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## Digital Divas: Women, Politics and the Social Network

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## Introduction\*

In the 2008 presidential campaign, Barack Obama emerged as the champion of new media by using social networking tools in innovative ways to turn on and turn out young voters. Since then, some of the most visible and creative users of social media in the political realm have been women:

- After humiliation and defeat in 2008, Sarah Palin resurfaces as a powerful force in the Republican Party through Facebook and Twitter.
- Missouri Sen. Claire McCaskill is featured in *Time* magazine's 2009 "Top 10 Celebrity Twitter Feeds" for her microblogs about her family, her diet and CEO bank pay that she writes herself (as she noted in a tweet).<sup>1</sup>
- Hillary Clinton digitizes diplomacy as Secretary of State after a lackluster new media campaign in her run for the presidency; Huffington Post calls her "Obama's Unsung Tech Guru."<sup>2</sup>
- Rep. Michele Bachmann of Minnesota propels herself into a role as Congressional Tea Party Caucus leader and presidential contender, streaming video on her Facebook page and creating an iPhone app for supporters.<sup>3</sup>
- Tea Party organizers—many of them stay-at-home mothers with young children—use Twitter and other social networking platforms to connect conservative activists in a movement that upends the 2010 midterm elections.

In addition, surveys indicate that women outnumber men on social networking sites. And academic research shows that social media may play to women's preferred styles of communication.

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So in this research project, I set out to address the following questions:

- Can social media provide distinctive opportunities for women in politics? Does it empower—or can it hurt—female politicians and grassroots organizers?
- Do women politicians use social media differently than their male counterparts?
- Given the visibility of Palin, Bachmann and other women associated with the Tea Party, do Republican women utilize social media more effectively than Democratic female politicians?
- Does a politician’s popularity on social media sites have a correlation to electoral success?

Many of the people I interviewed for this project—executives at social media companies, political strategists, new media advisers, pollsters and academic experts—acknowledge that given the newness of social media, there is little research on the political impact of social networking, particularly related to gender. Social media companies were not willing to release pertinent data, or claimed that they didn’t have such information. Some researchers have disputed the notion that there are any gender differences in the political uses of social media.<sup>4</sup> But others believe this is a hypothesis worth testing. Karina Newton, the social media adviser to Nancy Pelosi, said that “the metrics are so new” on this topic.<sup>5</sup>

Rather than drawing any conclusive, causal links, this paper will raise questions for discussion, assess current research about these issues, and examine data from election results and media research organizations. I review social science research focusing on women’s use of new media, journalistic accounts, and observations from experts in the fields of politics and technology. And in exploring the connection between social media and electoral success, I will offer some new analysis of data drawn from the social networking presence of candidates in the 2010 midterm elections.

Based on my research, here's what we can say generally about women in politics and social media:

- Social networking favors outsiders and newcomers to politics, so it can be an asset for women candidates and activists.
- Given the often mean-spirited and divisive rhetoric of online communications, social media can be a mixed blessing for female politicians.

## **Social Media and Politics—A Brief History**

Social networking is a 21<sup>st</sup> century phenomenon. Though early versions of social media were developed in the 1990s (and even before that through the military)<sup>6</sup>, the popular services that have been employed for political purposes are quite recent: MySpace and LinkedIn were created in 2003, Facebook in 2004, YouTube in 2005 and Twitter in 2006.<sup>7</sup> Facebook, originally designed for college students, wasn't opened up for general public use until September 2006.<sup>8</sup> The use of new media in national political campaigns reflects the rapid evolution of social networking tools.

**2004: Howard Dean's breakthrough campaign used the Internet for Meetups and fundraising, revolutionizing politics.** In *Here Comes Everybody*, his book about how new media is changing society, Clay Shirky evoked the power of persuasion in politics:

The Dean campaign brilliantly conveyed a message to its supporters, particularly its young ones, that their energy and enthusiasm could change the world...much of it was a function of people looking for something, finding it in Dean, and then using tools like Meetup and weblogs to organize themselves...They gained a sense of value just from participating; and in the end the participation came to matter more than the goal (a pretty serious weakness for a vote-getting operation). The pleasure in working on the Dean campaign was in knowing that you were on the right side of history; the campaign's brilliant use of social tools to gather the like-minded further fed that feeling.<sup>9</sup>

Joe Trippi, the veteran Democratic strategist who was Dean's campaign manager, epigrammatically summed up the phenomenon in his own account of the 2004 race, *The*

