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Article

The Value of a Like: Facebook, Viral Posts, and Campaign Finance in US Congressional Elections

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Abstract
Social media has become a dominant force in American political life, from Twitter and Facebook to newer rivals like Instagram and TikTok. As American elections have also grown increasingly expensive, campaigns have sought to capitalize on social media success through campaign donations. The most successful social media posts can garner thousands of likes and millions of views focusing attention on the candidate and presenting a fundraising opportunity. In this study, I examine the impact of viral posts (those receiving more than 5,000 likes or those in the top 1% of likes) on the number and amount of campaign donations a candidate receives on the date of the post. Combining social media data from Facebook and campaign finance donations during the 2018 and 2020 House of Representatives elections, I find that viral posts can dramatically increase a candidate's fundraising on those dates. This finding suggests that candidates can increase their fundraising through increased social media success.

Keywords
campaign finance; campaign fundraising; congress; elections; political campaigns; social media; US elections; viral posts

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1. Introduction

Modern American political campaigns are expensive, and candidates devote an immense amount of time and effort to fund their campaigns. Due to the intense demands, candidates and consultants are always looking for an edge in efficiently raising money from donors. Coupled with the rise of social media as not only a major societal phenomena but also one in politics, it is only logical that members of Congress would turn to social media as a place where success could be leveraged to provide campaign fundraising results. For American politicians particularly, social media has become a critical venue for offline political mobilization. Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign demonstrated to the ordinary observer that social media could be and would be a major part of American campaigns going forward. A new generation of candidates for Congress such as Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez embraced social media and rode success in that venue to becoming a household name. While candidates do use social media for direct fundraising appeals, those posts may not be the most engaging. Candidates and political action committee fundraising emails are sent with such frequency that they have become a social media punchline and are frequently ignored. Candidates compete for attention in the social media sphere, and to be successful in this area they must create engaging content. In 2022, for example, Pennsylvania Democratic Senate candidate John Fetterman utilized a viral marketing campaign to get engagement and social media views for his campaign, including a cameo (a short, paid video from celebrities for special occasions) from *Jersey Shore* star Snooki and flying an airplane banner over a crowded Jersey Shore beach to challenge the residency of his opponent. In that race, Fetterman outraised his Republican opponent, Dr. Memhet Oz, a television celebrity himself, by $23 million. But how much of the fundraising success of a congressional candidate can be attributed to their success on social media?

Campaign donations are a form of mobilization. Scholars have found that candidate visits in presidential elections can both mobilize donors as well as countermobilize opponents (Heersink et al., 2021). In 2020, visits by then-President Donald Trump and Vice Presidential candidate Kamala Harris mobilized donors, while visits from then-candidate Joe Biden and Vice President Pence did not. Candidates can use social media as a way to mobilize donors, making posts that appeal to donors and mobilize supporters (Auter & Fine, 2018). Non-profits can also use Facebook as a way to mobilize potential donors (Bhati & McDonnell, 2020). Social media can be used to increase voter turnout (Bond et al., 2012). Candidates can use social media as a mechanism to spread their messages, even if they are only reaching those who already support them, rather than persuading (Gainous & Wagner, 2014). However, even preaching to the choir can be important for campaigns. Activating and engaging supporters to turn out to vote is crucial for campaigns. Mobilization of supporters can be nearly as important as persuasion.

This study attempts to answer the question of how social media success and campaign fundraising success go together. I combine social media data from candidates for the US House of Representatives in the 2018 and 2020 elections with campaign fundraising data. I argue that higher-performing candidates on social media translate to greater fundraising success. Rather than relying on media coverage for their campaigns, candidates can utilize social media as a mechanism to directly interact with constituents and donors and generate "buzz" or increased attention. Social media provides greater control over messaging for candidates than other forms of media (Gainous & Wagner, 2014), and achieving social media success can launch candidates that may be ignored by the media. I find that viral posts (those with more than 5,000 likes or in the top 1% of likes) lead to more individual campaign contributions on the date of a post. Members raise significantly more through individual contributions (both in the amount and the number of contributions) on the dates they have a viral Facebook post, even when taking into account other metrics of popularity and other advantages. These findings are significant and demonstrate the importance of social media not only as a launching point for a political candidate like Donald Trump but as a mechanism for candidates to raise funds.

