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Political Communication in a Digital Age: 2011 Tea Party Senators and Social Media

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**Political Communication in a Digital Age:
2010 Tea Party Elections and Social Media**

Abstract

As online networking, including the use of social media, becomes more prominent in today's society, it has been utilized as a successful tool for political figures. Because social media boasts the two-way communication model of interaction online, it is important to consider and evaluate how politicians are using new media technologies, and specifically social media, to run their election campaigns and govern afterward. Attempting to better understand effective usage of new media technology, this project is a case study analysis of the social media used by Tea Party backed candidates in the 2010 U. S. Senate elections. The research examines the candidates' use of social media, specifically social networks (Facebook), social video (YouTube), and microblogs (Twitter), and how it is incorporated into their overall political communication efforts. These efforts are measured with a one-month monitoring of posts vs. responses. While this case study specifically focuses on the Tea Party, the research discusses overall usage of social media for campaigning and governing. First of all, the study addresses the issues involved with political social media usage, such as transparency and control. Additionally, it shows examples of successful usage for others to follow. Together, these findings create a glance at the current social media landscape in politics and provide a learning opportunity for future campaigns and politicians.

Keywords: social media, political communication, tea party, senate, campaign

**Political Communication in a Digital Age:
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As with any successful communication method, politicians have been reaching out into the world of social media to better connect with voters and constituents. For example, social media played a vital role in grassroots organization and voter registration during Barack Obama's presidential election in 2008 (Metzgar & Maruggi, 2009). Through organization, fundraising, and press coverage, the Internet and other new media technologies have changed the way that politicians run campaigns and govern once elected. It is important to study how politicians are using social media because the platform is based on a two-way communication model, unlike traditional mainstream media.

Combining new political groups and new online technology creates an interesting look at how grassroots campaigns and traditional methods mesh. Because social media is more personal, targeted, and a user-friendly method, effective usage can increase voter participation in political campaigns (Baym, Zhang, & Lin, 2004). Thus, the purpose of this study is to better understand effective usage of new media technology. This project is a case study analysis of the social media used by Tea Party backed candidates in the 2010 U. S. Senate elections. However, this study looks at usage once elected to show the alignment with traditional communication methods. Monitoring Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter for a one month period provides an outline into the diversity of methods and frequencies with which the sites are being used.

Political Communication meets Social Media

The annual meeting of the Speech Communications Association (now National Communication Association) defined political communication as a form of public relations, explaining that it has been mentioned as far back in history as Plato and Cicero (Stacks, 1995). The meeting also mentioned strategy as part of political communication, showing the purposeful aspect of crafting messages (Stacks, 1995). In 1990, Harrop included marketing in political communication. He included not only promotions, such as television advertisements and bumper stickers, but also broader concepts like issue coverage and party position. For the purpose of this research, political communication will be defined as any interaction regarding candidates or pertinent issues on a communication platform where it can be shared with mass audiences.

Political communication focused originally on elections and voters, but has grown into a study of overall behavior influences today (Rogers, 2004). The study of political communication began in World War I with propaganda leaflets with Walter Lippmann's research in 1922; at this time, political communication was termed public opinion and propaganda (Rogers, 2004). It later emerged as a distinct field of research in 1981 by Dan Nimmo and Keith Sanders, overlapping with psychology and sociology (Denton & Kuypers, 2008). Today, political communication is also frequently categorized with advertising and public relations (McNair, 2003). The unifying concept behind this growing area of study is that political communication is a purposeful and targeted process (Denton & Kuypers, 2008; McNair 2003; Clark 1996).

It is also important to note that political communication is not restricted to just verbal and written messages. Since James Polk, the first president to have his portrait taken with a camera in the White House, images of political figures have played an important role in the public sphere (Culbert, 1983). With photography as the tool, images have influenced the public's

perception of a leader's ability to govern as based on his physical appearance (Culbert, 1983). This evolved into the radio and film mediums, and it eventually grew into today's sphere of political communication made up of various channels and brands (Stroud, 2007). Today, political communication uses a balance of many media forms to create an overarching theme (Sweetser & Lariscy, 2008). Politicians even hire independent consultants to craft strategies and control messages (Clark, 1996).

In the past decade, political communication has begun making the transition into the Internet and specifically social media (Hanson, Haridakis, Cunningham, Sharma, & Ponder, 2010). Many scholars (e.g., Druckman, 2004; Hanson et al., 2010; Metzgar & Maruggi, 2009) are wary of overemphasizing increased political participation based on social media. According to Metzgar and Maruggi, (2009) the outlet is just a method for those who already had opinions to voice them, instead of creating more political participation. For example, stories in traditional media are not yet driven by social media sources, contrary to current opinion (Metzgar & Maruggi, 2009). Instead, Metzgar & Maruggi's research on the 2008 U.S. Presidential Campaign found that both traditional and new media were both driving the public discussion. Still, social media is a rapidly changing field, and therefore more recent research needs to be conducted to monitor the changing news landscape. Research has shown that political blog topics are not limited to just news stories, but instead they also cover the method in which the mass media portrays a story (Jost & Hipolit, 2010).

Nonetheless, participation in political websites has seen a dramatic increase, mirroring the increase in overall social media usage (Johnson & Perlmutter, 2010). Likewise, its effects are being noticed. As early as the 1990s, researchers began looking at political communication as more of a grassroots form of public relations from the "bottom-up" (Stacks, 1995). For

example, one key campaign strategy, getting issues favorable to the candidate on the media agenda, has largely evolved into a discussion led by potential voters (Johnson & Perlmutter, 2010). Besides the campaign issue dialogue, priming the vote, or getting people to both find a candidate favorable and head to the polls, is largely reinforced with interpersonal discussion and contact (Druckman, 2004). By interacting directly with other candidates through online discussions and figuratively with e-mails, the voter-candidate connection becomes closer. Hanson (2010) called this the pattern of “activation, reinforcement and conversion” (p. 586). In the end, the potential voter feels both more connected to the election and voting remains on his list of important tasks.

The National Tea Party

In the past two election cycles, the National Tea Party has evolved into an undeniable political force. Their own website defines the Party’s role as one to “attract, educate, organize, and mobilize our fellow citizens to secure public policy consistent with our three core values of Fiscal Responsibility, Constitutionally Limited Government and Free Markets” (Tea Party Patriots, 2011). While the group held its first official rallies in 2009, the Tea Party was present as an unorganized grassroots movement in the 2008 presidential election (Greenblatt, 2010). By February of 2010, the Tea Party held its first national convention in Nashville, TN (Greenblatt, 2010). Even between elections, the Tea Party still influences political discussion, such as today’s emphasis on budget cuts in an era of stagnant wages and foreign economic competition (Dionne, 2011). While its sustainability and transition into the future is currently unclear, the Tea Party has left an impact on American politics in the twenty-first century.

In order to spread an issue platform and attract media attention, the Tea Party has demonstrated proficient use of social media tools. According to an article in the *Wall Street*

Journal, much of the conservative social media usage came in response to the success of the Obama presidential campaign's online organization (Blackmon, 2010). Matt Burns, director of communications for the Republican convention, noted that the Republican Party was not ready to compete on social media platform in 2008 because the GOP is traditionally a more hierarchical organization and therefore less internally structured for social media (Metzgar & Maruggi 2009). As Malcom Gladwell (2010) noted, social media is fundamentally built on networks and links, not leaders and followers.

This laid the groundwork for a grassroots response from the right. First, a Twitter collection of top conservatives using the hashtag #tcot helped set up a network of politically likeminded individuals (Blackmon, 2010). Additionally, the Tea Party gained national media attention after television commentator Rick Santelli noticed the popularity of conservative blog "Smart Girl Politics" (Schaefer, 2010). By the end of February, the same month as the above broadcast, the Tea Party held a series of rallies across the nation, many of which were loosely organized on Facebook. The immediacy of the Tea Party's growth fit the demands for a fast and user-friendly communication form, such as social media. In the following year, most of the digital education for Tea Party organizers came from FreedomWorks and American Majority, both politically funded groups that teach social media to conservative organizations (Hiar, 2010). "There was no way the Tea Party movement could have grown as deep and as wide as it has without social media and digital technology,' Christina Botteri, a founding member of the National Tea Party and a former PR director... told *PRWeek*" (Daniels, 2010, para. 2). Even though the issues may have been the driving point for the political movement, the fast spread of the Tea Party can be linked to social media because of low cost and availability (Daniels).

Because of its fast rise to power within the digital era, the Tea Party serves as an interesting model for studying the patterns of social media use in modern political campaigns.

Social Media Defined

Social media's definition in a growing online community has been difficult to pinpoint. Fundamentally, social media differs from traditional mainstream media because of its user-to-user format as opposed to top-down news dissemination (Clark & Aufderheide, 2009). Brian Solis (2009) noted that social media should be classified in the social sciences, rather than technological sector, because it looks at human interaction and behavior. Like physical communities, online communities vary based on the format, members, and cultural norms set by the group (Solis). Finally, Sweetser and Lariscy (2008) defined social media as a "read-write Web, where the online audience moves beyond passive viewing of Web content to actually contributing to the content" (p.179).

For the purpose of this study, social media will be used as an overall term to define online networking sites that are based upon user-generated participation (frequently called Web 2.0). This participation can range from higher involvement (blogging and file sharing) to lower involvement (profiles or comments). These include networking sites, blogging platforms, and content sharing pages.