*Revolution Will Not be Televised*: “People have been calling this era of computers, the Internet, and telecommunications the ‘information age.’ But that’s not what it is. What we’re really in now is *the empowerment age*... This power is shifting... to a new paradigm of power that is democratically distributed and shared by all of us.”<sup>10</sup>

Later in his book he asserts that “the Internet is tailor-made for a populist, insurgent movement. Its roots in the open-source ARPAnet, its hacker culture, and its decentralized, scattered architecture make it difficult for big, establishment candidates, companies, and media to gain control of it... What [experts] underestimated was the Internet’s ability to grow rapidly, virally, to create *a movement*.”<sup>11</sup>

**2008: Barack Obama hired Chris Hughes, a co-founder of Facebook, as a new media advisor.** Obama’s innovative campaign used Facebook, YouTube, text-messaging, email and micro-targeting to raise money and reach young voters. Obama’s campaign website gathered a motherlode of information for fundraising and voter outreach.<sup>12</sup> The Obama team announced Joe Biden’s selection as vice-presidential candidate by text message. One of Obama’s advisers was Eric Schmidt, then the CEO of Google.

“The tools we used in the Dean campaign,” wrote Joe Trippi, “were downright primitive compared to what campaigns would have to work with in 2008... We had gone from about 1.4 million blogs by the end of the Dean campaign, to more than 77 million by early 2008. People were posting their thoughts, their pictures, their ideas and their take on the news like never before, and millions more were commenting on those posts.”<sup>13</sup>

David Kirkpatrick, author of *The Facebook Effect*, wrote in his “inside story” of the company’s development: “Obama so mastered digital tools that some dubbed 2008 ‘the Facebook election.’ Nick Clemons was director of Hillary Clinton’s successful primary campaign in New Hampshire and several other states. Because of Facebook, he felt at a disadvantage. ‘On the Clinton campaign we could definitely feel the difference because Obama was using those tools... [The Obama people] recognized this technology earlier

than anyone else, and it had a lot to do with them getting the energy and commitment of that generation of people who had not been involved in campaigns previously.”<sup>14</sup>

Michael Slaby, the Chief Technology Officer of Obama’s 2008 campaign, disputes the role that Facebook actually played in the campaign. “The myth about 2008 was that it was a social media campaign,” said Slaby, who was recently appointed Chief Integration and Innovation Officer for the 2012 campaign after a year at TomorrowVentures and a year at Edelman. “Email was far more important than Facebook because social media in general was still so new. That’s not going to be true this time around.”<sup>15</sup>

**2010: Republicans outpaced Democrats in their use of new media in the midterm elections.** According to a 2011 Pew Internet Research report, 69 percent of Republican voters used the Internet to get news or political information in the 2010 midterm elections, or to get involved in the campaign, versus 56 percent of Democrats.<sup>16</sup> After CNBC’s Rick Santelli ranted about government bailouts on the floor of the Chicago Mercantile Exchange in February 2009, activists formed Tea Party groups, organizing through Twitter; some key grassroots leaders were women.

Social media was newly important in the 2010 elections. Katie Harbath, an Associate Manager for Public Policy at Facebook, noted that for incumbents in Senate races, it was the first time that they had run since 2004, the year that Facebook was introduced. Harbath said that for these politicians, social media represented a “big learning curve—they were surprised to see how much had changed.” Some had to learn to have “two-way conversations” with voters. Other candidates, like Republicans Marco Rubio and Michele Bachmann, “were getting comfortable with it,” said Harbath, conducting live town halls on Facebook and “taking questions with very little filter.”

Why were Republicans so dominant in their use of social networking? “In 2008 you would have seen more Democrats,” said Harbath. “It’s about the message they’re pushing and [the Republicans] were embracing social media. In 2010 Republicans and

the Tea Party movement were using Facebook to come together. They were super mad about what happened and they used social media to connect people.”<sup>17</sup>

