches them, whether it’s television or digital.”³⁹ Clearly, social media use in political campaigns will continue to be put to the test at every level of government. In the Bronx, voters can already see whether the effects of a strong social media campaign are there, and the implications for this shift in strategy could be vast.

³⁸ Wang 2018

³⁹ Cadelago 2019

CHAPTER 2: JOHN DOYLE'S 2017 CITY COUNCIL CAMPAIGN

As mentioned in the introduction, this paper will consist of a case study in overlapping districts in the Bronx with a focus on identified insurgent candidates in each race. The research in this chapter will be informed by a content analysis of John Doyle's campaign Facebook page, as well as his campaign finance expenditures, the election results, an interview with the candidate himself and a volunteer, and my own firsthand knowledge of the race having lived in the district and closely followed the race, particularly in the months leading up to the primary election. The content analysis will record the types of posts that were made in the two months before the primary and the different types of interactions (likes, comments, and shares) generated by each post. The campaign finance information and election results were obtained respectively through the New York City Campaign Finance Board and the New York City Board of Elections. Through all of these measures, I will be able not only to establish Doyle as an insurgent candidate as defined in the introduction but also get a sense of how aggressive his social media campaign was. These findings especially will be of importance when compared to the findings of a similar look into the Alessandra Biaggi campaign for the State Senate in Chapter 3.

Background of the Campaign

The district in question is the 13th New York City Council District. Almost all of this district is comprised of the 80th and 82nd New York State Assembly Districts (AD's). AD 80 primarily consists of the areas of Morris Park, Pelham Parkway, and Allerton, while AD 82 includes the neighborhoods of Pelham Bay, Throggs Neck, Country Club, and City Island. The district is historically white but trending less so in recent years and, according to Doyle, is the second oldest

district in New York City, in terms of people over the age of 51.⁴⁰ There were five candidates on the ballot in the Democratic primary election. In order of election night results, they were Mark Gjonaj, Marjorie Velazquez-Lynch, John Doyle, Victor Ortiz, and Egidio Sementilli. The former three candidates functioned as the major candidates in the race. Gjonaj, known for his Albanian heritage and his ties to the real estate industry was the State Assembly member for AD 80 at the time of the race and was the choice of the Bronx Democratic County Committee (BDCC). Velazquez was a Democratic District Leader who was endorsed by outgoing Council Member James Vacca. Doyle was a former state senate staffer who was working at Jacobi Medical Center during the race and was most known for his advocacy on City Island where he lives. Two other candidates, John Marano and Alex Gomez, were in the race but dropped out and were removed from the ballot respectively. Marano endorsed Gjonaj and Gomez ran on an independent line.

Candidate	Votes	Pct.
Mark Gjonaj	3,503	39%
Marjorie Velazquez	3,113	34%
John C. Doyle	1,728	19%
Victor R. Ortiz	481	5%
Egidio Sementilli	270	3%
TOTAL	9,095	100%

Table 1. Election results⁴¹

To reiterate, I defined an insurgent candidate as a relatively underfunded candidate who is running against either an incumbent or another candidate with near-incumbent status. Mark Gjonaj, although not the incumbent council member, was an elected member of the State Assembly and was endorsed by the BDCC, making him a candidate with near-incumbent status. Velazquez could have fit the definition of an insurgent candidate, however, she was endorsed by the outgoing council member, so this meant that Doyle better fit the definition, given his distance from the party

⁴⁰ Doyle Interview 2019

⁴¹ New York City Board of Elections 2017

machine. Additionally, Doyle was vastly outspent by Velazquez and especially by Gjonaj. Therefore, it is evident that of all the candidates, Doyle is best defined as the main insurgent candidate in this race. In addition, a significant portion of Doyle’s campaign funds were raised by small donations originating within the district. “He had the most or second most small dollar donations of any candidate in the city. Number one for the district and number two for the city,” said Steve Swieciki, a volunteer for the Doyle campaign.⁴² Such a distinction further establishes Doyle as an insurgent candidate because it separates him from the big money that dominated Gjonaj’s campaign fundraising.

Candidate	Expenditures
Mark Gjonaj ⁴³	\$1,355,199.05
Marjorie Velazquez ⁴⁴	\$259,212.93
John C. Doyle ⁴⁵	\$189,878.13

Table 2. Expenditures of major candidates. Doyle spent the fewest dollars of the three.

Having established the result of the election and the wide gap in campaign funding between Doyle and Gjonaj, the next step is to look into what role social media played in this race, if it played one at all.