More important than the specific technological devices used, social media demonstrates an all-over change in the ways that people think about news. A report released by American University's School for Communication found five core areas where these behaviors can be observed: choice, conversation, creation, curation, and collaboration (Clark & Aufderheide, 2009). With choice, people can go online to access the news they choose to learn about, eliminating the gatekeeper role of traditional media. Having a choice in media has two main

implications. First, it lowers the shared experience by viewers, which researchers have shown occurs when large numbers of people receive their media from the same provider (Mutz, 1994). In contrast, social media users create their own networks of like-minded individuals and search for information that both aligns with and solidifies their perspectives, a phenomenon called confirmation (Dickson, 1990). Next, both conversation and creation refer to the user-accessibility of social media, where users can create content and others can respond. In order to be successful, this continuation of interaction engages both the user and creator (Solis, 2009). Curation refers to the way people rank the credibility of content, such as a trend toward personal reviews on a product vs. longer consumer reports (Clark & Aufderheide, 2009). Finally, the report cites collaboration, also called “crowdsourced journalism,” where even traditional media rely on the audience for interaction through leads, sources, and examples (Clark & Aufderheide, 2009). These five forces illustrate how social media is not only changing the format, but also overall media habits.

Besides computers, social networks are also being accessed on mobile devices. In fact, the majority of phone purchases in the coming years will be more for online networks rather than actual phone call capabilities (Baekdal, 2008). Likewise, social network usage will shift to predominantly phone usage (Baekdal). Instead of phone communications as a one-to-one ratio, content is now trending toward one-to-many sharing. These devices provide an array of benefits to political organizers, such as the ability to cover an issue in real time through text and visuals. On the reverse side, communication blunders can go viral and gain negative media attention just as quickly with constant accessibility to the Internet.

Impacts of Social Media

Segmented Audience

Segmentation has been a key issue in communications over the last decade, with the creation of highly specialized websites, magazines, television channels, and social media platforms. Even within the mainstream media, a diversification of coverage has occurred, even when the same factual points are presented, frequently referred to as slant (Xiang & Sarvary, 2007). Selective exposure, or finding news that align with predispositions, is another aspect of segmentation to observe within social media (Stroud, 2007). Starting in the 1960s, researchers began studying whether this concept was empirically based with varying research results (Freedman & Sears, 1965). Finding an actual variance in behaviors based on viewership has been weak, but research has shown a backing for media preferences based on predispositions (Stroud, 2007). A study of U. S. adults in 2004 found that television viewership varies by political parties, with Republicans frequently trending toward Fox News, while Democrats had a more spread preference, focusing mainly on PBS and CNN (Xiang & Sarvary, 2007). Like the early research suggested, however, preferences and behaviors are two separate things; another study found that news outlet preference does not necessarily predict voting habits (Vigna & Kaplan, 2005). This suggests the possibility that viewers actively account for bias in media and make individual judgments on their accuracy.

While news media has seen a trend toward targeted publications, political communication has also become more divided based on the above factors. Research backing the tendency for individuals to consume news that aligns with their ideologies is only the first level (Xiang & Sarvary, 2007). Prior research on social media and political campaigns has highlighted the influence of parties, issues, ages, and regions, as factors in determining what content users

searched (Metzgar & Maruggi, 2009). Metzgar and Maruggi call this the “niche-ification” of American interests. The Internet era has even been credited for the further fragmentation into separate groups based on political beliefs (Sunstein, 2001). New platforms such as social networks will continue this trend and serve as a method of gathering partisan aligned news, whether consumers are actively aware of this bias or not (Xiang & Sarvary, 2007). Research on political discussion groups found that those with similar beliefs had more posts, but from a smaller, more concentrated number of participants (Freelon, 2010). With social media, users can read and discuss specific issues and then connect with other individuals who share these beliefs. This has the possibility of creating individual voters who are fixated on specific topics, when the general election may have a broader platform. With various mediums and brands available for news content, the field of political communication can splinter into various segments all covering the same facts from different angles.

Agenda Setting

Agenda setting has been researched with great interest since the 1960s and the advent of television news. In *Mass Media and Voting*, Kurt Lang and Gladys Engel Lang (1966) noted the importance of not just unbiased coverage, but also covering all issues. Following this, McCombs and Shaw (1972) cited their definition in research on agenda setting: “The mass media force attention to certain issues. They build up public images of political figures. They are constantly presenting objects suggesting what individuals in the mass should think about, know about, have feelings about” (p. 177). Only a small number of mass media news producers dominate the market, and therefore, audiences only get information about what the media decides is important enough to cover (McCombs & Shaw).

However, McCombs noted that the emergence of networked media requires more research to address the ultimate power of mass media (1972). Within the Internet era, the agenda-setting theory of mass media still holds relevance, but within this agenda users have more of an opportunity to seek, create, and share their own content, as explained earlier. The traditional gatekeepers to media coverage have seen a decrease in control, especially within the US political blogosphere (Meraz, 2011). In researching political blogs in 2007, Meraz found that they didn't always stick to the same issues as covered by mass media each day, especially right-leaning blogs. Meraz stated that this is an example of "the growing power of partisan social influence within networked political environments" (p. 120).

For politicians, one of the biggest benefits of social media is the ability for candidates to speak directly to potential voters without the media intermediary (Gillin, 2008). This also creates a more personal relationship. For example, a study of candidates' Facebook pages found that people used the personal term "you" most frequently to refer to the candidate when posting on the page (Sweetser & Lariscy, 2008). First-name references, last-name references, whole-name references, pronouns, and formal titles made up the rest of the postings, in descending order of frequency (Sweetser & Lariscy). This demonstrates the more personal relationship by just having a presence on social media, such as facebook "friends." Using the same appeal as Nixon's well known "Checker's Speech," candidates succeed when viewed as a likeable character, not just political figure (Culbert, 1983). Social media provides the means to quickly and easily doing so, without needing to create so many forced moments and to get this coverage past the traditional gatekeepers.

New Influencer

The power of the new influencer is also a new concept for communication practitioners to understand when using social media. Even within the industrialized side of online marketing, social media shops are popping up across the nation to adapt to such a specialized industry (Morrissey, 2010). Recent research has even shown a tendency toward “‘media catching,’ a reversal of the traditional media relations’ communications patterns” (Waters, Tindall, & Morton 2010 p. 241). In this process, journalists ask for leads and sources from the outside, using websites such as HARO and Twitter, as opposed to the traditional “pitch” format. HARO, or Help-A-Reporter-Out, is not limited to just public relations professionals. The website features questions from reporters, which can be answered by any individual who fits the request. This type of news coverage can be extremely powerful and create a mutually beneficial relationship between a journalist and a media influencer (Waters et al.).

A recent phenomenon of viral media, or material that gains quick popularity through Internet distribution, shows the power of any individual as a content creator. In fact, research has shown that those who use the Internet frequently also tend to be more social than the average person to begin with (Baym et al. 2004). For example, the Eepybird.com and Coca-Cola incident where two entertainers in Buckfield, Maine, videotaped the chemical reaction between Mentos and Diet Coke (Gillin, 2008). Using over 100 bottles in a choreographed explosion, with both music and acting in the background, the pair shot the video and uploaded it to their website and emailed the video to friends. The video quickly went “viral,” or was spread to a large number of users, because of the many links the pair had already held. At first, Coca-Cola fretted over legal ramifications from the videos’ popularity, but eventually supported the pair by providing free products and even hosting the videos on the company’s webpage (Gillin). Even

though Coca-Cola did not originally create the video, the company was able to latch onto consumer-generated content and benefit from a supposed 15% boost to business (Gillin). This example just skims the surface of the power of the consumer, or potential voter, as an outside force in news creation.

Lack of Control

While Eepybird's videos had a positive effect on Coca-Cola, it is important to be aware of the challenges of user content. Press secretaries and news watchers alike are all too familiar with videos or messages that show candidates in an unforgiving light and quickly become viral. The press secretary has less control as a gatekeeper, while greater transparency is required (Metzgar & Maruggi, 2009). Social media as a news breaker is a recent development, where stories emerge in tweets instead of press releases. This aspect of social media limits the control of the traditional press secretaries, and also decreases the dependence on traditional media for up-to-date content.

Wary of the gatekeeper's recent loss of control, Podger (2009) warns of the dangers of trying to delete online content in order to cover up a mistake. Instead, Podger observes how social media addresses the human side, recognizing that all people make mistakes. To increase trustworthiness and transparency, individuals should post corrections instead of trying to conceal the initial problem. Following this logic, traditional media outlets such as the *Wall Street Journal* and *New York Times* have recently released social networking guidelines for their employers, as just one small example in a recent wave of publications deciding how to balance responsibility and individualism (Podger). Additionally, political online forums have varying levels of governance, from managed to autonomous spaces (Freelon, 2010).

However, the key fundamentals of communication strategy cannot be abandoned when utilizing social media (Metzgar & Maruggi, 2009). After studying the 2008 presidential election, where social media really established its dominance in politics, researchers noted that even though the tools can be used effectively, they don't replace "message, motivation, or strategy" (Metzgar & Maruggi, 2009, p. 141). Pages cannot exist in a vacuum but need to be tied to a winning outside campaign platform. Nonetheless, the Internet can be used to frame and prime an issue, and these are both key tactics to a winning campaign (Maurer, 2011). While the issues themselves may have been the driving point for the initial Tea Party movement, its spread greatly utilized social media because of low cost and fast availability. However, little research exists on how the Tea Party has used social media once elected into government offices. Therefore, the following research combines the aspects of emerging grassroots organization and traditional press communications.

Research Question

RQ 1: How do National Tea Party winning candidates in the 2010 U.S. Senate elections use social media in political communications; specifically as a two-way communication model or a one-way push of information?