Christine Williams and Jeff Gulati are professors at Bentley University who have been studying data from campaign websites, Facebook, YouTube and Twitter for 10 years. Their work, grounded in diffusion of innovation theory—how and why technological advances spread throughout societies—shows a rapid adoption of social media by U.S. Congress candidates. Gulati says that in 2006, only 13 percent of House candidates had activated Facebook profiles. By 2008, that number rose to 72 percent, and in 2010, 85 percent of Congressional candidates had campaign Facebook pages—92 percent, says Gulati, “if you count personal profiles.” The researchers found no difference in the use of social media by gender. But for Palin and Bachmann, Gulati said, “the only thing different is that they’re more active.” He also observes that “the out party tends to gravitate toward new technology. Karl Rove grabbed Voter Vault [a voter database] so the Democrats grabbed onto blogs, Meetup and Facebook. Then Republicans dominated on Twitter.” Eventually, he says, the parties catch up. In 2010 Republicans “jumped ahead because they were just being disruptive.”<sup>18</sup>

**Looking ahead to 2012:** In an attempt to portray himself as technologically in sync with his times—and his party—Newt Gingrich used Facebook and Twitter to “pre-nounce” his candidacy for the 2012 presidential election in early May<sup>19</sup> (the official announcement came two days later). Gingrich followed former Minnesota Gov. Tim Pawlenty, who announced that he was forming an exploratory committee on Facebook in March, and former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney, who used a YouTube video in April to launch his own exploratory committee for 2012.<sup>20</sup>

Micah Sifry, co-founder of Personal Democracy Forum, a website and conference about the intersection of politics and technology, argues that the media has overstated the ways in which Republicans have closed the tech gap with Democrats. In a piece titled “Election 2012: It’s Not Facebook, It’s the Data, Stupid,” Sifry wrote that “Facebook and

other third-party social network platforms aren't the central battlefield. It's data and targeting and figuring out how to use online strategies to enable motivated volunteers to identify, persuade and get out the vote." Obama, Sifry wrote, "towers above the rest of the field in the raw size of his contactable base" and states that "2012 will be more about micro-targeting than ever." He added that Republican strategists know they're behind in assembling useful data that could swing close elections by a few points. He quotes a conservative tech developer who said, "The tech people are generally leftists...On the Republican side, you have a lot of tech-oriented marketing people, not people who understand coding."<sup>21</sup>

Obama's re-election campaign kicked off in April with a web video, emails to supporters,<sup>22</sup> and a new website with a button that followers could click on that said "I'm In." If young, tech-minded voters were central to Obama's new media campaign in 2008, their social networking presence will be even greater in 2012. A national poll of 18 to 29 year olds conducted in March 2011 by the Institute of Politics at Harvard University's Kennedy School showed a significant increase in Facebook adoption in just the last year—from 64 to 80 percent, and up to 90 percent for four-year college students. Twitter is far less relevant to young voters, growing from 15 to 24 percent. Young Republicans are on Facebook in larger numbers than Democrats (87 to 81 percent). In addition, women outnumber men by a wide margin—86 to 74 percent.

Though the survey found that less than 30 percent of young Americans use Facebook for politics, millennial voters view social media tools as having a greater political impact than in-person advocacy: 27 percent reported that "compared to in-person advocacy, they believe that advocating for a political position by using online tools like Facebook, Twitter, blogs and YouTube" makes more of an impact, compared to 16 percent who said it makes less of an impact.<sup>23</sup>

Katie Harbath of Facebook says that the significance of social media in politics is about the sheer numbers of people who are using it now. "Everything's moving more social,"



said Harbath. “The presidentials will push all campaigns to use more social media. Her colleague Adam Connor, also an Associate Manager for Public Policy at Facebook, adds that there’s a lot going on at the state and local level. “Looking ahead to 2012, we’ve done a good job of getting campaigns going. At local levels, more candidates are involved and [seeing that social media can] create benefits. An increasing amount of technology is being integrated into elections.”<sup>24</sup>

## **Clinton and Palin: Reinvention through Social Networking**

The 2008 presidential campaign was historic not only for the election of the first black president, but for the presence of two powerful and compelling women who played unprecedented roles—Hillary Clinton and Sarah Palin. Though Clinton scored points in a seemingly endless series of primary debates, her campaign was troubled, and her strategists didn’t seem to know whether to run her as a man or a woman—until she teared up in New Hampshire.<sup>25</sup> Both women confronted sexism in the campaign: Clinton was the target of lewd slogans and rude put-downs (from the man who shouted “Iron my shirt” at a rally); Palin was subjected to what *Washington Post* columnist Kathleen Parker referred to as “pornified” images on the Internet.<sup>26</sup>