2. Social Media, Elections, and Campaign Finance

2.1. Campaign Finance in American Elections

American elections are expensive, and compared to many national political systems, fairly unique. In 2020, candidates for Federal elections (president, House of Representatives, and Senate) received nearly $7.9 billion in campaign contributions (Open Secrets, 2021a). Candidates for the House of Representatives alone raised $1.9 billion. This significantly outpaces the spending on elections in other democracies. For example, in the 2019 parliamentary elections, Boris Johnson and the Conservative Party spent £16 million (about $21 million) in his victory (Cowburn, 2020). For comparison, Donald Trump alone spent $773 million, and outside groups spent an additional $313 million, on his losing 2020 presidential campaign (Open Secrets, 2021b). Americans contribute large amounts to political campaigns in the comparative context, but in the relative context of the American economy and particularly the size of the federal government's budget, some have wondered why there isn't more money in American politics (Ansolabehere et al., 2003).

It is important to note that this study focuses on the American context. While nearly all democratic nations require some amount of money to fund elections, how they go about raising that money varies significantly, and the US stands out in its funding system. It must be noted that American elections, particularly on the campaign fundraising side, are unique. American elections are candidate-centric (i.e., La Raja & Schaffner, 2015), in part due to late 20th and early 21st century reforms such as the Bipartisan Campaign Finance Reform Act, which dramatically reduced the fundraising ability of formal party organizations. This led in part to the development of the "extended party network" approach to American politics, which emphasized the coalitions between voters, interest groups, candidates, and formal party organizations to succeed in American elections (Bawn et al., 2012). The focus shifted away from parties, candidates who sought and won their parties' nomination were forced to rely on their own personal networks and brands to find funding. Importantly, while America has had strict limits on direct contributions to candidates, the amount a candidate could spend is unlimited. This limits on donations but not on overall spending means that American elections are fairly unique. Among Western democracies, only Finland shares these limits on donations, but not on spending rules (Waldman, 2014). Due to this heavy reliance on contributions from individuals and political action committees (PACs), the US is an ideal case study for the role of social media on campaign donations. American politicians must solicit large numbers of contributions from individuals in relatively small amounts, and can not rely on the party organization to fund their campaigns. The majority of political finance literature has focused on the American context, but a growing literature is attempting to find language and comparative frameworks to analyze across nations (Scarrow, 2007).

The unique cost of American elections means that candidates must continually seek funding for their campaigns. Members expend significant time and effort to raise money. In 2012, the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee in a presentation to new Members of Congress advised that members should expect to spend four hours each day on "call time," outreach

efforts to potential donors soliciting campaign contributions (Grim & Siddiqui, 2013). Given this immense time and energy devoted to the task, it only makes sense that candidates for Congress would seek better and more efficient ways to reach out to potential donors.

On the campaign contribution supplier side, there are two major sources of funding, PACs and individual donors. PACs allow for the aggregation of resources to better coordinate the campaign activities of various interest groups such as corporations, trade associations, union members, and various other groups and overcome collective action problems (Olson, 1965). Corporations give widely to incumbents in the hopes of gaining access (Hall & Wayman, 1990). PACs can also coordinate through the extended party networks in order to help elect their preferred candidates (Desmarais et al., 2014). Corporations and executives give to further their influence (Bonica, 2016). American politicians are generally more responsive to wealthier interests (Bartels, 2010; Hacker & Pierson, 2010; Olson, 1965). Fitting with Hall and Wayman's (1990) findings that donations may buy time and access, Broockman and Kalla (2016) find that members of Congress are more likely to meet with donors than other constituents.

While PACs are still critical, individual contributions are disproportionately important to Congressional candidates. Individual donors made up 62.4% of funds for House Republican candidates in 2020, and 66.4% for Democrats (Open Secrets, 2021b). Small donors (those who give less than $200) made up 16.9% of Democratic contributions compared to 49.5% from large donors (those who give more than $200). For Republicans, it was 22.1% and 40.3%, respectively. However, most Americans do not give to candidates, with only about 16% of Americans donating to them (Hughes, 2017). Initially after the *Citizens United v. F.E.C.* (2010) Supreme Court decision, and subsequent decisions which eased restrictions on corporate and wealthy donors, a small group of mega-rich donors began to dominate the political landscape (Confessore et al., 2015). Campaigns, particularly on the Democratic side, began to seek ways to counter this. Ultimately, they turned to larger numbers of small individual donations.