Methodology

Similar to behavior as a communication variable, the effectiveness of social media is especially difficult to measure. Because of the relatively recent development of different social media platforms, an equalizing quantitative variable for comparison is lacking. For the sake of this study, the frequency of updates is a key variable, because this measures how viable the platform functions as a news source. Also, user participation will be an important method to measure the two-way communication model, which this study specifically discusses.

Because of the large amount of content, the study will look at just one month prior to the election (Oct 2, 2010—Nov 2, 2010). Specifically, this study will look at the six Tea Party Senate candidates who won their general elections in 2010 (Jim DeMint—SC, Ron Johnson—WI, Mike Lee—UT, Rand Paul—KY, Marco Rubio—FL, and Pat Toomey—PA). Losing Tea Party candidates (Sharon Angle—NV, Ken Buck—CO, Joe Miller—AK, and Christine O’Donnell—DE) will not be considered.

For measurement purposes, the study will use numerical comparisons of user-generated content and campaign-generated content. Furthermore, participation on three major social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube) will be monitored. While many blogs or organizing websites may have existed for the campaign, only these three platforms will be analyzed for the purpose of gaining comparable data. The time frame will cover one month, April 2011. During this period, the Senate was on recess for a state work period during the last two weeks, from April 18-29.

Results

Table 1: Social Media Account Names and Website Links

U.S. Senator Name	Twitter Name	Twitter Certified	YouTube Name	Facebook Name	Social Media Links on Website
Jim DeMint	@JimDeMint	Yes	SenJimDeMint	Jim DeMint	YouTube
Ron Johnson	@SenRonJohnson	No	SenatorRonJohnson	Senator Ron Johnson	YouTube, Facebook, Twitter
Mike Lee	@SenMikeLee	No	senatormikelee	United States Senator Mike Lee	YouTube, Facebook, Twitter*
Rand Paul	@SenRandPaul	Yes	SenatorRandPaul	Senator Rand Paul	YouTube, Facebook, Twitter
Marco Rubio	@marcorubio	No	SenatorMarcoRubio	Senator Marco Rubio	YouTube, Facebook, Twitter
Pat Toomey	@SenToomey	Yes	SenToomey	Senator Pat Toomey	None

*Lee’s website also has a link to Flickr

First, finding the social media accounts on three platforms for six different U.S. Senators provides its own complications. Each senator has separate names for each account, and not one of the six keeps the same name across all three platforms. This prevents user-friendly access.

Additionally, of the six main websites, only four actually link to all three predominant platforms: Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. This is not to say that all of the six lacked connectivity. Four of the websites had links for RSS feeds to sync updates to an outside server. Also, Lee's page featured a link to a Flickr account, which is a social media platform for photo sharing. All of the links mentioned above were in visual form, meaning they were graphics of each social media's logo that lead to the separate pages when clicked.

Besides the accounts listed in the chart, other external websites and social media sites for these six also existed, some actual and some not. For example, many campaign pages still existed, such in the case of as Paul and Toomey. Although no longer updated, these accounts do add to the confusion of finding where current information is posted. In contrast to these actual accounts, false pages, specifically on twitter, had been created using variations on senator's names. Once read, these were obviously not real, but many did have followers nonetheless. To add to the confusion, half of the actual senator's accounts on twitter didn't have the actual certification check mark, which is traditionally given to public figures, popular celebrities, or large businesses. Still, these were the actual accounts, seeing as they provided links to and from the actual websites.

It is important to note that of the six senators studied here, all had accounts on the three predominant social media platforms, whether they were optimally used or not. Regardless of use, senators have acknowledged the need to have the account at the most basic level. Beyond usernames, the sites were each branded with backgrounds related to the corresponding senator and state. Additionally, all of the six senators used accounts to appear as if speaking directly to constituents by using first person, instead of acknowledging a staffer's presence by speaking in third person. Following this initial overview, each platform was analyzed separately, using the

appropriate measurement standards for the different ways each site works. Individual usage can be tracked in Appendices A, B, and C, which feature graphs tracking the number of posts by senators and posts by users, as they pertain to each platform.

Table 2: Comparing Facebook Usage and Feedback

	DeMint	Johnson	Lee	Paul	Rubio	Toomey
Fans*	132,983	787	1,851	7,550	6224	589
Senator Posts	27	5	24	37	38	19
User Posts	4,178	65	381	1,011	656	115
User Likes	16,805	72	560	3,712	3,094	86

*Measurements for the month of April, totals as of April 30, 2011

Of the three platforms, Facebook had the highest amount of user participation, specifically with the ability to like a post. In the chart, the documentation of likes shows those only on senator generated content, not on user comments. Nonetheless, it is important to note though that Facebook users frequently wrote comments to each other instead of directly to the senator, and liked others' comments. This was probably the most social aspect of the entire process. Of all the user content however, only one instance of a senator's direct response to a user's question could be found. On Lee's page, the senator wrote "Thanks for the support!" in response to a specific comment.

Usage and responsiveness were highly varied, as well. DeMint, the only second term senator of the group, had the highest amount of participation (Figure A-1). In contrast, Johnson had the smallest number of posts and responses (Figures A-3, A-4). Also, the six senators' pages had activity at all different times, and no consistent pattern could be found (Figures A-1 through A-12). Generally, activity followed frequency of senator posts, not current events.

Two senators' pages had direct requests to engage users to become active in social media. Lee started a contest to ask constituents to send pictures of Utah. The winning pictures would be

featured on the senator’s webpage. Besides this, Paul had a post asking for more outreach. He wrote, “Please take some time today to invite all of your facebook friends to ‘like’ this page. Thank you.” Some users commented below with questions on how to actually go about doing this, and other users, not the senator, answered the questions in comments.

Also notable, of the six pages only two, Rubio and Toomey, allowed users to write directly on the wall. As mentioned previously, other users frequently commented on each other’s content. However, at least externally, these comments were not addressed directly, unlike other forms of constituent correspondence. These page posts were used by constituents and organizations who were in favor of or against the senators. These two pages provided more of a social aspect, instead of another platform for just sharing links that direct traffic to the website (Figures A-9 through A-12). The other four Facebook pages had more control because users could only post when the senator posted something first. Although the comments do not appear to be regulated, the individual comments do not necessarily have visibility on the main page either. Instead, comments are compiled below and changed into a number graphic, further controlling the conversation.

Table 3: Comparing Twitter Usage and Feedback

	DeMint	Johnson	Lee	Paul	Rubio	Toomey
Tweets*	10	23	47	54	1	36
Retweets	1	2	2	0	0	2
Times Mentioned	1671	244	671	1,437	797	269
Followers	87,186	1,984	3,728	8,416	29,227	3,058
Following	29,634	48	1,551	104	2,859	3,278

*Measurements for the month of April, totals as of April 30, 2011

For the next platform, Twitter usage rates varied widely between senators, although the program was generally used in the same maner for each. For these six, twitter was primarily a

content generator/linker. Out of the entirety of tweets, only seven were retweets by others, and not one was a direct response. Beyond generation, the senators also differed greatly in the amount of people they chose to follow, ranging from 48 to 29,634. Not following others is another indication that twitter is a push platform, not a reactionary tool. The amount of twitter usage also included a wide range (Figures B-1 through B-6). For example, Rubio only produced one tweet in April, despite demonstrating a proficiency in the other social media platforms (Figure B-5).

Regardless of the extent or manner in which twitter was used by the senators, its content was highly spread after generation. The number of times a senator was either mentioned or information retweeted in the span of a month was tracked using the free online software, Topsy. These results showed high numbers of mentions. Interestingly, the results do not directly correspond to the number of tweets generated by a specific senator within that month. Nonetheless, these figures show that outside users are using twitter to talk about political related issues. The online conversation exists regardless of any senator’s participation in it.

Table 4: Comparing YouTube Usage and Feedback

	DeMint	Johnson	Lee	Paul	Rubio	Toomey
Posts*	2	5	17	17	13	4
Views	1267	1836	7561	107,655	24,114	764
Comments	6	7	0	888	84	0
Subscribers	1636	21	92	4646	161	29

*Measurements for the month of April, totals as of April 30, 2011

As the final social media platform, YouTube was predominantly a content regurgitation method for each senator. This was a platform for linking traditional and social media, because the majority of the updates were either television or radio clips that had been edited for YouTube and uploaded to the Internet. Thus, this platform was updated less frequently than the other two

(Figure C-1 through C-6). Like Facebook, users could comment on the content generated, although this conversation was generally smaller than that on Facebook. However, these comments were not necessarily related to the number of posts, as Rubio and Lee created the same amount of content in April, but had strikingly different comment rates.

Also like the two prior platforms, content varied from senator to senator. In an interesting example, Rubio used his YouTube channel to post videos specifically related to constituent concerns, in addition to reposting mainstream media content. In the month of April, his channel featured three videos directly addressed to constituents, which varied from discussing current events to explaining why he did not vote for a resolution. These videos had a very personal feel, one of which was filmed directly from his desk. They did not have necessarily higher viewership than the other posts, but their content did stick out from the norm. Also unlike the other senators, Rubio posted sound files of his radio interviews, which were not included on any other page.

Discussion

It is impossible to make any overall generalization about Tea Party usage based on these results, since they vary so widely among each senator. The one conclusive statement is that social media is used in a variety of different ways. However, it is apparent that the social conversation has continued to exist since the election, with a large number of comments, mentions, and views. Each senator did seem to prefer a certain platform over another, just by observing the amount of time put into posting and promoting.

