

Study of Political Campaign on TikTok

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Abstract. Minnesota State Senate candidate Matt Little uses an app that few other politicians use, TikTok, to try to distinguish himself from other politicians and often devotes a lot of time to "branding" efforts. This article looks at how Matt Little is using this new app that has emerged in recent years - TikTok - to communicate and civilly educate people in a new way. The results of the study show that Matt Little has achieved good results by communicating with young people on their favorite platforms during the campaign, gaining many fans and growing in popularity. It made him turn from an obscure candidate to an internet celebrity. But in the end Matt Little did not win the election, showing that success on TikTok does not automatically translate into political success. This study helps us gain a deeper understanding of the impact of social media on political elections.

Keywords: Politicians; Matt Little; Electoral Campaign; Tiktok; Social Media; Civic Education.

1. Introduction

Matt Little, a member of Minnesota's Democratic-Farmer-Labor Party, a lawyer and former union member, was previously little known in his district of about 80,000 people south of the Twin Cities. However, in 2020, he gained national attention for his use of the social media application TikTok, and he accumulated hundreds of thousands of followers. From the videos of TikTok during Matt Little's campaign it looks like Little is a rare political figure. A politician who fully embraces and utilizes TikTok, a site that many in Washington are squeamish about due to concerns that it could be used as a data collection tool for the Chinese government. His following and visibility have been growing steadily since he opened his TikTok account in February, 2020. His content, which includes, among other things, self-deprecation about his public persona, jokes and his own policy positions, almost always involves lip-syncing or background music, is very much in line with the main content of TikTok.

In 2020 he uses the app to reach young voters. According to the latest data, TikTok surpassed 1 billion monthly active users worldwide as of July 2022. About 44% of TikTok users are between the ages of 18 and 24, and another 32% are between the ages of 25 and 34. He try to connect with youth especially the most exclusive Generation Z by TikTok, which is one of the few apps that can appeal to them. What's more, Covid 19 makes it impossible to perform many traditional voter services in 2020, TikTok allows him to connect directly with voters. At this time, TikTok fills some important gaps for those few politicians who embrace it.

This study aims to find out how Matt Little used this new app that has emerged in recent years TikTok to communicate and civilly educate people in a new way. The first part retrieves the current literature studying TikTok and summarizes the current research directions and conclusions; the second part analyzes the content design method of Matt Little's TikTok; the third part analyzes the content of Matt Little's TikTok in terms of content, form and interaction; the fourth part is the conclusions drawn from this paper's research and the future research directions.

2. Literature Review

TikTok is one of the main social media outlets during the 2020 presidential election. Politicians from around the world have also joined TikTok to gain access to voters. Politicians and their media teams use TikTok to build a trusting relationship with potential voters. They create content that will target their audience's beliefs and influence their opinions. In previous elections, politicians have used social media such as Instagram, Facebook, Google and YouTube. however, TikTok is the newest social media app that they are using to generate a favorable relationship with potential voters.

Sounman, and Kim (2016) studied that in the last few years, the social media has gained power in the political environment. As part of marketing communications strategy, an increasing number of politicians are adopting social media to engage with their constituents. Social media has lowered the cost for new entrants to disseminate information to voters, reducing barriers to entry into the political sphere and increasing political competition.

Medina Serrano and Hegelich (2022) collected a set of U.S. Republican and Democratic political videos on TikTok to investigate how users communicate with each other about political issues and to provide a preliminary assessment of political communication on TikTok. With the help of computer vision, natural language processing and statistical tools, TikTok is more interactive in political communication than other social media platforms, and users combine multiple information channels to spread their messages. They found that users from both U.S. parties are young and behave similarly on the platform. However, Republican users post more political content with many responses, and Democratic users engage more in cross-party discussions.

Cervi an Marín-Lladó (2021) explored if and how Spanish political parties use TikTok as part of their communication strategy. By analyzing the content of all posts made by the five most important political parties in Spain. The conclusion drawn is that although TikTok is popular globally, Spanish political parties do not fully utilize the platform's capabilities, but rather use it only as a one-sided communication tool. Among the posts, the most popular ones were those that were interactive and oriented toward political entertainment.