Yet some of the harshest commentary came from the media: TV personalities spoke about Clinton’s “cackle” and her “shrill” voice. Commentator Tucker Carlson said that pundits “instinctively crossed their legs at the mention of her name,” and Chris Matthews was forced to apologize for insulting remarks he made about Clinton.<sup>27</sup> Palin, whom many in the media initially portrayed as an energizing choice as John McCain’s running mate, faltered in interviews with Katie Couric of CBS and was unforgettably lampooned by both Tina Fey on *Saturday Night Live* and David Letterman, who referred to Palin’s “slutty flight attendant” look.<sup>28</sup>

It seems interesting that both Clinton and Palin, in very different ways, sought out—or took refuge in—social networking after their experiences with the media in the 2008

campaign. Social media afforded greater control over their image-making. Palin certainly used the brave new media world for her own purposes. After the Republicans' defeat in 2008, she quit her job as governor of Alaska and re-introduced herself to the public through Facebook, Twitter, a memoir, a new gig as a commentator on Fox television and a reality TV show about Alaska, without the interference of what she called the "lamestream media." "Palin leveraged the unfair coverage of her gender to her advantage," said Kellyanne Conway, a Republican pollster.<sup>29</sup>

Palin's efforts paid off in sheer numbers: Her first book, *Going Rogue*, promoted in part over her social networking sites, sold over 2.7 million copies in its first few months, putting it in league with memoirs by Bill Clinton, Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama.<sup>30</sup> In 2009, she stirred up the national health care debate with her Facebook posts about "death panels." Today, Palin issues policy pronouncements and commentaries on the news to her nearly three million Facebook fans and more than half a million followers on Twitter. "Like Obama in 2008," wrote Micah Sifry, "Palin more than any other Republican has figured out how to use new media to communicate directly to her base, bypassing the media filter."<sup>31</sup>

"I thought for a while that Palin was inventing a new way of campaigning," said Susan J. Carroll, a professor of political science and a Senior Scholar at the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University who has written about the 2008 campaign. "The potential is there to do something alternative and creative. [Social media] clearly does represent an opportunity for women. Palin's ahead of the game."<sup>32</sup>

Ed Gillespie, a former Republican National Committee chairman, speculated in March about the possibility of Palin running for president in 2012: "In the way that JFK was the first made-for-television president, she may be the first made-for-Facebook president."<sup>33</sup>

At this writing, Palin's presidential ambitions are hard to discern. She has been coy about declaring her candidacy, while continuing to attack the Obama administration on the economy, health care and foreign policy. She updated her PAC's website after media

buzz focused on a sizable drop in her poll ratings. In March, a *Washington Post*–ABC poll found that fewer than 6 in 10 Republicans and Republican-leaning independents viewed her favorably, compared to an all-time high of 88 percent after the 2008 Republican convention and 70 percent in October 2010.<sup>34</sup>

Meantime, Michele Bachmann emerged as a presidential contender. Bachmann became a Tea Party favorite through her conservative policy positions, her blunt talk and her appearances on cable TV and talk radio programs. Like Palin, she enthusiastically embraced social networking—during the 2010 elections, she unveiled an iPhone app with updates and video from the campaign trail.<sup>35</sup> In March 2011, she announced that she was considering a run for the presidency<sup>36</sup> and wowed conservative crowds in Iowa.<sup>37</sup> Alex Castellanos, a former aide to Mitt Romney, told Howard Kurtz of *The Daily Beast* and *Newsweek*, “I think Sarah Palin is running for president, but her name is Michele Bachmann.”<sup>38</sup>

Palin’s avoidance of the mainstream media often made it seem that she had constructed an online existence for herself separate from traditional political roles. In MIT professor Sherry Turkle’s newest book about the emotional and psychological aspects of the Internet, *Alone Together*, she writes about avatars on such Internet game sites as *Second Life*, where people live other lives online, developing friendships, creating communities and conducting romantic relationships with other avatars.<sup>39</sup> I asked Turkle if Palin had turned herself into a kind of political avatar through social networking, particularly since her record and reputation as Alaska’s governor sometimes seems at odds with her current hardline persona. (In “The Tragedy of Sarah Palin” in *The Atlantic*, Joshua Green wrote that though Gov. Palin prided “herself on her well-advertised social conservatism, she was prepared to set it aside when necessary. Rather than pick big fights about social issues, she declined to take up two abortion-restriction measures that she favored, and vetoed a bill banning benefits for same-sex partners of state workers.”<sup>40</sup> )

“Social media gives you a parallel identity, and not just for women,” Turkle told me. “It gives you a chance to create an avatar of you, independent of the ‘you’ you, that’s more manipulable. Politics is one of the realms where you can do it in artful ways. Palin became very conscious of social media. Hillary backed into it unwittingly.”

