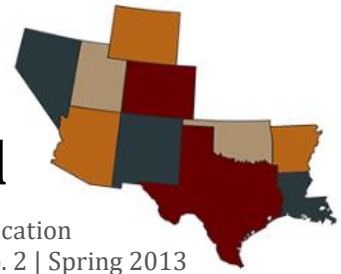


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## The Republican Primaries in 140 Characters: How the 2012 Candidates Used Twitter to Mobilize Their Supporters, Interact With them and Frame the Campaign

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This study used content analysis to examine how the 2012 Republican candidates used Twitter to mobilize their supporters, interact with them, frame campaign issues and frame their opponents. The results indicated that Santorum has used Twitter the most. The most popular mobilization tactics were announcing appearances and voter recruitment. However, the candidates minimally used Twitter to frame campaign issues. Overall, the candidates' use of Twitter was limited. Pertinent implications for the 2012 presidential elections are discussed.

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### **Introduction**

“Use of Internet to Raise Funds, Organize Rallies May Be Common in Future,” reads a February 2004, *Washington Post* headline (Faler, 2004, p. A12). Such a headline would colloquially and aptly elicit a “duh” response in this day and age. Back then, Howard Dean’s campaign, the subject of the headline, was deemed almost revolutionary in its use of the Internet to drive campaign issues. The article went on to discuss Dean’s trailblazing efforts such as bringing blogging and online interaction into the political community, maintaining an online directory of supporters and the early use of Meetup.com, a social networking site dedicated to group-based activism. However, Faler later qualified his laudatory statements by comparing Dean’s bellwether campaign to Pets.com, a widely panned dotcom failed venture.<sup>1</sup> Faler’s prophesy seems to have burst in its own bubble. Internet based campaigning has since gone mainstream. In a nutshell, this study seeks to find out how the 2012 Republican primary candidates used Twitter to mobilize their supporters, interact with them and frame both the campaign issues and opponents.

Howard Dean’s efforts can only be compared to candidate Obama’s savvy use of social media to drive his 2008 presidential bid. Obama’s campaign focused its social media strategy on young voters under 29 years, whom he won by a 66% majority (Comart, 2011). This demographic is dominant on the Internet and in the social media world. It is also the most likely to use social media sites such as Facebook, MySpace, LinkedIn and Twitter. Despite this predominance, focusing on the social media world would still be of paramount significance to

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.cnet.com/1990-11136\\_1-6278387-1.html](http://www.cnet.com/1990-11136_1-6278387-1.html)

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any campaign, given that 65% of all American adults currently use social networking sites (Madden & Zickuhr, 2011).

This last statistic has not gone unnoticed by Republicans, who lost the technology edge by a large margin to the Democrats in 2008 (Lemire, 2011). The latest crop of Republican presidential candidates was well warned and adopted an array of social media tools. Most of them set up online call centers, which unlike their traditional counterparts allow supporters to mobilize voters using smartphones or computers and on the go. In an effort to manage image presentation in the user-dominated world that social media is, the candidates produced Twitter and Facebook-ready pictures that supporters could upload onto their own pages (Auxier, 2012). Newt Gingrich's "Newt 2012 Influencers" program allowed supporters to automatically post and share campaign generated news reports on their social media accounts.<sup>2</sup>

In the absence of social media, most of these new outreach methods would not be available to candidates. Traditionally, campaign methods follow a multi-step process in which the media act as gatekeepers who filter what goes between the candidates and their supporters (Hänggli and Kriesi, 2010). The Internet however, has resurrected a throwback version of the old fashioned retail campaign style that heavily emphasized the candidate-supporter interaction of the pre-mass media era. Candidates can now use campaign websites and e-mail to emphasize and also elaborate on specific issues as they so wish (Davis, 1999). Social media in general takes this interaction to an even more nuanced and personal level and no other social media tool does this more efficiently than the microblogging site Twitter.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.newt.org/influencer#st>

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Twitter allows candidates to connect with their supporters in a highly personal manner and in an environment free of direct media influence. Unlike more established social media sites such as Facebook, MySpace, LinkedIn and traditional blogs, Twitter allows one to reach multitudes of users with short, pithy messages and in real time. Additionally, one has a set of dedicated readers called “followers” who sign on to follow a certain person because they have a specific interest in him/her. Twitter users have to update their profiles at high frequency, sometimes severally in the same hour. This particular trend is unique only to microblogging sites like Twitter. This means that followers are keen to get the latest status updates from an individual they are following. Unlike traditional blogs and social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter only allows users to post messages not exceeding 140 characters. This automatically takes care of reader’s fatigue and textual monotony as followers can scan several brief messages in a short time. More so, followers can easily rebroadcast the same messages to others by simply retweeting them on their own Twitter accounts for even more exposure. Table 1 shows the Republican Twitter usage statistics as they appeared on Twitter as of March 19, 2012, during the data collection period and at the height of the Republican primary.

<b>Candidate</b>	<b>Total Tweets Posted</b>	<b>Followers</b>	<b>Following</b>
Newt Gingrich	3,442	1,448,757	448
Mitt Romney	875	382,957	242
Rick Santorum	1790	171,845	167
Ron Paul	884	265,430	155

*Source: Twitter.com (3/19/2012)*

While Twitter and other social media sites are not the only ways the Republican candidates reached out to their supporters, Twitter is bound to play a bigger role in the future. It

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is important to examine how these candidates employed this highly interactive tool and how they used it to shape the messages they sent out to their audiences, hence the purposes of this study:

- A) To find out which mobilization techniques the Republican candidates deployed via Twitter;
- B) To find any differences between the candidates in their use of Twitter as a mobilization tool;
- C) To determine the level of candidate-supporter interaction via Twitter and if this differed by candidate;
- D) To find the level of emphasis on specific and general campaign issues on Twitter
- and E) To examine how the candidates framed their opponents on Twitter.