However, the current literature does not examine how politicians use TikTok to spread political influence, which methods are used, and whether politicians' political advocacy on TikTok achieves beneficial results. This article focuses on how Tiktok helps frame candidates and shape public discourse.

3. Methods

The most straightforward way to study how Matt Little communicates with the community is to look at his social media TikTok videos. His account is called “attorney matt little”. Watching his videos one by one on the internet, starting from his first video on January 7, 2020, up to his electoral loss on November 6, 2020. There are 224 videos in total. Besides, I also read Matt's response to a huge number of user comments in the comments section.

As I watched each video, I paid attention to both the content (message) and the format (style) of the video. Observe the style of music he uses in each video and in what way his message is conveyed. Sometimes he would express some political views, but more often it was just a short humorous video. This is a visual observation, I just visually review all his short videos. In addition, the way the video is shot is an important observation. For example, how Matt Little uses music, and whether he speaks in person. matt's videos can be broadly divided into several categories, more often using some of the popular music in the network, and then with funny body movements and language. Some are accompanied by music and subtitles to express some of his views. Some are small skits designed to express some political views. All in all, his videos are very rich in content and do not take a single approach.

In addition to watching and analyzing the video, I also checked out the comments section. Usually, he doesn't have more than a thousand comments, and the way to see the comments is to distinguish them by high likes. It is the comments with more than 50 likes or personal replies that dominate. An important point in the comment section is to observe the comments for and against him, as well as his own recovery and explanation., and even a new short video directly to rebut how he communicates his message and the election.

4. Effective Path to Media Results

4.1 A Very Young App

First, Matt Little effectively used a very young app to promote his ideas and at the same time break the traditional way of delivering the message. Many of the videos do not have the seriousness of politics. To many people, politics and the way its ideas and messages are delivered are very serious and authoritative. But Matt Little fits perfectly into the mainstream TikTok community, both in his choice of music and in the way he expresses himself in writing and in the way he speaks to young people. Unlike many others in politics, other political figures do not offer the kind of expression that users prefer, and this informal and sometimes nonsensical approach greatly strengthens the bond and support with young users. his videos interspersed with his own political views and those of his party in the context of 2020 from time to time, and even a non-establishment language and attitude to comment on current affairs.

4.2 Built a Good Community Communication

The second point is that Matt Little has built a good community communication during his campaign, and he very clearly conveyed his ideas, political philosophy and the same fun dance and music on TikTok; a very important form of propaganda, so to speak.

Matt Little would choose more popular music on the internet and imitate some popular videos so as to integrate into the network. At the same time, he also exerts his humorous talent to create some short skits that flirt with politicians, and draws closer to young people through this witty way. In addition, he does not adopt a serious didactic model for the output of political views. Instead, he makes simple sitcoms to express his views through simple words, so that voters can catch his key points more.

4.3 Focusing on the Engagement

In the TikTok October 28th, 2020, user Simon made the serious comment that “whats the difference of a representative and state senator or are they the same thing?”. Lighter comments were also plentiful, such as another comment on the same day, Emily said:” Am I the only one who wants to move to Minnesota just to vote for him.? “(In the write-up of the findings, all usernames and comments are anonymized for ethical purposes).

Although it doesn't seem to have a particularly large number of comments, Matt Little answers some interesting comments and is active in answering some questions as well as responding to constituents. There are quite a few people who are not voters in his district, as he is only sent out some, responses to him from voters in his constituency.

Most of the comments at the bottom are supportive, at least among young Democrats. Of course, there are some critical comments as well. But instead of completely ignoring the critical remarks, he turned some of the criticism into a humorous video, and this attitude in the face of criticism deepened his recognition and appreciation. even a new short video directly to rebut how he communicates his message and the election.

5. Conclusion

Even though he was not elected to his state senate district, he was able to operate it very well. In this study, I can't count in detail how much the user base in the TikTok community played the role in his election, but in what is known through this study is that success on TikTok does not automatically translate into political success. How to turn popularity on the social platform into a boost in the election may be a new lesson that politicians need to learn.

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