Doyle’s Advertising Strategy

It should be said from the very beginning that Doyle’s social media campaign, compared to the insurgent campaigns of Biaggi and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, was very small and likely not a major component of his campaign structure. “Only a year later I look at the good stuff Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Alessandra Biaggi was (sic) able to accomplish and ... mine now looks like the

⁴² Swieciki Interview 2019

⁴³ New York City Campaign Finance Board, 2017. (Mark Gjonaj)

⁴⁴ New York City Campaign Finance Board, 2017 “Financial Summary.” (Marjorie Velazquez)

⁴⁵ New York City Campaign Finance Board, 2017. (John C. Doyle)

early stages,” Doyle said. “They were so much more advanced. I think that was great.”⁴⁶ Although Doyle’s social media strategies were not as aggressive as Biaggi or Ocasio, it was still the most active social media campaign of all the major candidates in that race. Doyle said that Marjorie Velazquez had told him after the end of the campaign that he “had the best social media platform of any of them, and she wanted to hire that person [who ran Doyle’s social media] - it was me so that didn’t really work out.”⁴⁷ Doyle’s social media campaign was largely run by him with relatively little involvement from his campaign staff. We will see later that this is something that distinguished him from the Biaggi campaign.

However, by most measures, Doyle ran a very traditional campaign. Unlike the insurgents that came after him, his most important sources of advertising were mailers and canvassers, not social media. “We had Berlin Rosen, widely considered the best direct mail firm in the City of New York,” Doyle said.⁴⁸ Payments to Berlin Rosen were a big portion of Doyle’s overall spending.

Berlin Rosen, LTD	\$ 64,319.83
Facebook ads	\$ 130.40

Table 3. Doyle’s payments to Berlin Rosen, a progressive firm that offers a mailer service, compared to spending on Facebook ads.⁴⁹

Spending on mailers can function as a microcosm for the role that money plays in elections. While Doyle spent \$64,319.83 on mailers, Gjonaj spent \$111,627.10, which went to several groups like Advance Group, Hamilton Campaign Network, Mission Control, and Power Play Strategies.⁵⁰ Gjonaj didn’t spend any money on Facebook ads, but given how little Doyle spent on digital ads

⁴⁶ Doyle Interview 2019

⁴⁷ Ibid

⁴⁸ Ibid

⁴⁹ New York City Campaign Finance Board. 2017. (John C. Doyle)

⁵⁰ New York City Campaign Finance Board. 2017. (Mark Gjonaj)

anyways and how large the discrepancy was between the two candidates on mailers, it is easy to see how money can be such an important factor in a local election, particularly when candidates are running traditional campaigns. Additionally, social media provides easy-to-use tools on how to examine the success of an action such as an online post. The technology of social media allows candidates and users access to indicators that can determine the effectiveness of a post that something like mailers cannot do. Although Doyle's name recognition in neighborhoods did go up after mailers were sent to homes in those neighborhoods,⁵¹ social media provides far more comprehensive data.

Looking at the specifics of Doyle's Facebook page will give some insight into how aggressive his campaign was in this regard. In the two months that preceded the primary election (June 13 – September 12), Doyle made 346 posts on his Facebook page.⁵² This does not include posts that were posted multiple times, such as photo albums that were reposted every time they were updated. For each of these posts, I recorded the date posted, the number of interactions (likes, comments, and shares), and categorized them into a variety of subsets, notably "Issue," "Anti-Gjonaj," and "Trail/Event." The latter category is defined as posts that do not focus on any specific issue or action. They primarily show images or videos of the candidate knocking on doors on the campaign trail or speaking with voters at local events. There are other types of posts such as volunteer recruitment, get-out-the-vote posts, and miscellaneous posts that do not fall perfectly into the other major categories, but these posts had very few occurrences, so this chapter will focus on the aforementioned categories.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, different posts had different levels of engagement. Notably, issue-based posts and negative posts on Gjonaj were much more engaging than trail/event posts.

⁵¹ Doyle Interview 2019

⁵² Facebook 2017

According to Doyle, issue-based posts, on topics such as campaign finance reform, opioid crisis, overdevelopment, transportation, and the environment had much higher levels of engagement than the average post. If we examine the issue posts, anti-Gjonaj posts, and trail/event posts side by side, it is evident that Doyle was right that these issue-based posts did better on average in terms of engagement. However, it might also be proper to look at anti-Gjonaj posts and issue posts together, according to Doyle, because the negative posts about Gjonaj discussed his record on the issues and how his actions as a legislator and as a person who is involved in the real estate industry can affect his job in the City Council. “If we just ignore [Gjonaj’s record] and don’t tell that story, we’re doing a disservice to the average voter,” Doyle said. “The lines are there, the relationships are there, the money is there, [and] the associations are there, so we always tried to get it out there.”⁵³