Turkle contends that Palin is creating a “second presence” through social media that’s somewhat different than her original presence. “Not better—it has different affordances,” Turkle said. “The notion of an avatar is that you’re creating a malleable other. And not just one—you can create a multiplicity of selves. In the politics of the future, people will deploy these avatars strategically. You’re really creating several versions of yourself. I was struck at the White House Correspondents’ dinner when Seth Meyers said to Obama, ‘Mr. President, you’d love the 2008 Obama,’ as though Obama could have the 2008 him hanging there for those who want that. You want to see your Obama. You will go to where the Obama that you want lives.”<sup>41</sup> (Significantly, perhaps, Obama’s presidential campaign website was called [my.barackobama.com](http://my.barackobama.com).)

As for Hillary Clinton, her new media efforts in 2008 were eclipsed by Obama’s tech innovations—Democratic strategist Morra Aarons-Mele contends that Clinton’s campaign “set back social media” for Democratic women.<sup>42</sup> But once in the State Department, Clinton incorporated social networking into diplomacy, developing innovative ways of reaching out to people under the banner of “21<sup>st</sup> Century Statecraft.” That slogan was coined by Alec Ross,<sup>43</sup> an Obama campaign veteran who took on a newly created position as the Secretary of State’s Senior Adviser for Innovation. Joining Ross at State was Katie Stanton, a former Google employee who had been on Obama’s White House tech team; she subsequently went to Twitter as the head of international strategy.

“In 2008, [Clinton] was supposedly techno-challenged and out of touch...a Luddite who ignored Silicon Valley in the campaign and didn’t quite understand the Internet era,” Marvin Ammori, a law professor at the University of Nebraska, wrote on Huffington

Post. Now, he says, she has emerged as “the smartest, most aggressive and most successful senior member of the Obama administration to attempt to harness all things digital to serve her department’s wide-ranging agenda...She has initiated several innovative technology-based diplomacy and development efforts as a means of re-imagining power relationships in a networked world.”<sup>44</sup>

Clinton has championed such initiatives as text messaging to raise funds for Haiti’s earthquake relief, a program called Civil Society 2.0 targeted at Afghanistan and Mexico<sup>45</sup> and has plans to connect technology leaders with the developing world. Anne-Marie Slaughter, former Director of Policy Planning in the State Department and now a professor at Princeton, led a delegation of 12 women from Twitter, Google and other companies to Africa for a week to help with a range of issues. Slaughter said she and others in the State Department were “supposed to be doing innovative things, real 2.0 stuff—more than, ‘Gee, the Secretary’s tweeting.’” Clinton has embraced social networking, says Slaughter, “because it fits much more with her focus on engaging societies, instead of traditional diplomacy...It’s a way of redefining the image of the United States in the world.”<sup>46</sup>

As Secretary of State, Clinton is “an outlier,” says Ginny Hunt, who runs Google’s Public Sector and Elections Lab in Washington, DC. “She’s made the shift to digital and fully embraced public diplomacy. As a woman, for the markets she’s going into, she’s maintained a lot of image control.”<sup>47</sup> But how did Clinton go from running an underwhelming tech campaign to becoming a social networking “guru”? “She *learned*—it’s one of her greatest characteristics,” said Slaughter. “She learns from her mistakes. The State Department is now more active technologically than the White House. It’s recognized in the tech world.”<sup>48</sup>

## Do Women Use Social Media Differently Than Men?

Theoretically, social media should be an asset for women politicians. Recent Pew Internet studies have shown that women now outnumber men on social networking sites,<sup>49</sup> and a report on the 2010 campaign indicated that women are almost at parity with men in their use of social media for political purposes—a jump from previous years, according to Aaron Smith at the Pew Internet and American Life Project, the senior researcher on the survey.<sup>50</sup> And yet as the gender gap in technology closes, a gender gap still persists in electoral politics: Analysis shows that even among the women who triumphed in the 2010 races, voting split along party rather than gender lines.<sup>51</sup>