### **Online Mobilization**

This study seeks to find out how the Republican candidates used Twitter to interact with and mobilize their supporters. Unlike most local electoral campaigns, large-scale and national campaigns rely heavily on the mass media and mass marketing techniques to mobilize voters (Gerber and Green, 2005). This however does not discount the importance of other personal outreach methods. Traditional voter mobilization tactics include grassroots activities such as knocking on doors, use of phone banks to contact supporters, leaving door hangers, use of independent organizations to promote campaign issues and voter registration efforts (Bergan, Gerber & Green, 2005; Nickerson, 2005). Although research shows a weak relationship between the use of ballot initiatives and voter turnout in presidential elections (M.A. Smith, 2001; D.A. Smith, DeSantis & Kassel, 2006), party activists have not shied away from using these tactics. These ballot initiatives mostly use wedge issues such as gay marriage bans, affirmative action reform, welfare reform etc. Internet-based campaigns are now adopting some of these traditional

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methods. This study also seeks to find out how the Republican candidates framed similar issues on their Twitter accounts.

Howard Dean's aforementioned use of the Internet to run a presidential campaign is not the first of its kind. The forerunner role is bestowed upon the Clinton/Gore 1992 campaign. With Web browsers yet to go mainstream, their campaign mainly used bulletin boards, discussion groups and e-mail to communicate with supporters (Wagner & Gainous, 2009). Bob Dole debuted campaign websites in 1996 when he famously misstated his campaign website's URL at a stump speech. The site later crashed after a flood on visitors figured out the correct address (Klotz, 2004). Less than a decade later, John Kerry's 2004 campaign would set a new single-day record with a \$3 million haul from online fundraising (Justice, 2004). Kerry went on to raise over \$80 million from online contributions (Cornfield & Rainie, 2006).

### **Blogs as Campaign Tools**

Although the Internet is yet to supplant the mass media as the dominant campaign medium, it stacks up impressively against TV and print news. A 2008 Pew Research Center report indicates that more Americans than ever are now using the Internet as a source of campaign news. The Internet comes only second to TV as a campaign news source. While TV claimed a 72% share of the campaign news source market, the Internet scored 33% while newspapers and radio trailed at 29% and 21% respectively. Overall, the Internet enjoyed a 23 point jump in use since 2004, while TV saw a four point drop in the same period. This development has been accompanied by a partisan trend, where users shy away from sites that do not align with their political views. Democrats are more likely (44%) than Republicans (35%) to

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seek partisan content (A. Smith, 2009). This should give more reason to a candidate to use Twitter to reinforce his/her base via Twitter, assuming that a dedicated group of Twitter followers would probably be of the candidate's party.

By the 2010 midterm elections, 73% of all Internet users, who represent over half of the adult American population, received their elections news online (A. Smith, 2011<sup>a</sup>). Not only did these users seek news, they also engaged in some form of online political activity such as watching videos, fact checking claims or sharing content. While this report did not single out how many users accessed Twitter updates, it would not be a stretch to infer that Twitter followers were among the numbers reported. This statistic is an indication that Twitter has become a recognizable player in the online political game, thus the more the reason it needs to be studied.

Candidates have been quick to take advantage of the pervasive nature of the Internet by using it as a means of supporter mobilization through the use of e-mail, websites, blogs etc. This trend has been for good reason. Accounting for only one in 10 the of adult Internet users in 2005, social networking site users accounted for one in three of the same population by 2008 (A. Smith, 2009). Currently 22% of all online adults use Twitter and other social networking sites strictly for political purposes (A. Smith, 2011<sup>b</sup>). These users engage in such activities as; discovering who their friends voted for, getting campaign information, posting political content, signing up friends and participating in political groups and caucuses.

While researchers have examined how candidates use websites and blogs as campaign tools, the same cannot be said of social media, especially as pertains to microblogging sites such as Twitter. This is most likely due to the newness of this particular media tool. Since this study

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focuses on how the Republican candidates used Twitter as a campaign tool, the closest comparison with Twitter would be how candidates have used traditional blogs as campaign tools. In a general sense, traditional blogs lend themselves to this study given that they went political very early on in their existence in the wake of Sep. 11, with the advent of the war bloggers (Gallagher, 2002). Additionally, political blogs tend to score favorable credibility ratings that outperform traditional media sources in terms of believability, fairness, accuracy and depth. This credibility effect is biggest on heavy blog users (Johnson, Kaye, Bichard & Wong, 2008). This bodes well for the future of blogs and microblogs in political campaigns and beyond.

Research shows that blogs are just as effective in mobilization as other campaign tools. In a multifaceted study of campaign blogs and partisan mobilization, Thorson and Wise (2006) found varied but strong indicators of such effects, especially when blogs emphasized campaign strategy frames over issues-related frames. Supporters were more likely to participate in a particular candidate's campaign when the blog put emphasis on such partisan innuendo as war language and gamesmanship. Likewise, strategy frames had a positive effect on a supporter's likelihood to vote for a particular candidate in the presidential election.