Type	Reactions	Comments	Shares	Interactions	Count
Anti-Gjonaj	15.1	2.1	6.43	23.62	21
Issue	11.36	0.63	6.49	18.47	59
<i>Issue+AntiGjonaj</i>	<i>12.34</i>	<i>1.01</i>	<i>6.48</i>	<i>19.83</i>	<i>80</i>
Trail/Event	9.32	0.35	0.85	10.52	204
All	10.28	0.49	2.71	13.49	346

Table 4. Types of posts on Doyle’s Facebook page, along with average interactions and count for each type of post.⁵⁴

By every measure, particularly shares, issue posts and anti-Gjonaj posts far exceeded those of the campaign trail posts. However, a closer look at the number will reveal a key weakness within the social media campaign. Of the 346 posts made in the two months before the primary election, only 80 could be argued to be on the issues, if one includes anti-Gjonaj posts in that category. However, 204 of those posts were general, unengaging posts of the campaign trail. From these numbers, it is evident that campaigns ought to focus more on issue-based posts and less on general campaign trail photos. These findings could contradict the idea that negative advertising does not

⁵³ Doyle Interview 2019

⁵⁴ Facebook 2017

improve voters' opinions of the attacking candidate,⁵⁵ but a lot of the negative advertising directed at Gjonaj was engaging with people who already had a good opinion of Doyle, including negative posts that came from other campaigns like that of Marjorie Velazquez. “[There was] a little [bit of digital advertising] for Marjorie,” Doyle said. “But it was mostly just negative stuff on Gjonaj which people - my supporters - all thought was great.”⁵⁶ This is not to suggest that Doyle did not run an issue-based campaign. The truth is the exact opposite, his campaign had multiple detailed stances on real estate development, the environment, ethics, opioid addiction, and others. The argument here is merely that Doyle’s social media tools probably were not used to the fullest of their potential, as he opted instead for a more traditional approach.

While Doyle did not have an advanced social media campaign similar to the ones that came after him, one of the primary purposes of his social media was to amplify third party news sources. “I knew that we were going to get a lot of earned media coverage,” Doyle said. “I probably had the most earned media of any of the candidates in that race ... I was involved in the community, I was doing things, and I was getting free media coverage.”⁵⁷ Doyle said that media coverage from independent sources was an important aspect of the campaign to amplify. “That objective, independent coverage could be amplified on social media because it wasn't just me saying something,” Doyle said. “It's not John Doyle saying [Gjonaj] is taking money from gun runners. It's the New York Post.”⁵⁸ Outside of this strategy to promote aspects of the campaign, there were few concrete strategies not only in terms of advertising but also in terms of organizing. This is particularly true in the case of a Facebook group that was formed by volunteers.

⁵⁵ Bratu 2013, 151

⁵⁶ Doyle Interview 2019

⁵⁷ Ibid

⁵⁸ Ibid

A Facebook group was formed during the campaign which functioned originally as a forum for supporters of Doyle to talk about the campaign. The group was formed in part by Steve Swieciki, a supporter of Doyle, and “was entirely volunteer based.”⁵⁹ In other words, the group was not a formally coordinated effort by the campaign. This was done in response to the fact that other Facebook discussion groups were very restrictive in the content that people were allowed to post, and ultimately, decisions made by those groups’ admins became very biased towards certain candidates. However, Swieciki’s group ultimately became a haven for supporters of all candidates to talk about the campaign. The important thing to note is that this group, like other aspects of the social media campaign, was not used very much for organizing, and instead had become “an echo chamber” with people largely just posting talking points with whatever campaign they were supporting.⁶⁰ A structure for organizing volunteers and supporters toward action was not present in the Facebook group or even in the general campaign. “We didn't use it for organizing at the time,” Doyle said.⁶¹ This distinction will also ultimately separate this aspect of Doyle’s social media campaign with that of Biaggi.

The Campaign in Hindsight

Having established that Doyle’s social media campaign was not particularly aggressive in its approach to digital advertising, it is important to establish things that future campaigns ought to look at to ensure that social media is used to the best of its potential. In my interview with him, Doyle described a number of things that campaigns should do if they plan to have a strong digital presence. Looking back on his campaign in hindsight, Doyle said:

⁵⁹ Swieciki Interview 2019

⁶⁰ Doyle Interview 2019

⁶¹ Ibid

Hindsight is always 2020, but I think now looking back, we spent a good deal of our budget on direct mail ... But looking back now, Ocasio and Biaggi just really turned it on on social media and online advertising in a way that we never really did. We did like very preliminary stuff ... Maybe it could have been closer had I went that route because I didn't see anything really Mark Gjonaj was doing in terms of online advertising.⁶²

Obviously, it is impossible to know exactly what would have made the difference in Doyle's primary run, and it would be disingenuous to suggest that if he had only had a stronger social media presence that he would have won. However, in this quote, Doyle keeps open the possibility that the results at the very least could have been closer with a social media strategy similar to the one that Biaggi used in her 2018 primary.