Themes from the secondary research also appeared in the senator's pages. First, lack of control appears as a huge issue for public officials, with only two having open Facebook profiles where any user can post. Having an area where any individual can comment leaves politicians

both vulnerable to criticism and open to praise. Senators seem to be dealing with this issue in different case-by-case ways. Additionally, the agenda setting aspect of social media certainly applies here. Of course, politicians posted mainstream media content in which they were featured. Interestingly, though, many also posted op-eds or articles, which supported legislative decisions aligned with their own political ideologies. This outside content helps to validate decisions and persuade constituents. It is important to note the difference between a social media and mainstream media here. While many people expect mainstream media to provide factual news, social media's new emergence has yet to fully show how it is perceived. Users were very responsive to the articles and videos posted on the six senators' social media sites, but it is unknown to what extent they perceived the information as 100% fact.

From a conversation standpoint though, two distinct levels appear. On the first level, senators were pushing information and content. These posts did not ask questions, except for the rare two requests, but rather stated information and shared it for constituent viewing. Probably the closest example of a two-way communication from a senator standpoint can be seen in Rubio's direct videos, which mainly respond to constituent concerns. However, even these are not direct as they do not mention specific names or allow for video questions to be submitted. On the second level, users are participating in a highly social conversation of comments with each other. They directly address each other by username, like each other's comments, and participate in a debate within comment threads. They did not necessarily seem to self-segment, however. Users had both positive and negative comments. Overall, it is clear that while senators may use the pages for one method, visitors are using it for another.

Conclusion

Like any research, limitations of this study must be acknowledged when looking at the results. First, with no prior research experience, this study was my first time taking on such an extensive project. Naturally, I faced the learning curve of understanding not only the subject of social media usage, but also the facets of completing a research project. Also, I lacked the resources to hire an outside professional research company, and thus used both free online software with no certainty to its rigor and methodology.

Beyond restrictions, the results from this study lead to further questions in the area of political social media. Potential future research questions could cover the positive vs. negative feedback by constituents on social media. Also, for contrasting purposes, a larger study which documents all U.S. Senator social media usage would make it possible for more differentiation between parties or the number of terms served when compared with social media activity. This comparison could also look at social media during campaigns vs. social media once elected. From a correspondence standpoint, interviews with congressional staff members could discuss the methods and problems with documenting social media requests, unlike traditional phone call or letter writing legislative campaigns. Finally, a more qualitative study could look at how constituents perceive correspondence, images, and text on social media. It is obvious that social media is a rapidly growing field. Just as U.S. Senators can grow to more effectively use the different social media tools, more research can also be done on its implications and trends.

Still, the immediate impact of social media can already be seen from the results mentioned here. Regardless of the adoption by U.S. Senators, the audience for the messages exists, and users will be content-generators when allowed. While social media currently serves as another platform for push communications, new modifications to encourage feedback and

participations are being instituted on a case-by-case experimental basis. Finally, the popularity of a user's social media account is not completely correlated with the content it generates. In more than one case, users had a large number of followers, without providing correspondingly more content. In contrast, name familiarity seems correlated to the number of followers, with the only second term Tea Party member, DeMint, having more followers in two of the three categories. The one exception to this statement was Paul's Youtube account. Still, this first term politician's name also has recognition from his father, who ran unsuccessfully for president. Thus, senators should not rely solely on updates to increase popularity. Rather, the message and brand are still the most important factors when determining the number of followers.

Allover, social media is being accepted from U.S. Senators endorsed by the Tea Party, and its usage is continuing even after election campaigns. However, one of the most noticeable aspects of each site was the commenter's interaction with each other on the threads below the official postings. While it no longer resembles the grassroots organization platform, social media is still used by constituents to communicate with each other, instead of just directly to elected officials. These commenters continue the conversation about politics, giving the sites their truly social aspect.