Individual donors are significantly different from those who do not contribute to American campaigns. They are more ideologically polarized, and donors respond to higher-stakes elections (Hill & Huber, 2017). Individual donors are also wealthier on average than non-donors (Bartels, 2010). Individuals are more likely to donate to members who overlap with their policy positions, and to candidates on committees that are related to their occupation, but the size of the donation is largely out of the control of the candidate (Barber et al., 2017).

Individual donors can give for a multitude of reasons including material or social interests (Brown et al., 1995; Francia et al., 2003) or for ideological reasons (Barber, 2016; Barber et al., 2017). But individuals may also give for consumptive reasons, simply because they enjoy participating in politics and treat donations as a consumptive good (Ansolabehere et al., 2003; Gimpel et al., 2008). For many, participating in politics is a hobby (Hersh, 2020). Appealing to ideological extremes may also be a consideration, as more ideological candidates raise more from individuals (Ensley, 2009), and individuals target their donations ideologically to candidates that share their views (McCarty et al., 2006).

While all of these are certainly factors to consider, the political landscape is changing rapidly. The costs of elections are rising, and candidates have needed to seek new and innovative ways to fundraise to keep pace. Perhaps the largest shift in campaign finance patterns surrounding individual donations is the rise of online fundraising and small donors. Major campaigns have turned toward increased data availability and the internet to advance their campaign fundraising. The Obama re-election campaign was driven largely by small donors in 2012, with more than half of his donors giving less than $200 (Malbin, 2012). Today, small donor aggregators and online fundraising sites like ActBlue for Democrats and WinRed for Republicans are major players. Bernie Sanders received nearly 9 million individual donations in the 2020 Democratic Presidential Primary with the help of online fundraising (Grayer & Nobles, 2020). In only three months in 2022, ActBlue raised $513 million on behalf of Democratic candidates from small donors entirely online, including $89 million in only one week (Navarro, 2022) following the *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Decision* (2022) which overturned *Roe v. Wade* (1973), the case that solidified abortion rights in America. ActBlue's Republican rival WinRed collected only $155 million during the same three-month period. The world of campaign finance seems to have arrived in the online and social media age.

2.2. Social Media and Political Campaigns

Social media has been widely adopted by members of Congress. Early adopters of social media in Congress were driven in part by partisan, cohort, and ideological factors (Peterson, 2012). By 2016, all senators and nearly all members of the House of Representatives had adopted social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter (Straus & Glassman, 2016a). Donald Trump's 2016 campaign demonstrated the immense power of social media stardom on American campaigns. Perhaps most importantly, it demonstrated that social media success could be translated into real-world results.

Members of Congress engage in three major forms of political communication activities: credit claiming, advertising, and position-taking (Mayhew, 1974). Members must continually seek re-election, and to do this effectively they must continually advertise themselves to constituents. Social media represents one of the lowest-cost ways for members to advertise to their constituents in an unmediated fashion (Lassen & Brown, 2011). Members of Congress use it for a variety

of purposes, from advertising their policy positions (Golbeck et al., 2010), to learning about, getting feedback from, and even adopting, the issue preferences of their constituents (Barbera et al., 2019). They can also use it as a form of homestyle, the way in which members of Congress represent their constituents (Fenno, 1978), such as promoting their constituent service or policy positions (Russell, 2018a). Members also promote their political positions and provide information to constituents (Hemphill et al., 2013). Importantly for this study, they rarely use social media to request direct political action from constituents.

Different types of candidates use social media differently. Incumbents tweet differently than challengers (Evans et al., 2013). Incumbents are less likely to attack their opponents than challengers, are more likely to use personal posts, and are less likely to tweet about their campaign directly. Other factors, such as gender (Evans & Clark, 2016; Hemphill et al., 2021), and party (Evans et al., 2013; Hemphill et al., 2021; Russell, 2018b) also contribute to how candidates use social media.

Social media can influence not only online political behavior by individuals but also offline results. Social media activity can lead to offline political activity such as participating in political protests (Vissers & Stolle, 2014). It can also lead to more charitable donations (Mano, 2014), and be indicative of political behaviors like voting (DiGrazia et al., 2013).