Furthermore, Doyle said there are other ways in which future campaigns can and did organize their social media campaigns to some success. For example, it was established before that most of Doyle's social media work was done by himself. Campaigns need to seriously consider having a staff person designated to organizing a candidate's social media profiles in the future in order to have a strong social media campaign. "I didn't [have a social media staff] in 2017," Doyle said. "But I think 2018 onward proved that you absolutely need someone."⁶³ The data also indicates that social media campaigns ought to focus on providing issue-based content that is engaging with users, rather than filler content, such as pictures from the campaign trail. Additionally, particularly for insurgent campaigns, social media should be considered as a money-saving tool in a battleground where mailers and television ads can prove to be quite expensive. On social media's potential as a cost-effective tool, Doyle said:

⁶² Doyle Interview 2019

⁶³ Ibid

The more we can do to negate the influence of big money so you don't have to spend a lot of money on these mail pieces, so you don't have to spend a lot of money on these newspaper ads, you don't have to spend a lot of money with people who are just - you know, I don't blame them; they're looking for a paycheck - going door to door who have no real ties or investment in the district, that's positive.⁶⁴

Doyle also noted its effectiveness not just at saving costs but just in general as an advertising strategy. “I think it's positive that people are more engaged, and that turnout is going up, particularly amongst young people,” Doyle said. “I think social media has played a big part in that.”⁶⁵ There are other things about future campaigns that Doyle, having followed the 2018 election cycle, said were important aspects of these campaigns. “We see the benefit of an army of supporters,” Doyle said. “I think the DSA [for Ocasio] and the NoIDC movement [for Biaggi], perhaps because they had no money, really invested in those things that were nontraditional campaigns. But, you know, before something is traditional, it's not traditional.”⁶⁶ Additionally, there were strategic moves that should have been made during the campaign as well, such as doing “more with social media in Gjonaj's district.”⁶⁷

Evidently, social media did not play a major role in the 2017 primary based on the analysis of Doyle's Facebook activities. Even Doyle, who had the strongest social media campaign of the three major candidates in the race, did not have a social media presence that was anywhere close to the ones that followed him in 2018, and all other city council campaigns for that district that year paled in comparison as well. “I don't think that social media in that particular race made that

⁶⁴ Doyle Interview 2019

⁶⁵ Ibid

⁶⁶ Ibid

⁶⁷ Ibid

much of a difference one way or another,” Swieciki said.⁶⁸ Adding to that, Doyle said, “I think we were more active on social media, but I agree with you that it wasn't a determining factor in the campaign.”⁶⁹ Having outlined the social media aspect of an otherwise traditional campaign, the next step is to do the same with a campaign that came afterwards, particularly Biaggi’s campaign for the State Senate in 2018. “I’m actually very interested to see what sort of model Gjonaj runs in 2021 should he run again,” Doyle said. “Because the model that he was using - the Jeff Klein model - failed spectacularly in 2018.”⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Swieciki Interview 2019

⁶⁹ Doyle Interview 2019

⁷⁰ Ibid

CHAPTER 3: ALESSANDRA BIAGGI'S 2018 STATE SENATE CAMPAIGN

The very next year, 2018, was a very big year for insurgent Democrats in the Bronx. Local activist Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez won her primary against incumbent Congressman Joe Crowley in a surprise upset, despite being vastly outspent. Ocasio's victory also propelled her to local, state, and national attention as a grassroots powerhouse. As such, she began to align herself with other local candidates who had agendas similar to hers. One of them was Alessandra Biaggi, a former staffer for Andrew Cuomo who challenged state senator Jeff Klein, the leader of the Independent Democratic Conference (IDC), a group of senate Democrats that aligned themselves with the Republican Party. The following analysis of Biaggi's campaign, which took place in the 34th senate district (SD34), will be similar to the structure of the analysis of Doyle's campaign for the New York City Council in Chapter 2. It will entail information from the State Board of Elections and the State Campaign Finance Board, which recorded expenditures for the candidates in the race. It will also include an interview with the director of Biaggi's social media and a content analysis of Biaggi's Facebook page.