A 2009 Pew Internet Research report showed that women outnumbered men on social media platforms. Aaron Smith found that 50 percent of women vs. 42 percent of men reported using social networking sites.<sup>52</sup> “We see women gravitating toward those applications that allow them to connect with friends and share information with people they know.” Those numbers represented a change: A 2005 Pew report, authored by Deborah Fallows, gave men a slight edge in Internet use (though even then, women under 30 and black women outranked their male counterparts).<sup>53</sup>

Early in the spring of 2011, a post on TechCrunch called “Why Women Rule the Internet” circulated widely in the blogosphere. Written by Aileen Lee, a partner at the venture capital firm Kleiner Perkins Caufield & Byers (March 20, 2011), the piece referred to Facebook and Twitter:

Sheryl Sandberg, COO of Facebook, has talked about how women are not only the majority of its users, but drive 62% of activity in terms of messages, updates and comments, and 71% of the daily fan activity. Women have 8% more Facebook friends on average than men, and spend more time on the site. According to an early Facebook team member, women played a key role in the early days by adopting three core activities—posting to walls, adding photos and joining groups—at a much higher rate than males. If females had not adopted in the early days, I wonder if Facebook would be what it is today...

And more women use Twitter, which has a reputation for being a techie insider's (i.e., male) product. Women follow more people, tweet more, and have more followers on average than men, according to bloggers Dan Zarella and Darmesh Shaw's analyses.

Perhaps none of this is surprising. Women are thought to be more social, more interested in relationships and connections, better at multi-tasking. Recent research shows...that women are able to maintain quantitatively more relationships...than men. Knowing that is an important factor if you want to build and stoke social network effects. <sup>54</sup>

Jeff Gulati, the political scientist at Bentley University, has studied how male and female members of Congress portray themselves on congressional websites:

Starting in 2001, I focused on images on websites—I looked at what types of presentation style the representatives had. Of the 435 cases, gender popped up. Women had a much more standard presentation style—they all wore a business suit. Men had more variation in attire.

I got into gender literature, studied gender and communication, and did interviews with campaign staff. With men, there was an identification with their district. For women, it was about policy and accomplishments. Looking at presentation styles, you see a real difference. Now with social media—there are no gender differences at all. The reason we don't see a lot of differences is that women politicians take on male characteristics—they come across as the Hillary Clinton kind of person.<sup>55</sup>

Other academic researchers who look at gender and communication offer evidence that suggests why women might gravitate to social media: Studies show that women are more comfortable communicating through writing than face-to-face conversations. In "The Power of Talk: Who Gets Heard and Why," Deborah Tannen, the Georgetown linguist and bestselling author wrote that men and women develop different linguistic styles from childhood: "Girls tend to learn conversational rituals that focus on the rapport dimension of relationships whereas boys tend to learn rituals that focus on the status dimension."<sup>56</sup> As a result, women are often at a disadvantage in direct verbal communication with men (either, paradoxically, by asking questions or displaying assertiveness), and this can affect judgments about their competence and confidence. The implication is that written communication eliminates the possibility that women

will be judged on their direct presentation and misinterpreted about their voice and body language. Written communication also allows women to focus attention solely on the message they want to deliver instead of on external factors.

In a study with a similar message—“Do Men and Women Use Different Media for Interacting with Leaders?”—N. Lamar Reinsch, Jr. and Jeanine Warisse Turner, also of Georgetown, found that men and women differ in the media they use to send messages to, and receive messages from, leaders. Men preferred face-to-face interaction while women relied more often on computer-mediated channels such as email and text messaging.<sup>57</sup>

And in a book about the phenomenon of text messaging, *Txtng: The gr8 db8*, David Crystal, a British linguist and author, indicates that women are more loquacious and avid texters. He cites research by Norwegian researcher Richard Ling about gender differences in texting behavior. In Ling’s study, more than 40 percent of women texted daily, compared to 35 percent of men. Women wrote longer, more grammatically complex sentences, incorporated more salutations and farewells, and used texts to express a wider range of both emotional and practical content (such as where to meet up).<sup>58</sup>

## **How Does This Translate Into Politics?**

As outsiders, or relative newcomers to the political process, women candidates may have an advantage in social networking. Harvard lecturer Nicco Mele, who was Howard Dean’s Internet operations director in 2004, has made the point that disruptive technologies such as social media are useful for disruptive political movements—the Arab spring, or the Tea Party.<sup>59</sup> Women candidates might also be viewed as a disruptive force because they are still underrepresented in high elective office.