The widespread adoption of social media has brought about dramatic shifts in the world of marketing and beyond. The definition of what constitutes a "viral" post is one of subjectivity. Nahon and Hemsley (2013, p. 2) define viral as "what stands out as remarkable in a sea of content." When discussing virality on social media, one study notes "although there is no universal definition of the phenomenon, it is generally understood to happen when a social media post unexpectedly reaches an unusually large audience" (Han et al., 2020, p. 576). Even among scholars, virality is a bit like Justice Potter Stewart's definition of obscenity in his concurring opinion in *Jacobellis v. Ohio* (1964), "I know it when I see it." The question of what leads to content becoming viral is one that scholars have attempted to answer, with some believing that what goes viral is random (Cashmore, 2009), while others argue there are shared characteristics of what goes viral (Berger & Milkman, 2012). Virality has become a key concept in fields such as marketing, computer science, communication, and many others (Han et al., 2020). What goes viral on social media can vary in terms of characteristics. Berger and Milkman (2010) find a relationship between positive affect and virality in *The New York Times* articles, in contrast to classical communication theory on news diffusion which emphasizes negative news (Galtung & Ruge, 1965). However, Hansen et al. (2011) find that both positive non-news content and negative news content are more likely to go viral, concluding, "If you want to be cited, sweettalk your friends and serve bad news to the public!" (2011, p. 12). For anyone who has looked at the social media feeds of political candidates and members of Congress, this is a strategy that they will recognize.

While a large amount of scholarship has been conducted on the role of social media in political campaigns, far less has been done on the relationship between social media success and fundraising success. Campaigns may use social media such as Facebook as a mechanism for facilitating campaign donations and serve as an important way for candidates to introduce themselves to donors and voters (Kreiss et al., 2018). Looking at the candidate Facebook campaign strategy in 2010, Auter and Fine (2018) find that challengers use Facebook as a means to launch their campaigns and appeal for participation in offline mobilization and fundraising. Social media efforts can also backfire. Republican candidates for Congress who criticized Donald Trump online raised less than their counterparts who did not (Fu & Howell, 2020). Some studies have found that members of Congress may consider campaign contributions when posting on social media, particularly about the interests of industries that may financially support them (Yano et al., 2013). Others have found that incidental exposure to news on social media can impact online and offline behavior such as campaign contributions based on surveys during the 2016 presidential election (Yamamoto & Morey, 2019). More recent scholarship has found that adoption of Twitter by candidates for Congress results in about a 1–3% increase in campaign contributions. But overall, the relationship between social media and campaign contributions has not been given adequate attention in the academic literature given the importance of campaign contributions in American elections.

I propose that social media plays an integral role in campaign fundraising in American elections. I hypothesize that candidates for Congress who are more successful on social media will enjoy greater fundraising success. In particular, I argue that high-visibility posts, the ones that go viral and gain the most exposure and get the most interactions, will be major drivers for individual campaign contributions. Viral posts can focus attention on the candidate, raise their visibility, and ultimately lead to more individuals donating to the candidate in their wake.

3. Data and Methods

This article investigates the relationship between social media success and campaign fundraising and relies upon two main and significant datasets. First, to measure social media success, I use data from the Facebook pages of the Congressional candidates. I measure fundraising success through individual campaign donations obtained from the Center for Responsive Politics. I focus on the 2018 and 2020 elections for the US House of Representatives. I choose to focus on House elections for several reasons. First, House candidates are up for re-election every two years. This means that candidates must be actively campaigning in each election cycle,

unlike senators who are only up for re-election every six years. Secondly, there are 435 districts of the House of Representatives, compared to only 100 Senators. This provides significantly more variation among candidates and more opportunities to test theories related to social media and campaign fundraising. Finally, given that senators are one of only 100 and one of two in any given state, they are far more likely to enjoy name recognition in their state, but also nationally, than members of the House. Therefore, it would be expected that House members would have more to gain through adept social media usage in terms of making a name for themselves and the subsequent rewards that could come with it.

Facebook is the dominant social media site in the US, with more users than competitors like Twitter or TikTok (Gramlich, 2021). In 2021, 69% of American adults reported using Facebook, a number that has not seen any significant change since 2016. Only 40% of Americans used Instagram, higher than the 23% that used Twitter or the 21% that used TikTok. Of Facebook users, seven-in-ten visit the site daily, and it is used across the age, racial, political, and educational spectrum (Gramlich, 2021). The partisan differences in other social media platforms are also largely absent from Facebook.