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Appendix A: Facebook Usage

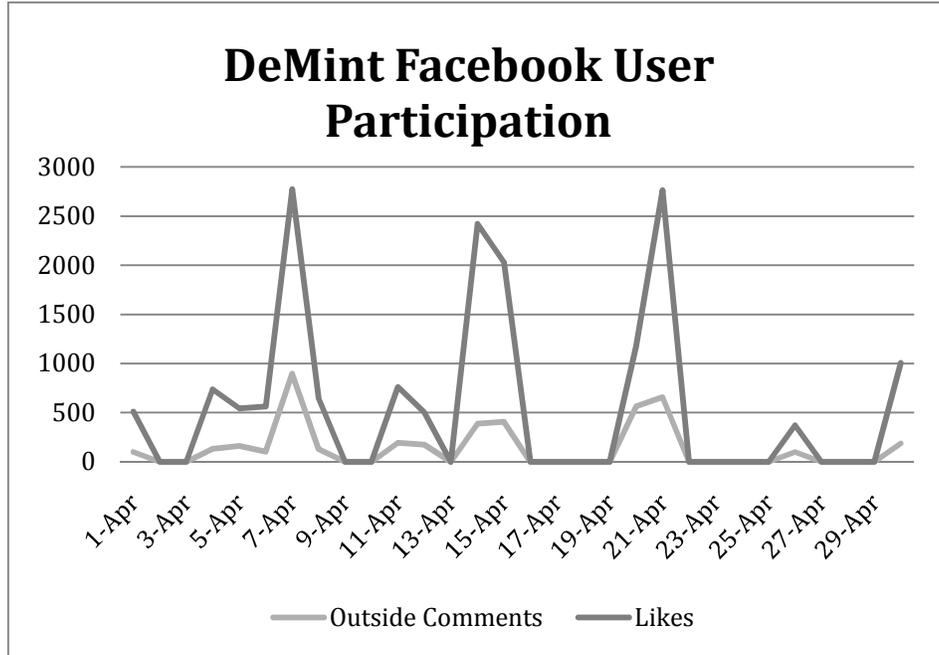


Figure A-1: DeMint Facebook User Participation

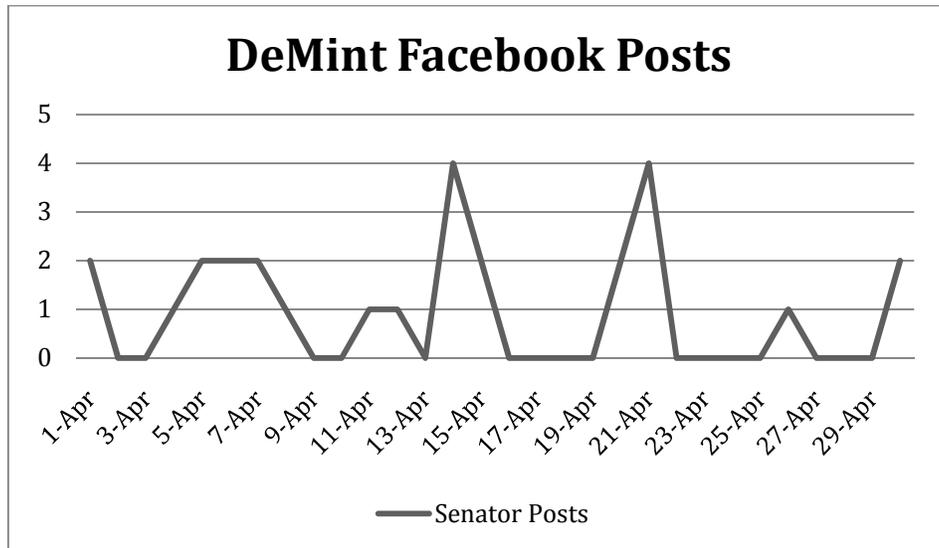


Figure A-2: DeMint Facebook Posts

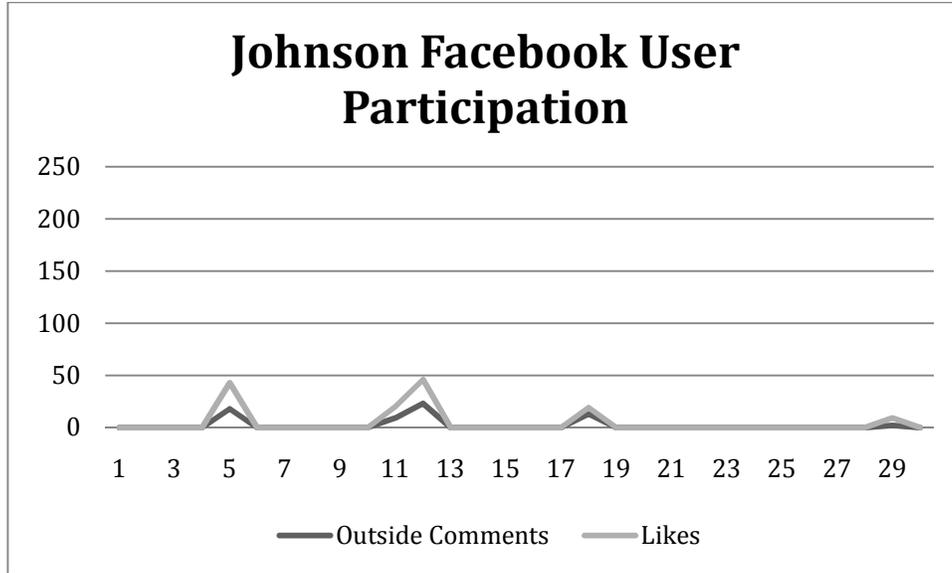


Figure A-3: Johnson Facebook User Participation

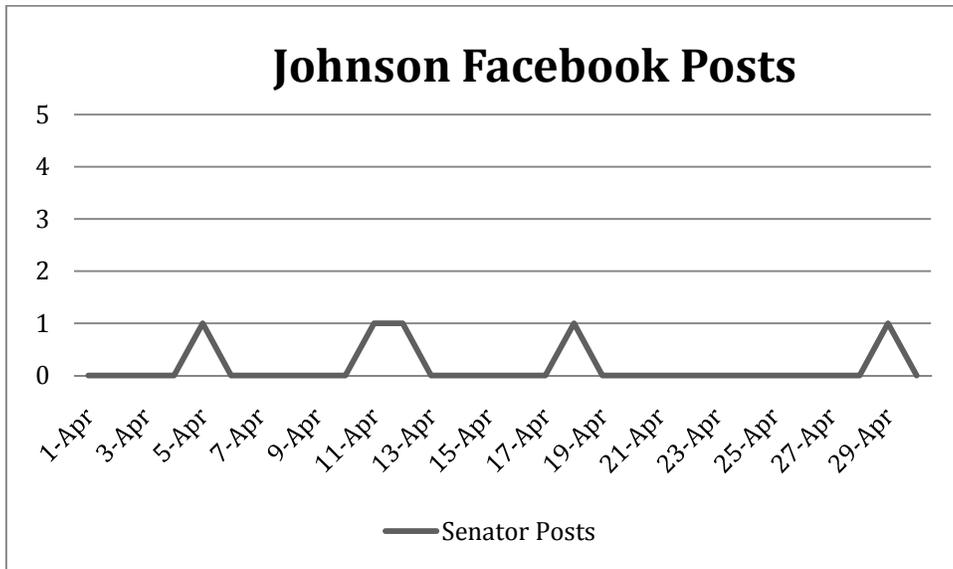


Figure A-4: Johnson Facebook Posts

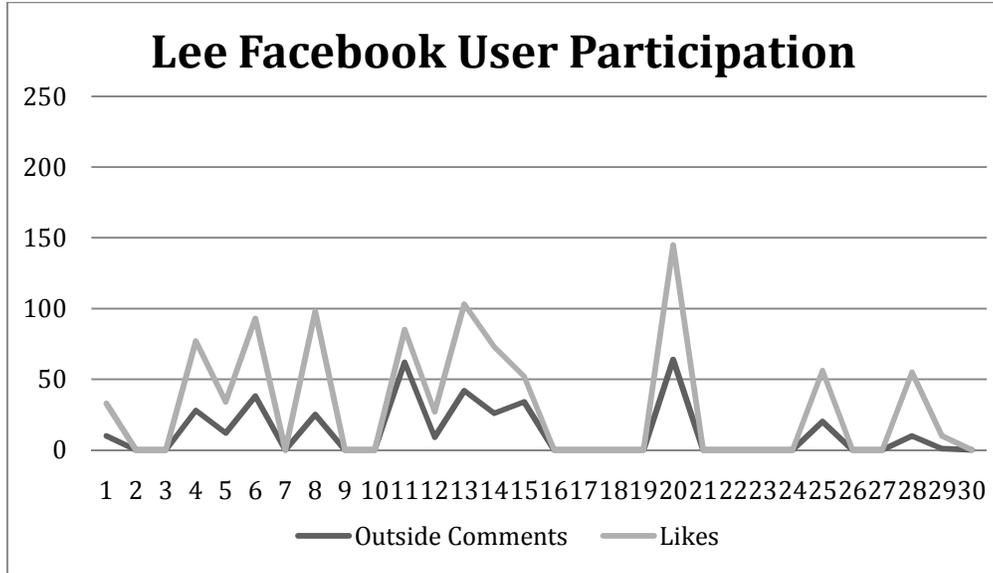