Background of the Campaign

The demographics of SD34 are similar to those of CCD13. SD34 consists of all the same neighborhoods as CCD13 in addition to Riverdale and parts of southern Westchester County. While the overlapping districts were demographically similar, there was a key difference in this race: only two candidates. The 2017 race had only the incumbent Klein and the challenger Biaggi. There were no minor candidates in the race. The election night totals were as follows:

Candidate	Votes	Pct.
Biaggi	19,318	54.25%
Klein	16,290	45.75%
TOTAL	35,608	100%

Table 5. Election Results⁷¹

While 2018 was a different year than 2017, it would seem that it would be a repeat in one particular way. Mark Gjonaj, a longtime ally of Jeff Klein and winner of the 2017 CCD13 election, endorsed Klein. John Doyle, Gjonaj's challenger and a former staffer for Jeff Klein, endorsed Biaggi. While it would be incorrect to characterize the 2018 election as a proxy war between two former candidates, it is still interesting how remnants of the 2017 race leaked into another big race the following year in a similar district. Also similar to the 2017 race was the obvious difference in spending between the candidates.

Candidate	Expenditures
Biaggi ⁷²	\$ 408,562.15
Klein ⁷³	\$ 3,221,801.80

Table 6. Expenditures of the two candidates

One quick look at these numbers would easily confirm Biaggi as fitting the definition of an insurgent candidate. She was challenging an incumbent and was vastly outspent, easily establishing her as an insurgent. Additionally, while Biaggi was endorsed by a few local Democratic Party clubs, those endorsements still paled in comparison to the establishment support that Klein received from multiple elected officials and party leaders, not just Gjonaj.

Biaggi's Advertising Strategy

It was mentioned in Chapter 2 that CCD13 was the second oldest district in the City Council. However, Christian Amato, former Director of Digital Strategy for Alessandra Biaggi,

⁷¹ New York State Board of Elections 2018

⁷² New York State Campaign Finance Board 2018 (Biaggi)

⁷³ New York State Campaign Finance Board 2018 (Klein)

said that there is more to the demographics of the area than one would think, and the demographics actually made a great case for an aggressive social media campaign in SD34. To this point Amato said that:

It's all about demographics, right? ... Based on the demographics of our district, I think *a lot of people really thought that direct mail is the safe, conventional way to go*. Not every person voting is on social media. And what we found was that actually, we had an immense strength through social media because of the fact that *our district is skewing younger and younger*. And more younger voters were paying attention [emphasis added].⁷⁴

In other words, while the districts did have significant older populations, Amato and others in the campaign had noticed that despite this, the trend in the area was younger.

The differences between the two campaigns are highlighted in where their money was going. Biaggi's campaign spent \$13,649.04 on Facebook ads alone. This does not include spending on Twitter ads since this paper is focusing on Facebook pages. Jeff Klein did not spend any money on Facebook or Twitter advertisements. "We invested in ad buys ... you know Facebook ads and whatnot, Twitter promotions, and Instagram promotions. It's definitely more affordable and achievable than direct mail in many ways. It's quicker," Amato said. Biaggi and Klein each did spend money on traditional media groups. Klein purchased the services of organizations like the Hamilton Campaign Network (a group that worked with Gjonaj's campaign), the Albanian Media Group, the Bronx Design Group, and others, totaling \$428,786.41 in mail services.⁷⁵ Biaggi's primary source of campaign mail spending was \$189,374.81, most of which went to a single group

⁷⁴ Amato Interview 2019

⁷⁵ New York State Campaign Finance Board 2018 (Klein)

called Mark Guma Communications.⁷⁶ While Biaggi did spend a significant portion of her budget on mail related expenses, the amount she spent on social media far exceeded that of every candidate across both of these races. Digital spending in this race was but one way in which Biaggi outperformed her opponents.

Biaggi’s social media had a very organized and very targeted purpose, according to Amato. While social media was used for a variety of things, such as recruiting volunteers and advertising events, “The number one tenet of our social media was ‘what is our narrative?’ and does everything link back to that?”⁷⁷ The narrative that Biaggi and her team created was one of a candidate who is deeply invested in the community and looking for ways to make specific changes that would improve the quality of life of residents. “Anything that talked about Alessandra being in the community did it,” Amato said. “Anything that was about what she was fighting for and what she was up against did it, but the biggest things that really worked were showcasing her making an effort to learn about the community.”⁷⁸

Type	Reactions	Comments	Shares	Interactions	Count
Issues	234.22	10.93	44.90	290.05	41
Anti-Klein	207.57	26.86	60.00	294.43	7
<i>Issues+AntiKlein</i>	<i>230.33</i>	<i>13.25</i>	<i>47.10</i>	<i>290.69</i>	<i>48</i>
Trail/Event	159.74	5.63	10.06	175.43	35
All	191.41	8.95	23.70	224.06	143