After the 2016 Cambridge Analytica scandal, Facebook tightened access to their data for researchers. To access Facebook data, researchers must apply for access to the Facebook Crowdtangle API. This service allows researchers to get information on publicly available pages and groups, including the text of posts, the number of followers, likes, comments, and other metrics. Crowdtangle also offers the significant advantage of allowing researchers to access historical data dating back to the creation of a given page. This combination of attributes makes Crowdtangle an ideal platform for researchers interested in social media and political communication.

In total, I analyze a total of 601,238 (277,663 in 2018, 326,536 in 2020) Facebook posts from candidate campaign pages, including both incumbents and challengers, by 844 unique pages across the two election cycles. I use posts from the campaign accounts of candidates, not official accounts. For incumbent members of Congress, there are strict rules governing social media usage. Members are not allowed to use official funds or Congressional staff for any campaign purpose (Straus & Glassman, 2016b). Any official Congressional communications staff may only post content that is "germane to the conduct of the Member's official and representational duties" (p. 3). This precludes any campaign-related activity. As such, many members of Congress have both an official Congressional Facebook account run by Congressional staff, and a second campaign account run by separate campaign staff.

For this study, I define social media success in two ways: (a) Many Facebook posts by candidates for Congress get relatively few likes, as depicted in Figure 1. A significant number of posts get very little or no engagement at all as measured by likes. The number of likes drops dramatically after a few dozen, with a very long

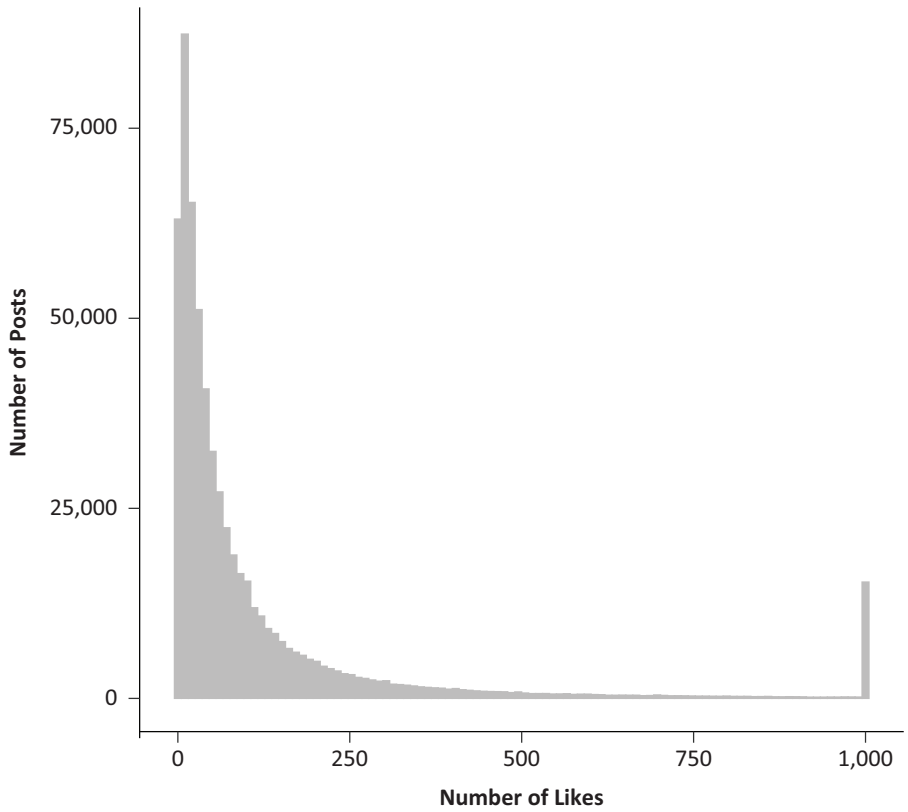

Figure 1. Number of likes per Facebook post. Note: Posts with 1,000 or more likes are included together.