Campaign blogs have not been used strictly for mobilizations purposes. In the 2004 Democratic primary, candidates used blogs mainly to discuss how supporters had helped the respective campaigns and also to offer gratitude for the effort. The respective campaign staff however put the blogs to more use as a means to directly interact and communicate with supporters, provide daily updates on the campaign and to publicize media appearances. On a lesser scale these blogs also notified supporters of endorsements while simultaneously seeking campaign contributions (Trammell, Williams, Postelnicu & Landerville, 2006). The study also



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found that candidates emphasized the same message patterns on both blogs and websites, with blog posts carrying more negative opponent content. However, blogs were used as a means to foster candidate-voter interaction. Almost half of the blog posts (49%) that the candidates or their surrogates wrote emphasized such personal terms as “you,” “you’ll” or used personal thoughts within.

Candidates also differ in how they deploy frames in their campaign blogs. Such was the case with candidate John Kerry and incumbent George W. Bush during the 2004 presidential elections. While both emphasized the *time* frame by framing their blog posts in context of the present, Bush was more likely to emphasize the individual and community nuances within the *space* dimension frame while Kerry emphasized the social and international frames. A commonality between these competing blogs was that they both carried a general neutral *tone* devoid of judgment. Kerry’s blogs posts however carried most of the negative posts of the two (Bichard, 2006).

This last finding was echoed in Trammell’s (2006) study on the attacks posted on Kerry’s and Bush’s blogs. While half of all blogs posts in this particular study carried opponent attacks, Kerry’s posts carried the overwhelming majority of those (70%). While the study did not examine the effectiveness of these attacks, Trammell nonetheless pondered on the reinforcing effect such attacks would have on invested supporters who would then firm their extant opinions of the other candidate and even glean talking points to be used in later political conversations.

In light of the above statements, this study seeks to answer the following research questions and hypotheses. Also, for the sake of definitional and methodological clarity, the

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measurement parameters for general campaign issues, mobilization techniques and opponent framing are discussed in the method section.

*RQ1: What were the most common online mobilization techniques used by the Republican candidates on Twitter?*

This research questions seeks to find out which online mobilization techniques the Republican candidates employed in their Twitter posts. The coding categories (see table 2) were derived from an adaptation of Davis's (1999) analysis of politics and the Web in conjunction with a general analysis of news articles on Obama's 2008 campaign's use of social media.

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### **Table 2: Online Mobilization Techniques**

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Fundraising  
Volunteer recruitment  
Voter reinforcement  
Personal information  
Opponent information  
Video links  
Endorsement  
Campaign schedule  
Links to campaign site  
Press/news releases  
Merchandise  
Links to news stories  
Voter appreciation

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*H1: There is a difference in how the Republican primary candidates used online mobilization techniques.*

*H2: There is a difference in the level of candidate-voter interaction via Twitter among the Republican primary candidates*

Hypothesis two predicts that there were differences among the candidates in the level they interacted with their supporters on Twitter. Interaction was measured dually using tweet update speed and the average number of tweets posted by a candidate per day. This hypothesis picks up on Twitter's unique emphasis on frequent status updates. Hence, interaction was first measured by the time lapse between each subsequent tweet and secondly by the average number of tweets posted daily. This means that the less the time lag between tweets and the higher the daily average of tweets meant higher interaction with one's supporters.

**Note:** While it was the researcher's intention to include retweets, mentions and replies as interaction parameters, the results show that only 19% of all tweets posted were either retweets or mentions. There was not a single reply among all the tweets analyzed.

*RQ2: How did the Republican candidates deploy the oppositional emphasis choice in their Twitter posts?*

Hänggli and Kriesi (2010) define the oppositional emphasis choice as the manner in which candidates portray their opponents' frames. This research question seeks to find out how the Republican candidates framed their primary opponents and the incumbent president in their Twitter posts. The frame was measured by how many times a candidate mentioned his opponents and/or the president and if the tone was negative, positive or neutral.

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### **Issue Framing**

Robert Entman, a leading figure in framing studies defines framing as follows:

*“To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described (Entman 1993, p.52)*

Edelman (1993) describes the social world as a chameleon, a kaleidoscope of varying realities subject to political maneuvering through framing and categorization. Category choices are largely driven by ideology and they do shape political beliefs and public support of policy issues. Ergo, political elites present issues in a manner to maximize desired public support (Edelman; Jacoby, 2000). Researchers have looked at two types of framing strategies; equivalency framing and issue framing. The former refers to the dual portrayal of certain problems either in a positive or negative manner, leaving the public little choice but to choose one or the other (Druckman, 2001; Druckman, 2004). Issue framing on the other hand refers to “situations where, by emphasizing a subset of potentially relevant considerations, a speaker leads individuals to focus on these considerations when constructing their opinions” (Druckman, 2004 p. 672). For example, hate speech could be portrayed as either a free speech or public safety issue, leading the public to view it in only these two framing parameters. This study examines how the Republican candidates framed specific campaign issues via Twitter.

Jacoby describes two types of issue frames: Specific and general. Specific issue frames denote those issues that clearly link policy actions to identifiable targets in society.

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Environmental protection linked to a specific call to the government to reduce pollution and protect individuals exposed to toxic waste would be an example. General frames on the other hand rely on an interpretation of disputable policy issues. A general call to the government to protect the environment would be an example.