Figure A-5: Lee Facebook User Participation

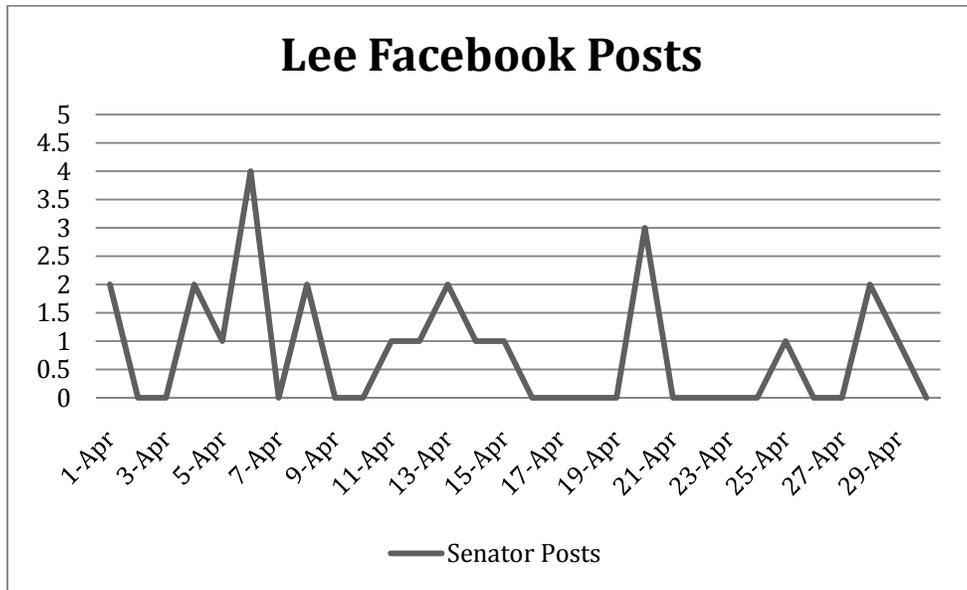


Figure A-6: Lee Facebook Posts

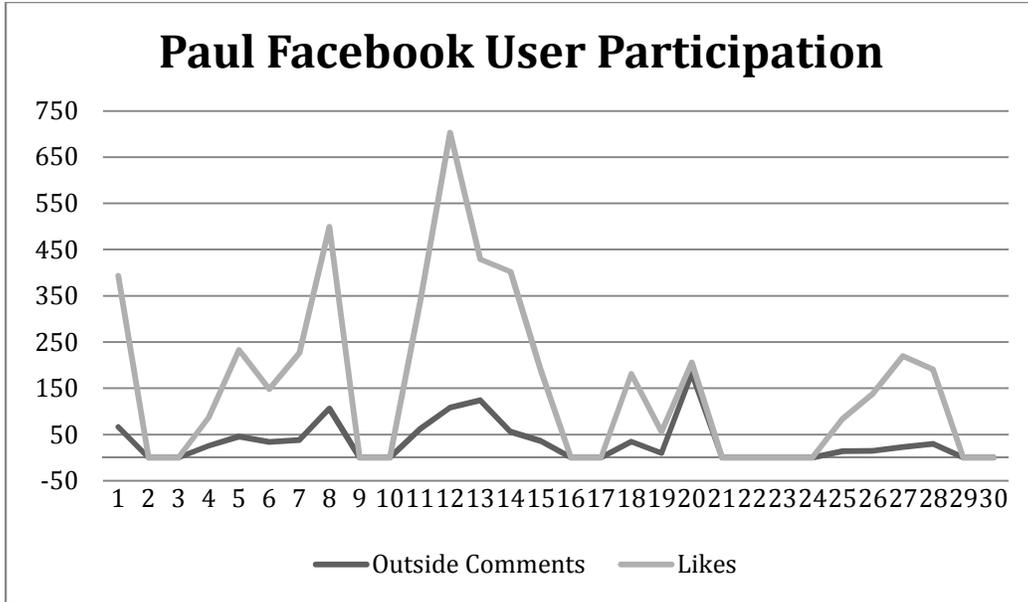


Figure A-7: Paul Facebook User Participation

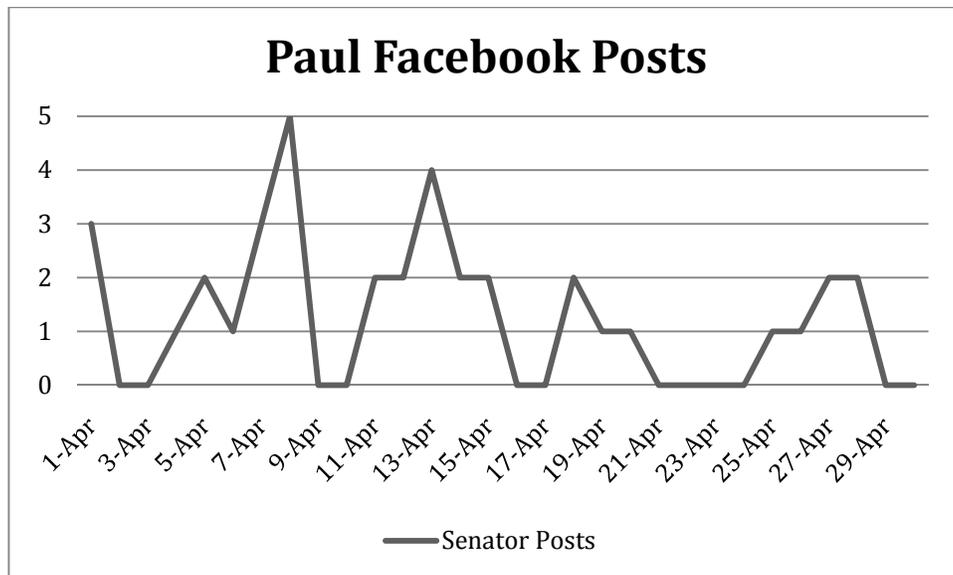


Figure A-8: Paul Facebook Posts

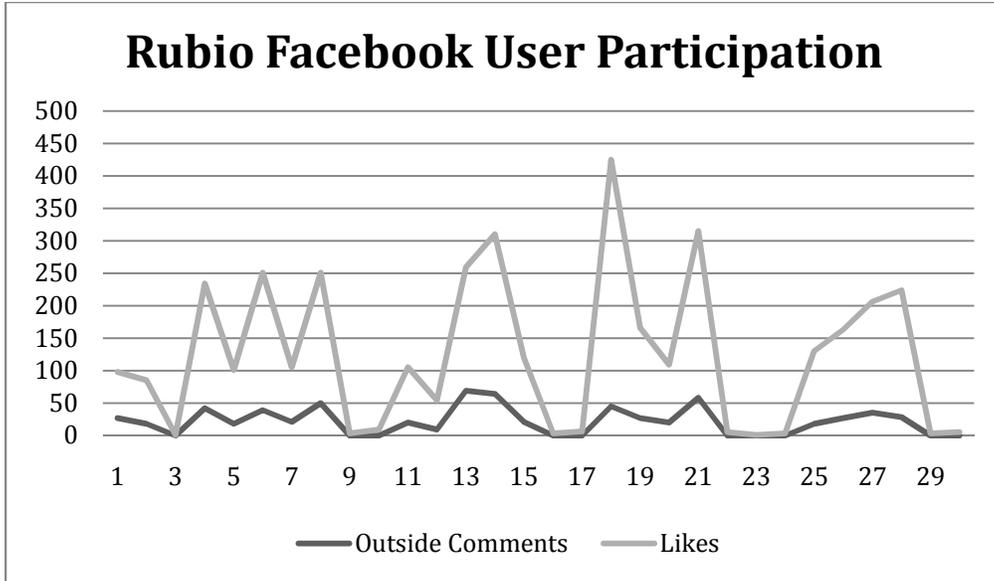


Figure A-9: Rubio Facebook User Participation

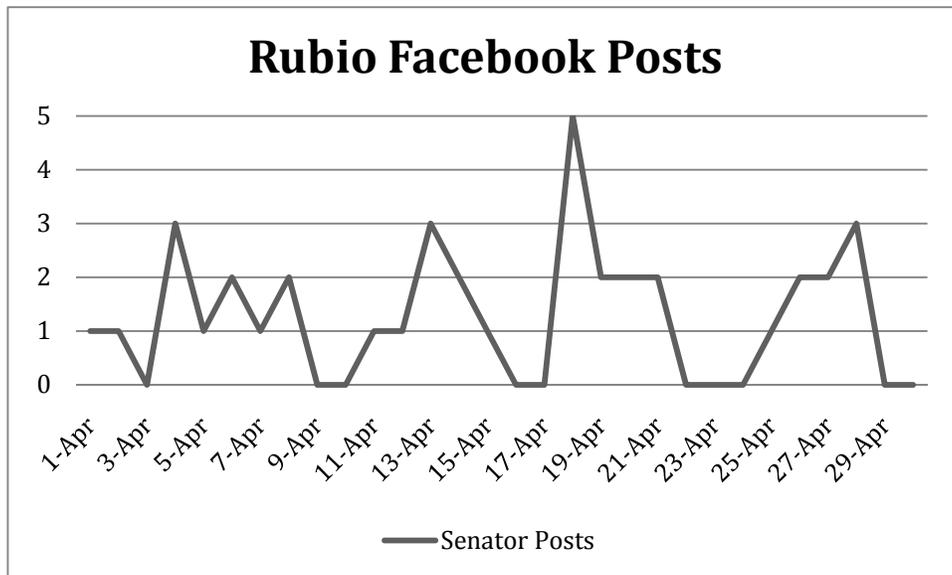


Figure A-10: Rubio Facebook Posts