Table 7. Types of posts on Biaggi's Facebook page, along with average interactions and count for each type of post.⁷⁹

The topic of “what she was fighting for” was clearly a major part of Biaggi’s social media campaign. While Biaggi’s Facebook page only posted 143 times in the two months before the primary, 48 of those posts could be considered to be on the issues, negative posts included. That is more than her number of posts that simply showed her at an event or on the campaign trail with

⁷⁶ New York State Campaign Finance Board 2018 (Biaggi)

⁷⁷ Amato Interview 2019

⁷⁸ Ibid

⁷⁹ Facebook 2018

no mention of major issues. From a numbers standpoint, this was the right move given that issue-based posts generated more interactions across the board than those listed as “Trail/Event” posts. Also of note was how little of her social media capital was used on negative posting. Only seven of the posts over the examined time period made any mention of her opponent’s campaign. Although negative posts were not anywhere close to being a major part of Biaggi’s social media campaign, they did occasionally function as a way of educating voters through fact-driven discourse. “When we do a negative post, it wasn't a dig or anything. It was all fact driven. And so it worked because we were putting out the facts. And one thing that we always strived for was it's always fact-based,” Amato said while maintaining that the campaign “never would smear” Klein or his campaign.⁸⁰

Somewhat tied into this point is how the Biaggi did a good job of amplifying support from other organizations. The campaign posted a number of endorsements from issue-based organizations such as the National Organization for Women, Planned Parenthood, and the Sierra Club.⁸¹ Endorsements ended up becoming one of the most important means of discussing Biaggi’s platform on the issues. “If we were able to facilitate an endorsement, we used that as an opportunity to educate on why we got that endorsement,” Amato said. “There were plenty of posts that were centered on a topic and centered on illuminating her stance on an issue. And then as we got closer to the campaign (sic), we then really made it a priority to create assets and content around her issue-based agenda too.”⁸² Since issue-based posts were relatively more interactive than other posts on Facebook, using endorsements as a means of educating voters would turn out to be a smart move on the part of the Biaggi campaign.

⁸⁰ Amato Interview 2019

⁸¹ Facebook 2018

⁸² Op-Cit.

Amplifying support from outside groups helped the campaign in other ways as well. One of the most significant groups involved in this race was the NoIDC movement, a group of Democrats who were fed up with Klein and other IDC members giving control of the senate to Republicans. “There was a yearlong education campaign before Alessandra even announced. Before she even made a decision, there were activists in Riverdale and Pelham Bay who were going out and making sure people knew what was happening,” Amato said.⁸³ Having a wide variety of grassroots organizations backing the Biaggi campaign proved to have great, positive implications on social media. NoIDC was doing things on social media that “helped elevate us and things that we were able to share as well or respond to,” Amato said. “And there were other groups like Creative Resistance and Collective Agency who worked with us to create some subsidiary content that we could share - some online video and whatnot - that gave us content to utilize.”⁸⁴ In this circumstance social media allowed allies of local campaigns a means of coordinating efforts among the groups and efficiently producing sharable, interactive content.

Similarly, the campaign also took advantage of access to other points of contact such as Facebook groups. A volunteer created Facebook group emerged during the campaign which functioned in some ways as an organizing hub for volunteers and the campaign. The creation of this group provided another avenue to recruit volunteers, spread information, and expand other general aspects of the campaign. “If we posted something on social media that was like recruitment based, we needed also to work in tandem with an email or posts across everything in every Facebook group ... we learned what every community Facebook page was and worked on them,” Amato said of these groups.⁸⁵ Social media clearly has many different outlets that can give resource

⁸³ Amato Interview 2019

⁸⁴ Ibid

⁸⁵ Ibid

strapped campaigns the tools they need to organize, whether that is cheap digital ads that can reach a high number of people, a platform to talk about the issues, and a central way to organize actions among organizations that want to work with the campaign in question. The Biaggi campaign took advantage of every one of these routes and used them to the fullest of their potential in ways that many local campaigns before them didn't do. "What was unconventional was how uniquely focused the voice of the account was, which is what made us win in a lot of ways," Amato said.⁸⁶

The Campaign in Hindsight

Biaggi's campaign was structured in a way that it could dominate and succeed in the digital sphere. One important part of their campaign was the fact that for a while, Amato served chiefly as a staff member charged with running Biaggi's digital campaign, something that could now define a serious campaign. "You need someone who's got a keen eye on stagecraft and advertising and storytelling. Social media will become more and more and more and more important, and politics is becoming more and more of a game that is played on social media," Amato said. "Having someone who can help with that social strategy and think about it on a deeper level becomes really helpful," especially during a time where candidates might not have the time to organize an aggressive social media campaign themselves when they are dealing with so many other aspects of campaigning.⁸⁷ According to Amato, Biaggi was directly responsible for around 25 percent of the posts that were on social media.