Politicians can frame issues in three ways: Substantive emphasis choice, oppositional emphasis choice and contest emphasis choice (Hänggli & Kriesi, 2010). By using the substantive emphasis choice, politicians choose those frames that will adequately draw media and public attention to their causes and at the expense of their opponents. They use oppositional emphasis to determine how much time to dedicate to their opponents' frames and eventually whether to use these frames defensively or offensively. Lastly, they use the content emphasis choice to determine what priority to give their frames vis-à-vis the campaign as a whole. The substantive and content emphasis choices tie in quite well with this study's general quest: To find out what specific and general campaign issues the Republican candidates emphasized through Twitter. However, because primaries pit like candidates in terms of party affiliation, it is important to see how the Republican candidates sought to differentiate themselves from their counterparts, thus the oppositional emphasis choice. Hence, this study also seeks to find out how the candidates framed their opponents in their Twitter posts.

Whichever way politicians do it, issue framing indeed has an impact on voters. "Framing effects occur when different presentations of an issue generate different reactions among those who are exposed to that issue" (Jacoby 2000, p. 751). Case in point, Jacoby's study found that government spending as an issue elicited powerful framing effects that led to individual-level opinion changes that surpassed traditionally partisan variables such as party affiliation, race and

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age. People were more likely to support government spending if it was framed in terms of specific programs such as food stamps. Nelson (2004) found similar trends in regard to adoption reform, affirmative action and school vouchers. Respondents were more supportive of adoption reform when it was framed in terms of parents' rights rather than in terms of children's rights. Inversely, affirmative action received less support when it was framed as an institution's obligation to provide an opportunity to minorities that in the context of rewarding excellence. Lastly, Nelson's study found that school vouchers received better response when framed as a school quality issue rather than a church-state separation issue.

Issue framing effects also emerged in Druckman and Nelson's (2003) study of the campaign finance reform issue. Respondents were more likely to support campaign finance reform when it was portrayed as a means to curtail special interest's influence on democracy than as a means to limit free speech violations by external actors. Nelson and Oxley (1999) found that respondents gave more support to a proposed economic development project when it was framed in terms of development benefits than when it was framed as an environmental issue.

This study uses the following research questions to examine which specific and general campaign issues the Republican candidates emphasized in their tweets. As earlier mentioned and for purposes of clarity, the operationalization of terms is discussed in the next section.

*RQ3: What were the most common specific campaign issues in the Republican posts on Twitter?*

*RQ4: What were the most common general campaign issues in the Republican posts on Twitter?*

These research questions seek to find out which specific and general issues the Republican candidates emphasized in their Twitter posts. Jacoby defines specific issue frames as those that

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denote clear policy action. General issue frames are those that lend themselves to some level of subjective interpretation. This study used the top campaign issues reported in the 2012 Republican primaries (Woodward 2012; CNN 2012; The Washington Post 2012) as a basis to examine the specific and general issue frames as shown in table 3 and 4.

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### **Table 3: Specific Campaign Issue**

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Debt  
Taxes  
Unemployment  
Education  
Energy  
Environmental issues  
Immigration  
Gay marriage  
Abortion  
Health care reform  
Social security  
Foreign policy  
National security

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### **Table 4: General Campaign Issues**

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Role/size of government  
America's future  
Government spending  
Electability  
The Constitution/liberties/freedoms  
Mainstream media  
Patriotism

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## **Method**

Content analysis was used to collect data between January 5, and January 31, 2012, spanning the period right after the Iowa caucuses and on the day of the Florida primary. January 5, was chosen because candidate Michelle Bachmann dropped out of the race after the Iowa

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caucuses on January 4, and candidate Rick Perry suspended his campaign after the South Carolina primary on January 21. It was expected that the two would not be in campaign mode during the data collection period, thus the exclusion. This left the four candidates who were in full campaign mode and still running for the nomination during the data collection period. The content analysis thus focused on: Mitt Romney, Rick Santorum, Newt Gingrich and Ron Paul.

The unit of analysis was a single tweet and two coders examined all tweets posted by the four candidates from January 5, to January 31, 2012. Overall, 397 tweets were coded. Coders read each tweet and any accompanying hyperlinks to determine the following coding themes: Specific campaign issues, general campaign issues, mobilization techniques and opposition framing tone. Demographic factors such as link type, tweet type, tweet duration etc. were also collected. Tweet duration was measured by manually counting the minutes between a particular tweet and the subsequent one.

The Scott's Pi for intercoder reliability scores were: Specific campaign issues (.91); general campaign issues (.70); mobilization techniques (.89); Republican opponent tone (.94); Obama tone framing (.98).

### **Results**

Three hundred and ninety-seven tweets were analyzed over the coding period. Seventy one percent of all the tweets contained a hyperlink and of these 19% linked to a news story and 72% linked back to the candidates' respective campaign websites. While on average the candidates posted a new tweet every six hours, real lag times between updates merit a mention. The fastest tweet was posted within one minute of the previous one and the slowest tweet was



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posted two days after the previous one. The candidates mentioned their Republican opponents in 9% of their tweets and mentioned President Obama in 14% of their tweets. A majority of the tweets posted were regular (80%) meaning that they were not retweets, replies and did not contain any mentions (see appendix for definition of Twitter terminology). As mentioned earlier, it was the researcher's intention to include retweets, replies and mentions as interaction parameters. However, only 19% of all tweets analyzed were either retweets or mentions. There was not a single reply among the 397 tweets analyzed.