tail. The average number of likes for all posts is 176.66, with a median of only 44. Since most posts do not get significant engagement, it is unlikely they will lead to significant campaign contributions. Most people who see a post will not donate. For this study, I propose a relatively high bar for a post to be considered successful. The first metric is using the top 1% of posts measured by the number of likes. The top 1% of posts are those that receive more than 2,228 likes. In his study, this is operationalized as a dummy variable, with posts in the top 1% labeled as 1, and those that are not labeled as 0. The second metric (b) for viral success is even more strict and follows the work of Han et al. (2020), who use the metric of 5,000 retweets on a tweet for the definition of virality. Based on their measure, .33% of all tweets in their study reach the threshold of virality. Facebook does not have a retweet feature but utilizes the like measure instead. This is an even higher bar than the top 1%. Only .38% of posts reach this threshold, comparable to the above finding of .33% of tweets reaching viral status. Like that study, we again employ a binary metric of viral posts, any that receives over 5,000 likes is coded as 1, and those with fewer are coded as zero.

It is important to note that the definition of virality can be defined in several different ways. As a robustness check, I also used an even stricter threshold of the top .1% of posts by members of Congress. The results remain substantively the same, so I opt to only use the first two metrics discussed, the top 1% of posts and those with over 5,000 likes.

To account for the potential that only the most popular accounts receive the most likes and subsequent donations, I also control for the total number of likes an account, rather than the post, has at the time of posting. Viral posts accounts do have significantly more followers than non-viral posts. However, the number of accounts reaching viral status is not negligible. Out of the 844 unique accounts, 79 (9.4%) have posts that reach viral status (over 5,000 likes), and 169 (20%) accounts make it into the top 1%. The top posts are not monopolized by a few individuals, even though those who make it, on the whole, are more popular on Facebook. While those party leaders are more highly represented in these ranks, such as Speaker Nancy Pelosi and incoming Democratic leader Hakeem Jeffries, there are significant upstarts and challengers on the list. This includes Republican newcomers such as Representatives Marjorie Taylor-Green and Lauren Boebert and rising Democratic stars like Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Katie Porter. It also includes some high-profile challengers like Amy McGrath who lost to Kentucky Representative Andy Barr in 2018 before later becoming the Democratic nominee to challenge Senate Republican Majority Leader Mitch McConnell in 2020. To account for whether it is the posts themselves, or simply the number of likes and followers an account has that may be driving campaign contributions, I include the logged number of page likes at the time of each post.

To further account for the expectations and popularity of any given representative, I also include a measure developed by Facebook, overperformance (for full details, please see https://help.crowdtangle.com/en/articles/2013937-how-do-you-calculate-overperforming-scores). Essentially, the overperformance metric takes into account the expected performance of a given post versus the actual performance (Crowdtangle, 2022). This metric looks at the number of likes, reactions, shares, and comments for the 100 previous posts from any given account. The bottom and top 25% of posts are dropped from the calculation. The remaining posts are then used as a reference for the newest post at the same time point after posting. This post is then compared to the average and the difference is multiplied by the weighted account metric. By including this metric of overperformance, it is possible to control for those posts that are more or less popular even within a given account.

I also include standard metrics which would be expected to influence the number of campaign contributions any given candidate receives. The most significant from the literature is incumbency (Ansolabehere & Snyder, 2002; Fouirnaies & Hall, 2014; Hall & Wayman, 1990). Incumbents enjoy significant advantages when it comes to fundraising from different sources, such as corporations (Kowal, 2018). While incumbents tend to do better at fundraising, some challengers may receive more coordinated funding and enjoy greater electoral success (Desmarais et al., 2014). More competitive seats also tend to draw more fundraising interest. To account for this, I utilize the Cook Partisan Vote Index (PVI; Cook Political, 2022). I consider any race with a PVI for either party of less than 5 points to be competitive. Those races with a PVI under 5 are coded as 1, and those over 5 are coded as 0. Open seats tend to be higher profile, with more focus on changing traditional factors that drive fundraising success (Berkman & Eisenstein, 1999). For this reason, I code candidates in open-seat races without an incumbent as 1, and those where an incumbent is present as 0. The party is also included in the model, with Democrats coded as 1 and Republicans and independents as 0. Democrats enjoy a significant fundraising advantage over Republicans from small donors and individual donors (Blake & Zubak-Skees, 2022; Davis, 2020). Because of the success of online fundraising operation Act Blue on the Democratic side, we would expect to see Democrats having a fundraising edge over Republican candidates when it comes to individuals and small donors.