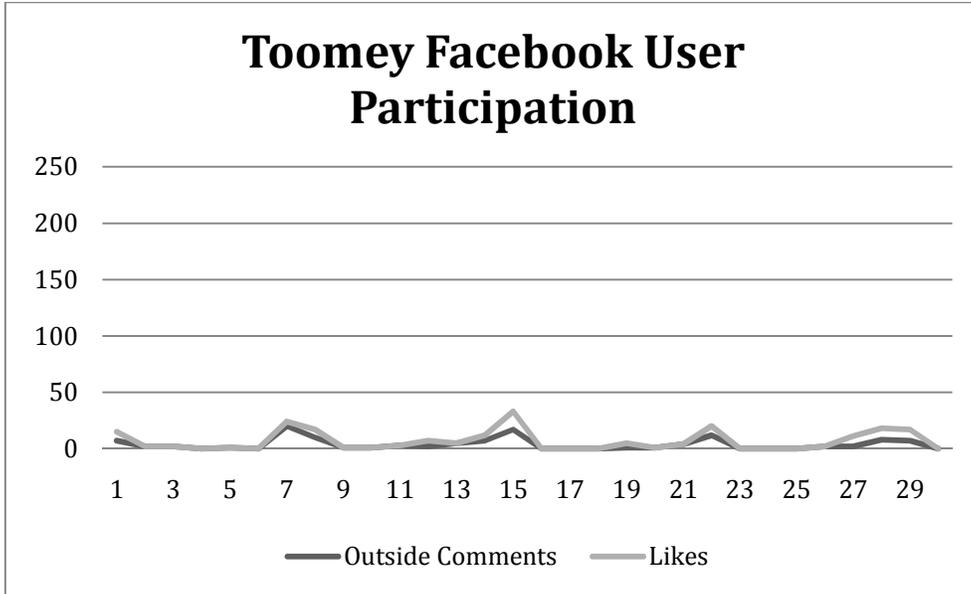


Figure A-11: Toomey Facebook User Participation

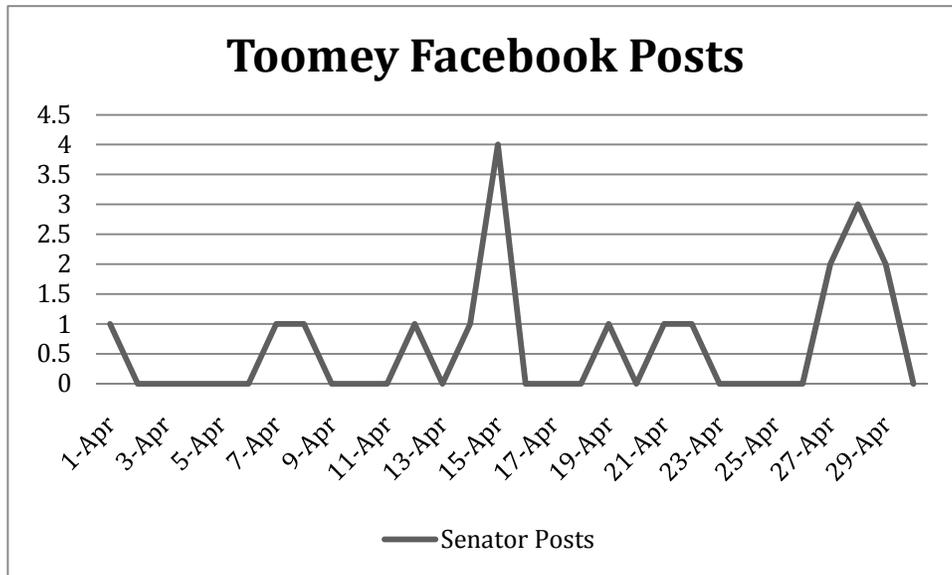


Figure A-12: Toomey Facebook Posts

Appendix B: Twitter Usage

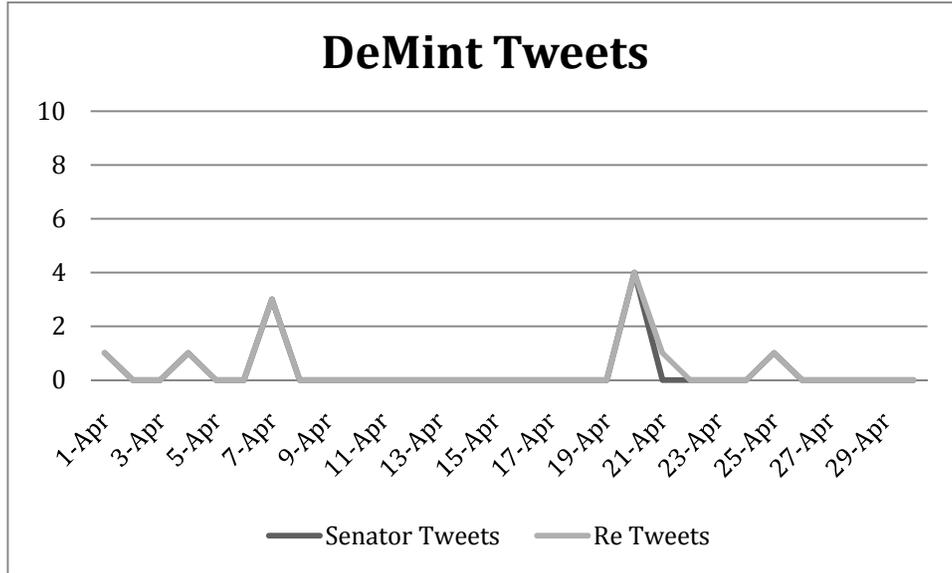


Figure B-1: DeMint Tweets

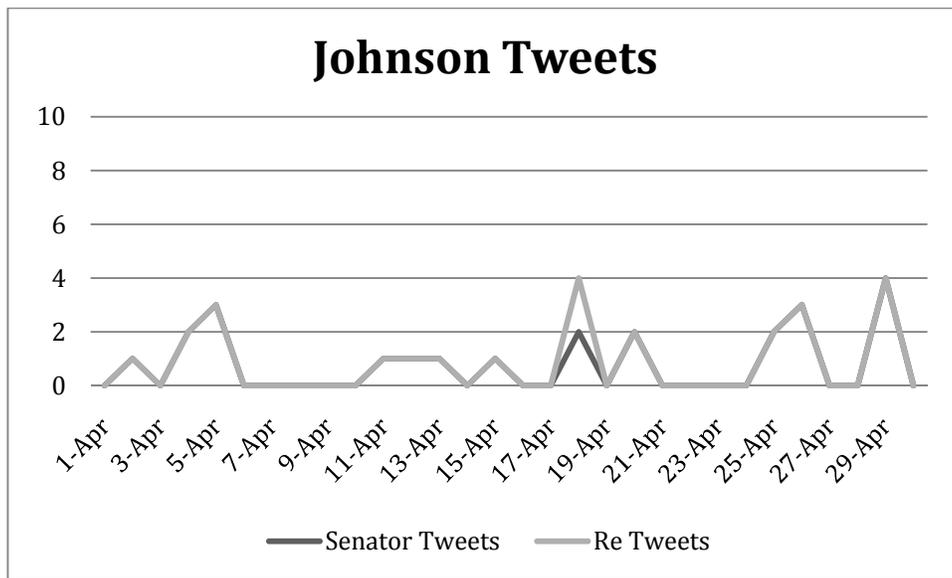


Figure B-2: Johnson Tweets

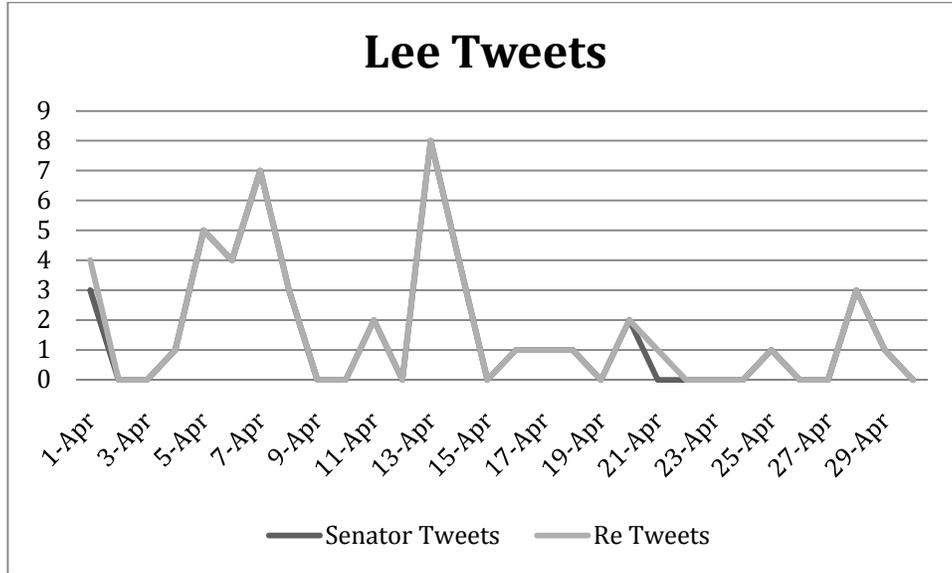


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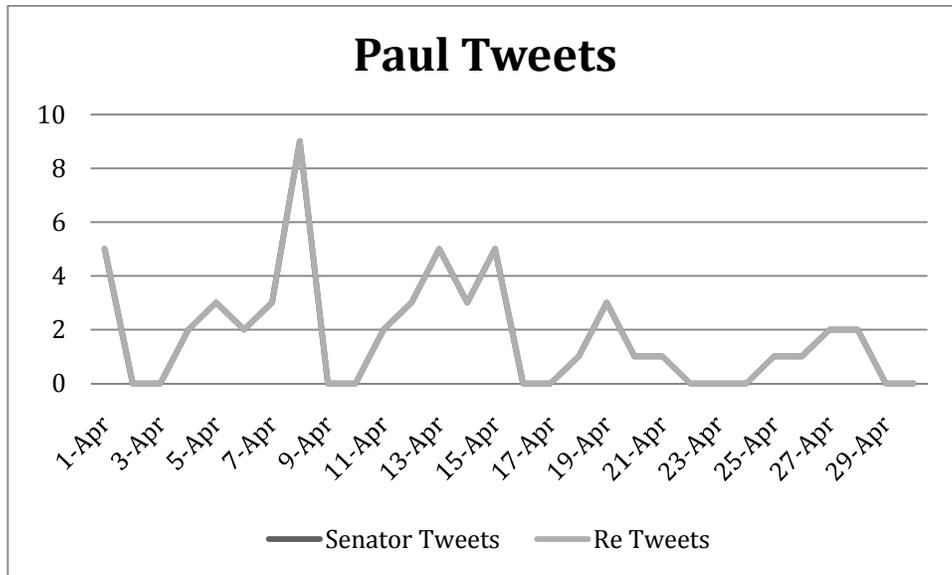