*RQ1: What were the most common online mobilization techniques used by the Republican candidates on Twitter?*

Table 5 shows that the candidates used Twitter mostly to announce their campaigns schedules, campaign stops and TV appearances. They also used Twitter as a get-out-the-vote tool by reminding their supporters to vote in various primaries and caucuses. Even though 11% of the tweets fell under the "other" category, some of these contained humorous images or nonpolitical statements that provided levity.

**Table 5: Most Common Mobilization Techniques Used**

	Frequency	Percentage
Schedules & appearances	96	30%
Voter recruitment	71	22%
Voter reinforcement	46	14%
Endorsement	30	9%
Fundraising	25	8%
Voter appreciation	11	3%
Personal information	5	2%
Press releases	4	1%
Other	36	11%

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*H1: There is a difference in how the Republican primary candidates used online mobilization techniques via Twitter.*

Chi-square analysis supported hypothesis one (table 6). The candidates differed significantly in the way they used Twitter to mobilize their supporters. Overall, Santorum dedicated more tweets towards mobilization than any other candidate. He was also the most likely to use Twitter to announce his schedule and appearances and the most likely to reinforce his supporters via Twitter. Gingrich dedicated the second most tweets to mobilization while Romney and Paul dedicated about the same amount of tweets to mobilization. In order to preserve the validity of the chi-square results, categories that had multiple scores under five were omitted from the analysis. These included: Voter appreciation, fundraising, personal information and press releases. Hence, the results below satisfy the chi-square requirement of not having more than 20% of the cell counts less than five.

**Table 6: Chi-square Results of Mobilization Techniques**

	<b>Romney</b>	<b>Santorum</b>	<b>Gingrich</b>	<b>Paul</b>	<b>Total</b>
Schedules & appearances	7	57	17	15	<b>96</b>
Voter recruitment	15	20	25	11	<b>71</b>
Voter reinforcement	13	21	2	10	<b>46</b>
Endorsement	1	9	16	4	<b>30</b>
Other	11	8	8	9	<b>36</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>47</b>	<b>115</b>	<b>68</b>	<b>49</b>	
$\chi^2 = 59.62$	$Df = 15$	$P < 0.001$	$N = 279$		

*H2: There is a difference in the level of candidate-voter interaction via Twitter among the Republican primary candidates*

This hypothesis was measured by two interaction parameters; tweet duration and average tweet posting per day. Separate ANOVA analyses for each parameter supported hypothesis two. The

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ANOVA test for tweet duration resulted in  $F = 7.74$ ,  $p < .001$ . Santorum posted his tweets the fastest at an average time of 4.41 hours between tweets while Romney posted the slowest at 10 hours between tweets on average. See table 7 for post hoc comparisons.

**Table 7: Tweet Posting Rate for Candidates\***

	Min (in minutes)	Max	Mean
Santorum	1	37	4.41 <sup>a</sup>
Paul	2	26	5.61 <sup>c</sup>
Gingrich	1	48	6.33 <sup>b</sup>
Romney	16	48	10.00 <sup>abc</sup>

*\*All units in hours except for minimums*

Note: Means that share the same superscript differ at the  $p < .05$  level in the Scheffe post hoc comparisons.

Likewise, ANOVA analysis for average tweet posting also supported hypothesis two;  $F = 26.36$ ,  $p < .001$ . Santorum averaged the most amounts of tweets per day (72) while Romney averaged the least (30). Both Gingrich and Paul averaged about 50 tweets per day. Scheffe post hoc comparisons showed significant differences between combinations for all the candidates except between Ron Paul and Newt Gingrich. As noted earlier, it was the researcher’s intention to include retweets, replies and mentions among the interaction parameters but the low occurrence of these among the tweets coded did not permit such an analysis. Case in point, none of the candidates had a reply among the tweets analyzed.

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*RQ2: How did the Republican candidates deploy the oppositional emphasis choice in their Twitter posts?*

The candidates deployed the oppositional emphasis choice more towards President Obama than towards each other. Only 35 (9%) of the tweets analyzed mentioned other candidates and 21 of these were negative. More tweets mentioned the president (56) and none of these were positive. Seventy-eight percent of these were negative and the rest were neutral.

*RQ3: What were the most common specific campaign issues in the Republican posts on Twitter?*

*RQ4: What were the most common general campaign issues in the Republican posts on Twitter?*

Overall, the candidates did not emphasize much of the specific campaign issues. Only 45 of all the 397 tweets posted (11%) were dedicated to these issues with unemployment getting the most mention at 11 tweets. General campaign issues fared better. The candidates dedicated 35% of their tweets to these issues. As table eight shows, electability was the most common general campaign issue emphasized (13%), followed closely America’s future (11%).

**Table 8: Most Common General Campaign Issues**

	Frequency	Percentage
Electability	52	13%
America’s future	42	11%
The Constitution	7	2%
Government spending	7	2%
Size of government	5	1.3%
Mainstream media	1	0.3%
Other	27	7%

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### **Discussion**

This study set out to examine how the Republican primary candidates used Twitter to interact with their audiences, mobilize their supporters, frame campaign issues and frame their opponents. As discussed earlier, Twitter is unique as it mostly negates direct media influence to the candidate-supporter relationship. Candidates can reach out to and contact their supporters in a highly personal and interactive manner. Of course the findings and conclusions reported here do not in any way endeavor to minimize the use and impact of traditional campaign methods such as advertising, political debates, media interviews, stump speeches etc. Twitter just gives these candidates a very narrowly defined conduit through which to reach a cadre of dedicated followers.