The second major source of data is the Center for Responsive Politics, a non-profit that aggregates data from the Federal Election Commission (FEC). All candidates for federal elective office in the US (president, House of Representatives, and Senate) must file reports at regular intervals with the FEC For House candidates, this must be done quarterly. Candidates for Congress by law must report all individual contributions over $200. Many campaigns choose to report amounts below this threshold.

However, in recent cycles, candidates have relied increasingly on small donors, and many of these contributions are routed through third-party organizations such as ActBlue or WinRed. As these are separate PACs, all contributions which pass through these organizations are reported to the FEC, giving more complete coverage of campaign contributions. For contributions over $200, the FEC requires the disclosure of various donor-level characteristics such as employer, occupation, and zip code. The Center for Responsive Politics, through its website (https://www.opensecrets.org), provides a platform for individuals, journalists, and researchers to analyze FEC data, including downloading of bulk data by researchers. For this study, I include all individual campaign donations to candidates for the House of Representatives in the 2018 and 2020 election cycles. In total, I examine 4,968,594 donations to House candidates (1,691,287 in 2018 and 3,277,307 in 2020).

For this article, I focus on contributions that occur on the date of a post. I do this because the life cycle of a social media post is incredibly short. Facebook posts per minute peak immediately after posting, and by six hours have become stale, with views plateauing and getting minimal views going forward (Castillo et al., 2014). Posts on Facebook receive the most engagement (likes and comments) in the first two to four hours, and rarely after 24 hours (Fiebert et al., 2014). If a potential donor is to be motivated by a post, it makes sense that they would be exposed very soon after the post is made. If they are motivated to donate by a viral post, it makes theoretical sense that they will do so soon after exposure. They are unlikely to see a two-week-old post, and theoretically even less likely to donate because of it.

I utilize ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models to test the effects of social media success on fundraising. I create models for three dependent variables: the total number of donations to a candidate on the date of a post, the total dollar amount received by the candidate on the date of a post, and the logged dollar amount received by the candidate on the day of the post. For all three variables, I create two separate models which test the two metrics for viral posts as independent variables, those posts that are in the top 1% of likes, and those that receive over 5,000 likes. I also include control variables for the party, incumbency, open seat, competitive district, the logged number of page likes at the time of posting, and Facebook's measure of overperformance.

4. Results

I make several significant findings in this article. First, I find that viral posts are followed by significantly more campaign donations than non-viral posts (these results are reported in Table 1). Candidates receive an average of $8,483.40 on the date of viral posts, compared to only $2,708.58 on non-viral post dates. The median non-viral post is followed by $0 in contributions, however, the median viral post is followed by $1,969 in contributions. It is not only the dollar amount of donations that increase on the dates of viral posts, but also the number. Viral post dates receive an average of 71 contributions, whereas, on non-viral post dates, candidates receive an average of 7 donations.

It is possible that other confounding factors play a role in the amount a candidate raises. This includes things like being an incumbent, in a more competitive district, and open seat, or even simply the candidates social media popularity in general. For this reason, I create OLS models to test for these factors, with results presented in Tables 2 and 3. Ultimately, I find that post-performance plays a significant role in both the dollar amount received by the candidate as well as the number of posts. In all models tested, a post being viral (more than 5,000 likes) or in the top 1% of likes has either the largest or second largest effect in the model. In all cases, the coefficients are statistically significant and positive.

Fitting with the existing theories, this study finds that many of the control variables are also statistically significant and in the expected direction. In each model and each viral specification, being a Democrat is statistically and positively associated with increased fundraising success. Competitive seats also result in greater fundraising

Table 1. Viral and non-viral post contributions.

Statistic	Mean	Median	Max
Non-Viral			
Likes	134.52	44	
Comments	29.63	4	28,624
Contrib. $	2,708.58	0	5,500,500
Contrib. Num.	7.80	0	1,696
N	602,058		
Viral			
Likes	11,072.4	7,837	174,607
Comments	1,851.79	1,061	56,940
Contrib. $	8,483.40	1,968	379,114
Contrib. Num.	71.01	14	2,930
N	2,329		

Table 2. OLS model results, viral posts (>5,000 likes).