Figure B-4: Paul Tweets

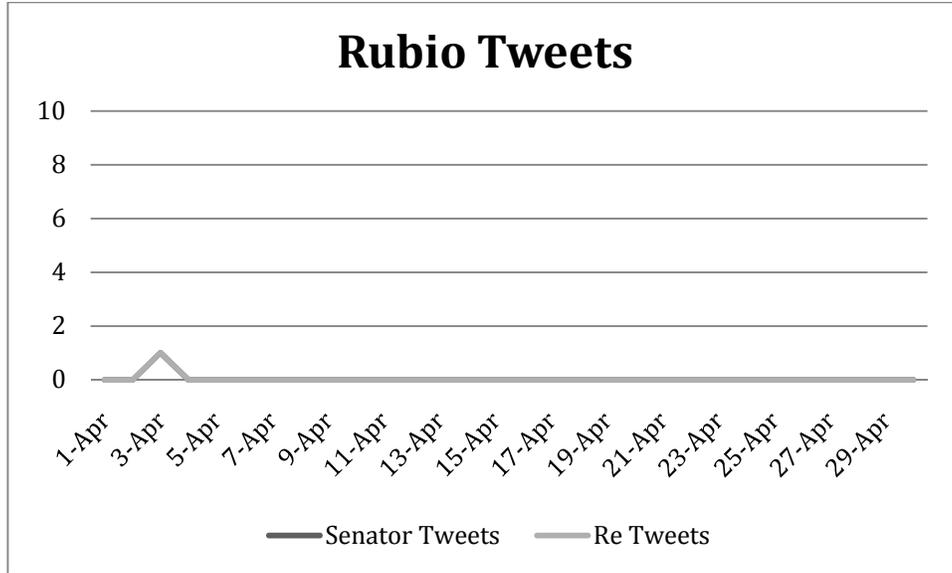


Figure B-5: Rubio Tweets

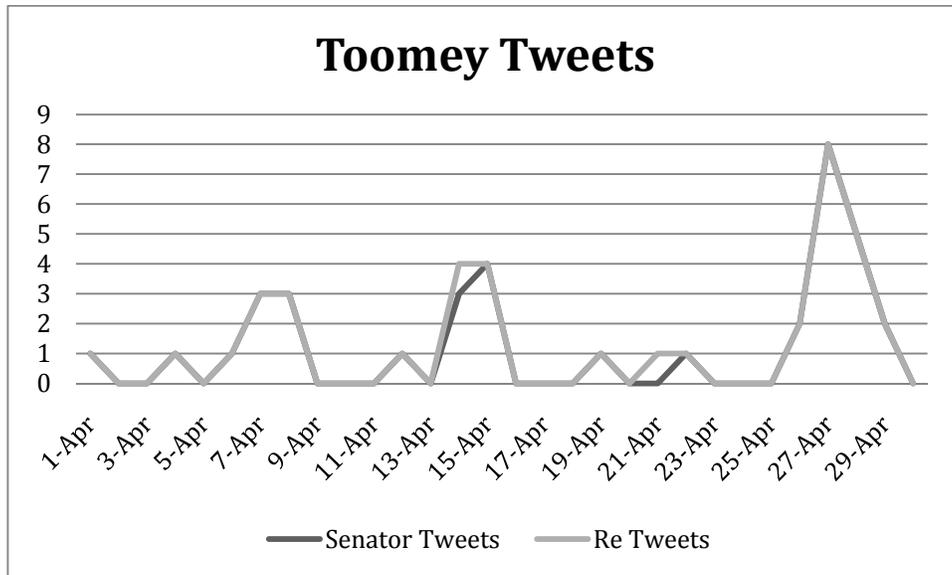


Figure B-6: Toomey Tweets

Appendix C: YouTube Usage

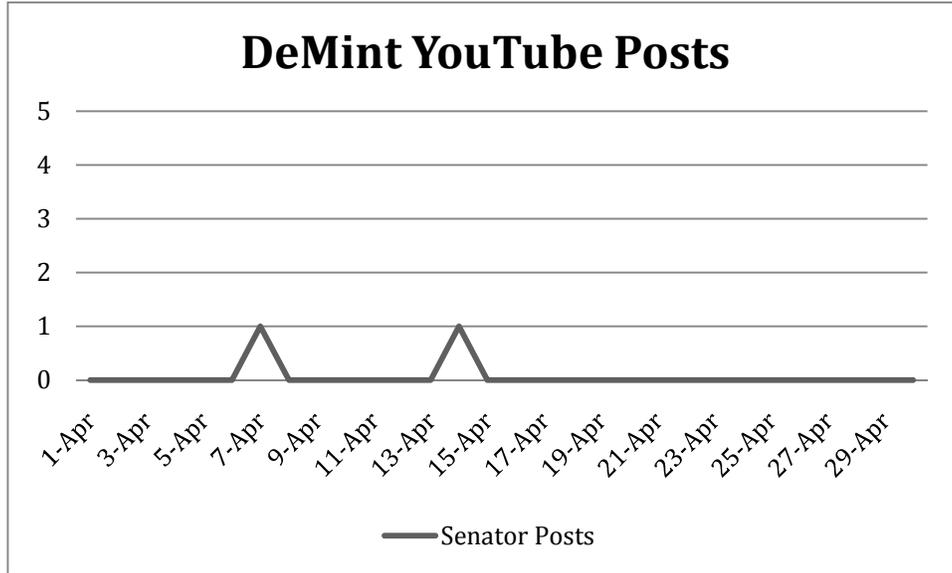


Figure C-1: DeMint YouTube Posts

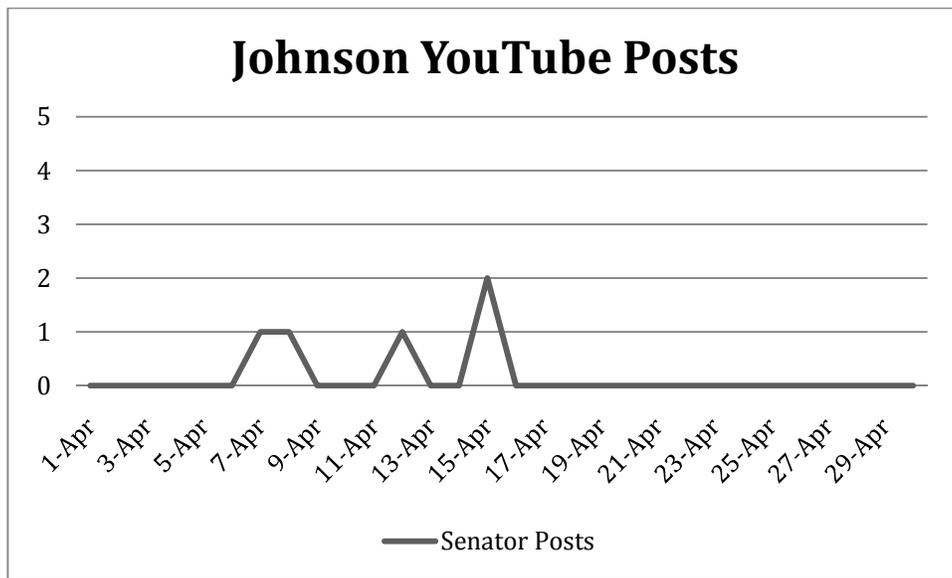


Figure C-2: Johnson YouTube Posts

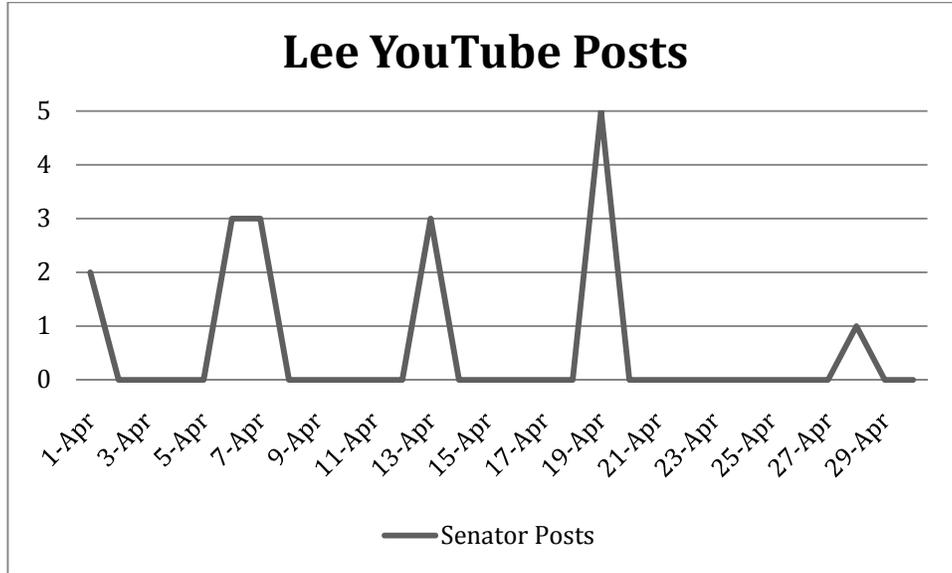


Figure C-3: Lee YouTube Posts

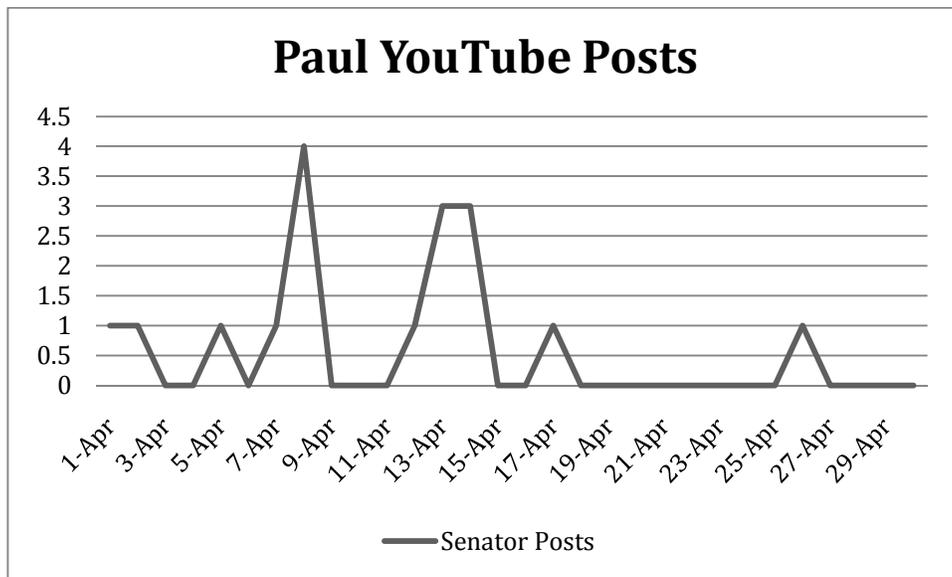


Figure C-4: Paul YouTube Posts

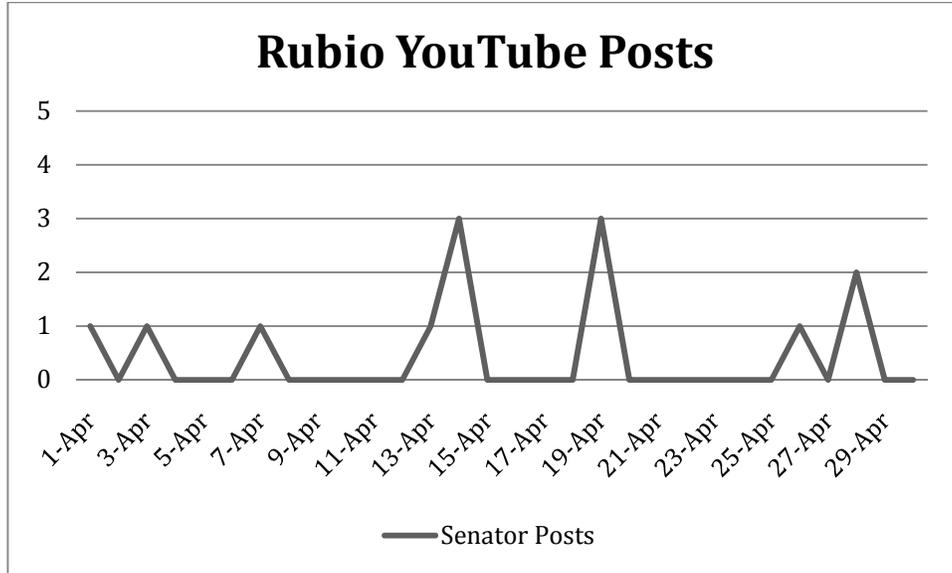


Figure C-5: Rubio YouTube Posts

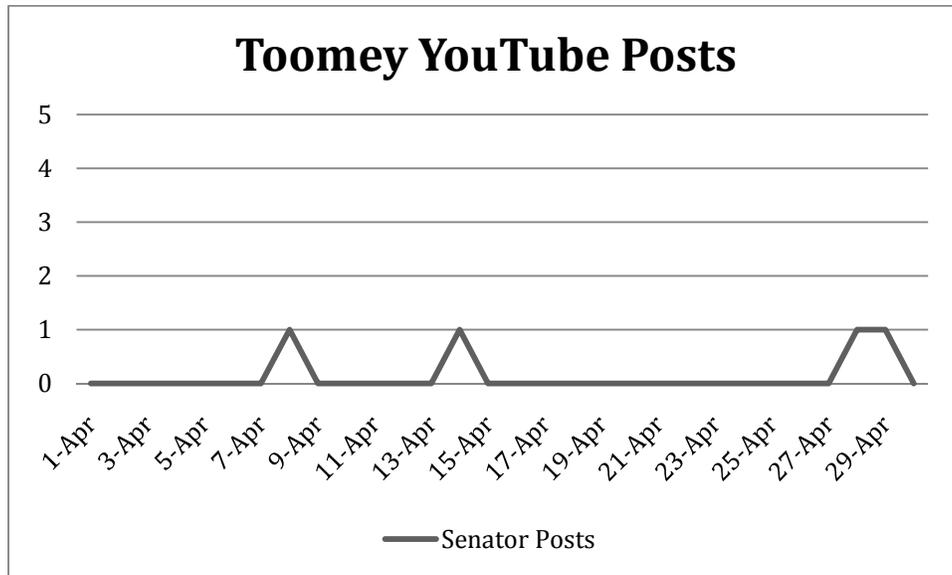


Figure C-6: Toomey YouTube Posts