The results indicated that while all candidates put Twitter to some level of use, Rick Santorum emerged as the one who did this the most. In fact, his mobilization tweets alone accounted for 40% of all mobilization tweets posted. In comparison, the then front runner Mitt Romney used only 16% of his tweets for mobilization. While posting schedules and appearances was the most common mobilization tactic among all candidates, Santorum was by far the one most likely to do so, outpacing Newt Gingrich's second-place finish by 43 percentage points. Santorum also posted his tweets fastest, posting his messages five and a half times faster than Romney. Santorum also outperformed his rivals in the total amount of tweets posted with a daily average of 72 tweets as compared to Romney's 30.

While not exactly a dark horse in the race, Santorum's performance and longevity in these primaries came as a surprise to many. His surprise Iowa win<sup>3</sup> and three-state sweep on

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<sup>3</sup> [http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/report-santorum-finished-34-votes-ahead-of-romney-in-new-iowa-tally-votes-from-8-precincts-missing/2012/01/19/gIQAJGuRAQ\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/report-santorum-finished-34-votes-ahead-of-romney-in-new-iowa-tally-votes-from-8-precincts-missing/2012/01/19/gIQAJGuRAQ_story.html)

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Super Tuesday<sup>4</sup> positioned him as the much desired anti-Romney candidate while at the same time infusing much needed cash and enthusiasm into his campaign.<sup>5</sup> His performance has to be put in the perspective that his upstart campaign was facing the juggernaut that was Mitt Romney's campaign operation, in terms of experience, organization, name recognition and financing. While it might be argued that some of this support might have derived from a general anti-Romney sentiment in the core Republican base, his use of Twitter could also have played a role.

### ***Implications for the Republican Race and Beyond***

Rick Santorum may have outdone his opponents on Twitter, but even his efforts have to be put into proper context. The threshold the Republicans set for the overall use of this social media tool is quite low. In the 27-day data collection period, the candidates posted an aggregate of 397 tweets for an average of 15 tweets per day. In perspective, Twitter reports 50 million tweets posted daily for an average of 600 tweets per second.<sup>6</sup> This does not mean that the candidates have to match this obviously astronomically high number, but their performance is quite weak regardless. This and the general results of this study show that the Republican candidates were yet to realize the usefulness of this tool, and even if they had realized so, they did not put Twitter into practice. While on average the candidates updated their Twitter accounts every six hours, real time lags showed several gaps that lasted up to two days between updates (see table 7). While a Twitter user has a dedicated number of followers who follow him/her for particular reasons, it still is not wise to neglect one's account for such long time periods if one hopes to keep hold of the followership.

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<sup>4</sup> <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052970204369404577209531461672726.html>

<sup>5</sup> <http://politicalticker.blogs.cnn.com/2012/01/02/santorums-fundraising-soars-along-with-his-poll-numbers/>

<sup>6</sup> <http://blog.twitter.com/2010/02/measuring-tweets.html>

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While posting speed and average number of tweets posted per day might not be the most comprehensive interaction parameters, it comes as a surprise that the candidates underplayed better interactions methods. Tweeter users post retweets, mentions and replies as a way of acknowledging followers and other users while simultaneously rebroadcasting interesting tweets. Only 19% of all tweets analyzed were either retweets or mentions. Not a single reply was captured during the content analysis period.

Microblogging sites like Twitter are meant to be fountains that provide steady spouts of information. A general analysis of the candidates' update patterns indicated that much of the update activity occurred around primary/caucus dates and during televised debates. However, the results show that by far most tweets (30%) announced a candidates TV appearances and speech schedules. In fact, voter reinforcement, which should be emphasized in the lull periods between primaries and debates, was the third most emphasized mobilization technique. Voter recruitment was the second most deployed mobilization tactic but that only scored 22% while voter appreciation scored abysmally as 3%. Fundraising, a key element in any contemporary political campaign hardly registered, accounting for a paltry 8% of the mobilization tweets.

This oversight might have major implications, not just within the Republican primaries but also in the upcoming general elections. With a dispirited Republican base and a lackluster body of primary candidates, it goes without saying that the Republican candidates might have missed an opportunity to rouse their electorate, especially younger tech-savvy users who dominate the social media world. Polls show that even with a fairly low job approval rating from this young demographic, the incumbent President Obama still leads Romney by wide margins.<sup>7 8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> <http://nation.foxnews.com/obama/2012/06/22/poll-obama-s-support-down-13-points-among-young-voters>

<sup>8</sup> <http://thehill.com/blogs/blog-briefing-room/news/234297-poll-obama-maintains-large-lead>

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### ***Have Republican Primary Candidates Done Enough To Rouse Their Base?***

As discussed earlier, a partisan trend has emerged among Internet news consumers with 35% of Republicans seeking partisan content while shying away from content that does not align with their views. It would be safe to assume that most of the Twitter users who followed the candidates and read the tweets analyzed in this study tended to lean Republican. If the lack of voter-oriented mobilization on Twitter was a reflection of their overall campaign strategies, and it might as well not have been, one is bound to wonder how these candidates would have roused Independent voters after failing to rouse a partisan group that makes up their dedicated Twitter followers. More so, social media users tend to be younger and Obama won this bloc by 66% in 2008, mostly by using social media tools. The Republicans will have to cut into this lead to better their chances of taking back the White House. Their social media performance has to improve.