“Social media is an advantage when you’re a newcomer—it lends itself to this,” says Karina Newton, social media director to Nancy Pelosi. “It’s [also useful for] opposition



candidates, who have nothing to lose...Newt Gingrich bragged that 5,000 people have visited his website, but that's nothing."<sup>60</sup>

In her acclaimed book about the 2008 election, *Big Girls Don't Cry*, Rebecca Traister said that new media gave young feminist organizers "an expansive new life and more abundant points of entry."<sup>61</sup>

I asked Andrew Noyes, Facebook's Manager of Public Policy Communications, whether he saw any advantages that women politicians had over men on Facebook. "In general, we encourage politicians to have the most authentic posts as possible," he said. "In the time I've been involved [he joined Facebook in 2009], I don't see a huge difference between male and female posting. But I feel like female politicians may have an easier time being authentic right out of the gate, whether it's them or their staffers. They're interacting with their audience, it's much more of a conversation. [Some] male politicians just use it to post press releases."<sup>62</sup>

Marie Wilson, founder and President emeritus of The White House Project, which encourages women to run for elective office, says that voters are always looking for keys to a candidate's authenticity, and she believes social media makes candidates seem authentic. She has found that women use social media particularly effectively for "dealing with stuff you couldn't say or do in the campaign," as she put it. "Women are using it for the 'Yeah, but' things people are concerned about that won't go into a speech or a debate. Issues that voters might worry about, like, do you have small kids, are you a lesbian, have you never run before."

Wilson believes different women are using social media well, and that younger women politicians are especially comfortable with it. "Women using it to educate people about positions they're running for, versus men, who are using it to talk about who they are," Wilson says. She says that policy does not lend itself well to social media — "it's boring." She believes that Palin and Bachmann present themselves as quintessential American

icons—as mothers and multi-taskers. “They’re using social media to be authentic, and presenting the ideal of American womanhood—as a mom.”<sup>63</sup>

Bryan Merica is the CEO of Activate Direct, a Sacramento-based company that develops online and social media sites for politicians and public officials. He notes that women outnumber men in social media, and cites figures of 53 to 47 percent on Facebook. “The only [form of social media] where men outnumber women is LinkedIn—the least social of the social networks,” says Merica. He says that women have embraced social media faster than men, but “eventually it will even out and at some point everyone will be on, just as everyone now has an email address.” In the meantime, he says, early adoption of social media is an advantage for women.

Merica’s company analyzes data about the kinds of conversations that work effectively in social media. He and his colleagues use social listening tools, an innovative measurement system that focuses on conversations around key words in blogs, online news sites and other web forums. Merica says that the things people respond to are “more honest conversation, and that’s not necessarily a gender thing. If people use social media for an abbreviated form of a press release, they get less traction. If they’re more open and transparent, it’s better.” But for women as outsiders, social networking is a “medium that favors them—I absolutely believe that.”<sup>64</sup>

## **Organizing the Tea Party**

With Sarah Palin as a model, Republican women utilized social media to express their opposition to the Obama administration. Their focus was on economic issues, rather than the social issues that many Democratic female politicians have often emphasized. In the wake of the financial crisis and mortgage meltdown, that theme resonated with women who felt alienated by traditional feminism.<sup>65</sup> What Palin and her followers were offering was an empowering mix of feminism, conservatism and technology, and social media became the vehicle for their message.

Republicans also were the beneficiaries of a relative social networking vacuum on the Democratic side. After the 2008 election, many young voters were dismayed to see that their tech connections to Obama essentially stopped once he arrived in the White House. Furthermore, in the view of strategist Morra Aarons-Mele, the Democrats' social media platforms were not motivated by the same grassroots energy that the conservative movement now seemed to draw upon. "Social media on the progressive side has been co-opted by big media institutions—Huffington Post, Politico," said Morra Aarons-Mele. "The blogosphere was supposed to be for the Left what talk radio was to the Right, but that hasn't happened."<sup>66</sup>

The Tea Party in particular provided a focus for conservative women. Though the disparate groups that constituted the Tea Party groundswell seemed to be dominated by older white men, a Quinnipiac poll in March 2010 showed that women accounted for 55 percent of Tea Party members.<sup>67</sup>