			Dependent Variable
	Date Log Number (1)	Date Number (2)	Date Number (3)
Page Likes (log)	.23*** (.01)	363.50*** (7.31)	1.43*** (.01)
Incumbent	−.92*** (.01)	−1,767.70*** (57.03)	−5.94*** (.09)
Democrat	2.32*** (.01)	2,382.01*** (47.85)	9.17*** (.08)
Overperforming	−.01** (.01)	2.64*** (.75)	.01 (.01)
Viral	2.51*** (.08)	5,190.25*** (376.48)	60.12*** (.59)
Open	.53*** (.01)	248.68*** (61.73)	−1.91*** (.10)
Competitive	.49*** (.01)	685.73*** (20.66)	1.62*** (003)
Constant	.03*** (.01)	−1,274.03*** (68.02)	−6.97*** (.11)
Observations	600,704	604,036	604,036
R^2	.14	.01	.07

Note: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$; totals are for the total amount and number of contributions individual contributions received on the date of a post.

success, with positive coefficients and significant results. Open seat results also fit with existing theory, with positive coefficients for each model. However, unlike existing theory, incumbency is associated with negative effects on campaign donations.

In terms of metrics of post-success, the log number of page likes is positively and significantly associated with greater fundraising success. However, Facebook's metric of overperformance in some models, but is significant in others. As such, I argue that this metric is not the best measure to assess these posts.

5. Conclusion

This study finds that social media success is indicative of campaign fundraising success. Candidates for Congress who are more successful on social media raise more money on days when they have viral posts than on other dates. This is an important finding for the literature surrounding campaign finance as well as social media in campaigns. By demonstrating that candidates receive more contributions on the dates of viral posts, I find that candidates who are more successful on social media can

Table 3. OLS model results, top 1% of posts, by likes.

			Dependent Variable
	Date Log Number (4)	Date Number (5)	Date Number (6)
Page Likes (log)	.22*** (.02)	360.86*** (7.34)	1.37*** (.01)
Incumbent	−.92*** (.02)	−1,767.19*** (57.03)	−5.97*** (.09)
Democrat	2.32*** (.02)	2,387.73*** (47.86)	9.27*** (.07)
Overperforming	−0.01** (.02)	2.57*** (.75)	−.01 (.01)
Top 1%	1.66*** (.05)	2,968.47*** (235.56)	41.45*** (.37)
Open	.52*** (.02)	238.04*** (61.74)	−2.07*** (.10)
Competitive	.49*** (.02)	684.16*** (20.66)	1.61*** (.03)
Constant	.03*** (.01)	−1, 264.90*** (68.02)	−6.77*** (.11)
Observations	600,704	604,036	604,036
R^2	.14	.01	.07

Notes: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$; totals are for the total amount and number of contributions individual contributions received on the date of a post.

capitalize on their success in the real world. A viral post can bring in an additional $5,190 to the candidate, and a post in the top 1% can bring in an additional $2,968, controlling for other factors. This is a significant increase in fundraising, given that candidates bring in on average $2,730 per day. Viral posts can more than double the amount raised by candidates.

This research presents one case study of the offline mobilization effects of social media. The American political finance system is highly unusual in a comparative context. The lack of spending limits, but the relatively strict limits on individual direct contributions mean that candidates for Congress in the US must continually find ways to mobilize donors. The relative ease of clicking a like button on a post is one thing. Candidates, however, cannot run a campaign on likes. At the end of the day, they need real, on-the-ground results. Certainly, the most important type of mobilization culminates in the voting booth, but to get there candidates must run a campaign, and that requires money. Candidates are constantly seeking an edge on how to efficiently raise the most contributions. That necessity may be somewhat unique to the American context, but the observation that there are real-world effects of social media success lends another piece of evidence to the importance of social media on political mobilization offline. Future studies should address the limitation of a single case study, with a more comparative perspective on the role of virality and social media success on political fundraising.

Social media has become a dominant force in daily life. The most successful influencers and social media personalities can earn millions of dollars per year and become household names. A single viral TikTok or Youtube video can launch a career and lead to internet stardom. I find that social media success can lead to financial benefits for political candidates as well, through an increase in campaign contributions. Social media likes and shares may not only be useful in promoting a candidate's name recognition, but also in bolstering their campaign coffers. This article adds to a growing literature that demonstrates online political behavior can have real-world political effects. These findings take a promising first step in understanding how social media success and viral posts can lead to increased political fortunes.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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