The results also indicated that the candidates paid little attention to red meat campaign issues. Only 11% of the tweets mentioned specific campaign issues such as the national debt, taxes, unemployment, immigration, healthcare etc. While the candidates put more emphasis on general campaign issues such as America's future, the size of the government, electability and the mainstream media, these were mentioned in only 29% of all the tweets posted. If any of these issues sounds familiar, one only needs to reminisce back to the 2010 midterm elections where issues such as over- taxation, America's future and "Obamacare" were the rallying points behind the Republican takeover of the House and a net gain of six gubernatorial offices nationwide.

In perspective, the primary candidates only mentioned healthcare and taxes six times each (for 3% of all tweets) and America's future in only 11% of their tweets. For the longest



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time, the Republicans have vowed to rescind “Obamacare” in 2012. Recent developments make this an uphill task. With the Supreme Court’s imprimatur on the Affordable Healthcare Act of 2010,<sup>9</sup> the Republicans will not only have to keep control of the House, they’ll have to win the Senate and take the White House. While Twitter may not be the end-all to this ultimate goal, its unique utility might go a long way in ensuring at least a presidential win. Based on their use of Twitter, the recent crop of Republican presidential candidates were yet to realize this.

### **Conclusion**

It was widely reported and also discussed earlier in this paper that Republicans lost the technology edge during the 2008 presidential elections. Some reports say that they have finally caught up and closed the gap.<sup>10 11</sup> It is also true that the Republican primary candidates have adopted an array of social media tools. However, the results suggest that they might have missed out on the most useful tool of all, Twitter. Table one shows that by March 19, 2012, the four candidates aggregated slightly over 2.26 million Twitter followers with Newt Gingrich claiming the lion’s share (1.45 million followers). In contrast, the eventual Republican opponent, President Obama had over 13 million Twitter followers as of March 19, 2012. By July 24, 2012, Obama had slightly fewer than 18 million followers compared to Romney’s 807,000 followers.<sup>12</sup>

Common political wisdom has it that a fractured party always coalesces around a common candidate once a contentious primary season is over. This was evident after the 2008 contest between candidates Obama and Hilary Clinton. This means that Romney, the Republican

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<sup>9</sup> [http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/supreme-court-to-rule-thursday-on-health-care-law/2012/06/28/gJQAarRm8V\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/supreme-court-to-rule-thursday-on-health-care-law/2012/06/28/gJQAarRm8V_story.html)

<sup>10</sup> <http://news.yahoo.com/campaigns-apply-tech-tools-ground-game-151847614.html>

<sup>11</sup> [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/05/17/koch-brothers-republicans-technology\\_n\\_1523540.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/05/17/koch-brothers-republicans-technology_n_1523540.html)

<sup>12</sup> <http://twitter.com/#!/BarackObama>

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nominee, should have experienced a dramatic increase in general enthusiasm since officially clinching the nomination in late May, 2012. While his fundraising numbers have been impressive so far,<sup>13</sup> his social media capital is yet to rise to the occasion as depicted by his Twitter followership. It is hard to imagine how Romney will bring his Twitter totals to 18 million by November, and that is assuming that Obama's Twitter popularity stagnates until then.

As the country becomes more partisan and both parties lose traditional supporters to the Independent voter bloc, reinforcing and rousing each party's base is of paramount importance, especially with closely contested elections as the 2012 race is shaping up to be. If one candidate can reinforce 18 million supporters via Twitter and have them show up at the polls in time to vote, that alone could swing a close contest one way or another. As things stand right now, the odds seem to stack up mightily against the Republicans.

Lastly, a word of caution is wise. This study did not analyze President Obama's Twitter use. That would not have been judicious since the incumbent cannot officially campaign until the opposition party has nominated its candidate. In fact, during the data collection period, Obama's political battles were waged mainly against the congressional Republicans and not the primary candidates. This means that the above mentioned findings can only be put in proper context with a similar study, but one focusing on the use of Twitter between the incumbent and the winner of the Republican primary race. Regardless, this study gives insight into how politicians use social media, namely Twitter, to interact with audiences, mobilize them and frame campaign issues and opponents.

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<sup>13</sup> [http://blogs.suntimes.com/sweet/2012/06/romneyrnc\\_raises\\_768\\_million\\_i.html](http://blogs.suntimes.com/sweet/2012/06/romneyrnc_raises_768_million_i.html)

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## Appendix

### Operationalization and Definition of Coding Terms

#### Definition of General Campaign Issues

Since general campaign issues naturally lend themselves to more personal interpretation than specific campaign issues, this study used the definitions below to define them:

***Size of government:*** This parameter encompassed tweets that referred to non-expenditure issues such tax raises or endeavors aimed at shrinking the government. Samples tweets would be:

*“@BarackObama wants to raise taxes & grow government. I’ll cut taxes and make government smaller, simpler, & smarter.”* – Mitt Romney

*“I want every American to have an optional 15% flat tax. My goal is to shrink to fit the revenue.”* – Newt Gingrich

*“How Gingrich, Romney, and Obama all promote big government.”* – Ron Paul

***Government spending:*** This parameter was determined by tweets that specifically mentioned expenditure-related keywords such as government spending, deficit, debt, debt limit, cuts etc.