Once again, it would be impossible to say how the race would have turned out if Biaggi had opted for a more traditional approach to campaigning rather than embracing a digital approach. Certainly, the campaign's analysis of the demographics justified the use of social media after

⁸⁶ Amato Interview 2019

⁸⁷ Ibid

concluding that the district was trending younger. However, Amato said that the election likely “would have been tighter” had they gone a different route but maintained that Biaggi ultimately won because she was the better candidate. “We managed to touch people, connect to a movement that was already growing,” Amato said. “So because of that, yeah we probably would have won, but it would have been much tighter.”⁸⁸

⁸⁸ Amato Interview 2019

CHAPTER 4: ANALYSIS, LIMITATIONS, AND FURTHER RESEARCH

Based on the details discussed in previous chapters, it is evident that social media can be an effective organizing tool for insurgent campaigns that lack the financial and political backing the typically support incumbent or establishment candidates. Based on the organizations of the Doyle and Biaggi campaigns, future insurgents might have little choice but to embrace social media as an essential source of advertising and organizing. As far as spending is concerned, both candidates spent heavily on campaign mail as an important source of advertising, but Biaggi spent more on digital advertisement (such as Facebook) than anyone else in either race. Because social media advertisements are far cheaper and easier to make and use than traditional campaign mailers, it is a very cost-effective strategy, making it an ideal tool for resource-strapped insurgents.

Moreover, it is evident that an effective social media strategy must prioritize issues that effect the communities that candidates wish to represent. While Biaggi's Facebook page recorded fewer overall posts during the two months before her primary than Doyle's, her posts were targeted, interactive, and issue-based. While Doyle made far more posts during a similar period, his posts were largely filler content of the campaign trail. Additionally, Doyle earned a fair number of endorsements during his campaign, but Biaggi used her endorsements as a platform to talk about the issues and created content that was specifically designed for elaborating her platform on women's rights, the environment, and other issues. Clearly, the sheer number of posts does not ultimately determine what makes an aggressive social media campaign. Much of this content was created by allied organizations, another way in which Biaggi took advantage of endorsements using social media. Virtually all of Doyle's social media was run by himself, despite having a full staff and a sizeable number of endorsements. According to Amato, Biaggi's staff was responsible

for roughly three-fourths of her online campaign.⁸⁹ As a result, Biaggi generated far more interactions during the two months before her primary than Doyle did. This particular aspect has great importance for campaigns in the future. Both Doyle and Amato agreed that serious campaigns will need someone on their staff that are capable of using social media to the candidate's advantage.

Doyle noted the Biaggi campaign's adeptness at using social media to their advantage, as well as the benefit of an "army of supporters," as Doyle put it:

For Alexandria [Ocasio-Cortez], it was the DSA ... For Alessandra Biaggi, I think when the story is told about the NoIDC movement, it's how coordinated the effort was throughout NYC and how basically they were just really, really able - they were putting out several tweets a day, they were fighting with Klein's staffers, like the amount of effort these people ... diverted Klein from the message he wanted to give was phenomenal.⁹⁰

However, Amato noted that in specific cases, such as Ocasio-Cortez's victory over Joe Crowley, a staff member specifically designated to work on social media might not even be necessary. "Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez runs her own social. She's very good at it. And she does it all on her own," he said. "She has a media acumen that not many people possess, and she sort of exhibits a control over it because she wants to control her narrative."⁹¹ In other words, every campaign needs someone who knows how to use social media to advance their agenda. Ocasio was able to do so herself. Doyle largely did not use it. Biaggi did after hiring staffers that knew how to use it.

⁸⁹ Amato Interview 2019

⁹⁰ Doyle Interview 2019

⁹¹ Amato Interview 2019

Elaborating on his idea of an “army of supporters,” Doyle also referred to the grassroots – the candidate’s base of supporters. “I think whoever runs now really needs like 20 or 30 people sharing regularly your message on social media, not just a like. I’m talking comments, I’m talking blast outs, I’m talking linking you up with other people,” he said.⁹² Doyle, though he did not focus on social media during his run in 2017, is indeed aware of its usefulness as an organizing tool, which is why he indicated that it will be an important asset to campaigns moving forward. For Amato, the important idea behind a social media campaign must be the narrative that one wishes to create about the candidate, which depends on what the issues are and the demographics. Social media cannot simply be seen as some kind of formula, with strategies that can be used interchangeably between different campaigns. On the 2017 City Council race, Amato said:

No one was really adept at their social media. No one knew how to use it. And I can predict that in the next City Council race, it's going to be mimicry. It's not going to be true narrative. It's going to be “Well, Ocasio did this and Biaggi did this. Let's just do that. Let's use a lot of emojis.” That's not the key. The key is having a firm understanding of who you are, what your 'why' is, what your narrative is, and finding and finding a way to always connect to that. That reinforces the message.⁹³

Ultimately, a social media campaign needs to have a comprehensive strategy if it is going to be used as an effective campaign organizing tool. “Social media isn't mimicry,” Amato said. “Social media is ad strategy, and you have to have the heart and mind of a storyteller in order for it to be effective for your campaign. It's more human than actual advertising.”⁹⁴ In this particular regard, Biaggi succeeded immensely. Their first success came from noticing that the district was trending

⁹² Doyle Interview 2019

⁹³ Amato Interview 2019

⁹⁴ Ibid

younger, which supported the idea to delve into online advertising than traditional advertising. As noted in chapter 1, previous research has shown that online campaigning can have a positive impact on youth voter engagement.⁹⁵ This vastly helps insurgents in youth-trending districts where incumbents might benefit from lower turnout.

Additionally, the results of this study show that social media should make up a higher degree of campaign spending than it has in previous years. This should not be too much of a problem for insurgent campaigns because digital advertising is incredibly cheap, as noted by Amato and from the campaign finance reports released by candidates for public office. Lastly, above all else, effective insurgents will use social media as a means of sharing how they will address the issues of their potential constituents. Therefore, it will be of little use to perennial candidates or candidates that do not have real solutions to problems. “If you're not advocating for the right thing, it's not going to be as effective,” Amato said. “You're casting a net and hoping you're going to pick people up each time and your net is only as strong as the message you're trying to impart so to speak.”⁹⁶

Limitations and Further Research

The importance of this thesis is to begin to fill the gap in research of politics at the local level. As this thesis was a case study of two elections across one general area, there are many avenues for further research to develop more results on how social media effects insurgents in local elections. One of which is to analyze social media campaigns in races for statewide legislative chambers where a number of insurgents are challenging incumbent and establishment candidates. Another limitation on this thesis is the time frame, which studies two races in the same general

⁹⁵ Ahmad and Sheikh 2013; Fernandes, et al 2010; etc.

⁹⁶ Amato Interview 2019

area over two years, 2017 and 2018. These races were chosen due to being the most practical ones to study in the Bronx. SD34 was the only Bronx district that had an insurgent, and all insurgent City Council races in the Bronx in 2017 had the similar characteristics, notably low SSN use by candidates who ended up losing the primary. Future research should consider more races across larger areas than the Bronx, such as New York City or New York State, in order to get a more complete idea of how social media can affect local races. Additionally, future research should look at campaigns on a yearly basis in order to minimize other factors that might change from year to year. In the realm of campaign spending, one interesting thing to look at would be how comparatively better a dollar spent on social media is than a dollar spent on campaign mailers or other traditional forms of advertising.

Conclusion

During my interview with Doyle and Swieciki, Swieciki asked me if I had ever read or seen *Moneyball*, a story about how small-market baseball teams used unorthodox, data-driven tools to compete with wealthier, big-market teams and, as a result, ended up changing the game of baseball forever. In many ways, the use of social media in local campaigns is similar to the story of *Moneyball*. In the short run, local insurgent candidates like Biaggi and Ocasio were able to find some success using a digital model for their campaigns, being that they did not have the financial resources to do otherwise. However, the country is still early enough in this new phase of campaigning that there is no way to predict what the long-term effects will be. What is clear, however, is how established institutions are responding to this new phenomenon. Ocasio-Cortez actually hosted a class shortly after taking office with Democratic members of Congress on how

to use Twitter.⁹⁷ Additionally, it was mentioned in chapter 1 that the Democratic super PAC Priorities USA is already making the shift away from traditional sources of political advertising such as television and radio and toward digital advertising. Based on what Amato said in his interview, this means nothing unless the Democratic establishment is clear on what narrative they want to create. In this regard, however, the establishment is also taking note. Politico said that, “The group has also expanded beyond the typical candidate-focused super PAC, branching out into issues like voting rights and related litigation ... Priorities is creating a new political department charged with building coalitions and tracking what’s happening on the ground.”⁹⁸ Whether or not insurgents will be able to keep up with the influx of money that their opponents will now be spending on digital advertisements is still to be seen. However, there is no doubt that for the time being, social media has proven to be an effective tool for insurgent campaigns if used correctly.

⁹⁷ Choi 2019

⁹⁸ Cadelago 2019

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