Sample tweets would be:

*“CNN’s Wolf Blitzer says Ron Paul is the only candidate that will reduce spending.”* –

Ron Paul

*“I’m the only one for REAL cuts, that’s what the GOP used to stand for.”* – Ron Paul

*“Release: Ron Paul to again vote against an Obama debt Ceiling increase.”* – Ron Paul

***Electability:*** Included tweets that emphasized horserace strategy and the promotion of a candidate’s suitability for the nomination. Sample tweets are:

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*“We are building momentum across the country and this is a two man race. Romney 30%/Newt 27% - Join us Today!” – Newt Gingrich*

*“CBS Poll: Independents prefer Ron Paul when pitted against Obama.” – Ron Paul*

*“DeMint: Ron Paul supporters natural part of Republican base.” – Ron Paul*

**America’s future:** This parameter was based on tweets that harkened back to better times or sounded warnings about imminent economic, social or cultural calamities. Samples tweets are:

*“This election is not just about getting more votes. Defeating @BarackObama is only one step toward our greater goal of saving America.” – Mitt Romney*

*“Should the 21<sup>st</sup> century be an American century? To answer, it is only necessary to contemplate the alternatives.” – Mitt Romney*

*“I believe in restoring the principles that made America great, and I’ll do that with your help Tuesday.” – Mitt Romney*

**Constitution/liberties/freedom:** This category included mentions of the Constitution, the loss of freedoms or the emphasis on protecting liberties. Sample tweets include:

*“I will not hesitate to use the powers of the presidency to protect religious liberty.” – Mitt Romney*

*“Court of Appeals overturning CA’s Prop 8 another example of an out of control judiciary. Let’s end judicial supremacy.” – Newt Gingrich*

*“@MittRomney Do you still believe taking away 2<sup>nd</sup> amendment (sic) rights ‘helps protect us?’” - Newt Gingrich*

**Patriotism:** This encompassed tweets that mentioned American patriotic symbolism such as troops, national holidays or sacrifice for one’s country. Sample tweets include:

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*“Thinking about our troops who are serving overseas protecting our freedoms while away from their loved ones.” – Mitt Romney*

*“Rep. Ron Paul has hired many individuals in his congressional office from the Wounded Warrior Program.” – Ron Paul*

*“Thinking about the sacrifices of the ‘greatest generation’ on this Pearl Harbor Day.” – Mitt Romney*

### **Definition of Mobilization Techniques**

Below is the criteria used to determine what mobilization techniques the candidates emphasized in their tweets. Only those techniques that lend themselves to personal judgment are discussed below:

***Personal information:*** Any tweet that mentioned an aspect of a candidate’s personal life was coded thus. Example:

*“Whole family loving the campaign trail. Don’t miss @callygingrich sharing the solutions we need to move us forward.” – Newt Gingrich.*

***Voter recruitment:*** This involves a direct call to one’s supporters, say to show up at the polls.

Example:

*“Today is the last day to vote early and avoid long lines. Click here to find out where: [link redacted].” – Mitt Romney*

***Voter Reinforcement:*** This encompasses tweets that kept voters informed about the campaign and/or indicated encouragement. Example:



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*“We’ll have a major campaign announcement today at 2pm ET at the Ohio State House.” – Rick Santorum.*

***Voter appreciation:*** This category includes tweets that thanked supporters after a win, for participating in campaign activities or for attending a rally. Example:

*“Thank you FL! While we celebrate this victory, we must not forget what this election is really about: defeating Barack Obama.” – Mitt Romney*

***Endorsement:*** Tweets that indicated a direct endorsement from a public figure were coded under this category. Examples:

*“Gov. Snyder is another conservative businessman committed to getting Michigan & this country back on track. Proud to have his endorsement.” – Mitt Romney.*

*“‘Why I chose Newt over Santorum’ – Chuck Norris.” – News Gingrich.*

***Fundraising:*** This category included tweets that specifically asked for campaign contributions. Example:

*“We’re picking up momentum & need your help to keep it going. Contribute here: [link redacted].” – Rick Santorum.*

### **Definition of Opponent Framing**

The categories below describe the criteria used to determine how the candidates framed each other and the president on Twitter. Tweets that were specifically targeted towards a particular individual were tagged as oppositional, and thereafter the nature of how an opponent was presented therein was coded as positive, negative or neutral:

***Republican opponent tweets:***

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*“Ron Paul on Rick Santorum liberalism: [link redacted].”* – Ron Paul: Negative

*“Tonight, I congratulate Speaker Gingrich on a hard-fought campaign here in South Carolina.”* – Mitt Romney: Positive

### ***Obama’s tweets:***

*“If you agree President Obama has failed to keep his word to students across the country, sign my petition.”* – Mitt Romney” Negative

*“Ron Paul in close competition with Obama in latest poll.”* – Ron Paul: Neutral

### **Definition of Twitter Terms**

*Retweet:* An original post repeated and forwarded by another user in order to propagate news.

Retweets are commonly identified as such in a message or with the abbreviation RT.

*Reply:* A tweet posted in response to another tweet. A reply is usually identified by the “at symbol,” @.

*Mentions:* These are very similar to replies and occur when a user posts another user’s username within their tweet. Mentions are also identified by the "at symbol," @.

*Keywords:* These are identified by the hash tag (#). Users insert the hash tag before a keyword or topic. When clicked, the keyword brings up all tweets that are relevant to that keyword or topic.

*Regular tweets:* These are tweets that contain no replies, retweets or mentions.

*Followers:* Not all Twitter users post status updates. Some simply *follow* those who do by subscribing to their tweets. In turn, they receive status updates on their accounts. Both statistics appear on a user’s profile page.