Theda Skocpol, the renowned Harvard sociologist and political scientist, has been researching the Tea Party for a forthcoming book, and co-authored an illuminating article titled "The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism." In a talk at Harvard, she described traveling around the country to attend local Tea Party meetings, where "the leader was invariably a woman in her 40s." (In the same talk, she also said that the biggest users of new media were women, Republicans and youth.)<sup>68</sup>

*New York Times* reporter Kate Zernike, who reported on the Tea Party for the paper and whose book *Boiling Mad: Inside Tea Party America* chronicled the rise of the movement, told me that, "In our polling, the data for activists show that they were no more likely to be women. But wherever I went, there were women. Young women, in their late 30s and early 40s."<sup>69</sup>

The women who rose to prominence as Tea Party organizers were often stay-at-home mothers who had been previously active in conservative politics, or had experience with

local PTAs or school boards. Some of them also had created blogs about politics and family life. “Women had the time and organizing skills,” said Zernike.<sup>70</sup>

Christen Varley, president of the Greater Boston Tea Party, organized through Howard Dean’s favored method: Meetup. She had a background in political organizing and was involved with a socially conservative group called the Coalition for Marriage and Family.<sup>71</sup> Anastasia Przybylski, a stay-at-home mom in Pennsylvania and onetime Democrat who voted unenthusiastically for John McCain, put together the Bucks County Tea Party.<sup>72</sup>

“The Face of the Tea Party is Female,” asserted a Politico piece in March 2010, which included two timely and relevant quotes. One was from Rebecca Wales, a spokeswoman for Smart Girl Politics, a group created to mobilize conservative women. “For years, it has been the liberal women who have organized and been staunch grassroots and policy advocates,” Wales told reporter Kenneth P. Vogel. “No longer is it only the liberals. Conservative women have found their voices and are using them, actively and loudly.” In the same article, Melanie Gustafson, an associate professor of history at the University of Vermont, said the Tea Party offered a more direct way for conservative women to have influence than the Republican Party, where “women have always struggled for inclusion.”<sup>73</sup> Several months later, a piece by Hanna Rosin on Slate asked a provocative question: “Is the Tea Party a Feminist Movement?”<sup>74</sup>

Stacy Mott’s activism began in June 2008 with the blog she called Smart Girl Politics. A former HR manager who lives in New Jersey, she used a social networking platform called Ning, which other conservative women were using for their blogs as well. “I started this just for myself,” says Mott. “I had three small children at home. Right after the election [2008], I didn’t have anyone to talk to about politics. I started with four or five [female friends]—and got 60 responses. A lot of women were new to politics—they needed someplace to vent. Now it’s more of a membership site. We have 50,000 members at the moment.”<sup>75</sup>

Smart Girl Politics started holding summits—the first in Nashville in 2009, the second in Washington, DC in 2010, and the third this summer in St. Louis (July 29–30). Mott says they draw about 300 women to their events. At the St. Louis meeting, Mott is planning to hold an all-women’s straw poll that she says is the first of its kind. Her survey will be conducted two weeks before the Republican Party’s Iowa Straw Poll, long a barometer of presidential candidates’ prospects in the January caucuses.<sup>76</sup>

In *Boiling Mad*, Zernike mentions that Tea Party activists seized on Twitter as one social media outlet that the Obama people hadn’t monopolized. Right after Rick Santelli’s rant, Zernike writes, “Nashville technology marketing consultant Michael Patrick Leahy saw Twitter as answer to the technology gap (which others saw as an enthusiasm gap) between Democrats and Republicans.” In Nov. 2008, Leahy started #tcot=Top Conservatives on Twitter, which became a key instrument for Tea Partiers.<sup>77</sup>

“If it wasn’t for Twitter, we wouldn’t have had the success we’ve had,” Mott told me. “The Tea Party—all that started because of Twitter. Our members reached out to us after Rick Santelli’s rant. There were three groups—us, #tcot (Top Conservatives on Twitter), DontGo, [libertarian] Eric Odon’s group—all done through social media. Twitter went crazy after Santelli.”<sup>78</sup>

Jenny Beth Martin, now co-coordinator of the Tea Party Patriots, one of the two major branches of the movement, was a former Republican consultant in Georgia. She had created a mommy blog called JenuineJen that she turned into a social networking site for activists, using Ning.<sup>79</sup> “Jenny Beth Martin was the archetypal Tea Party woman,” said Vanessa Williamson, a Harvard graduate student and research assistant to Theda Skocpol. “She was very conservative, organizing from the PTA. She had fought with schools about evolution and global warming. She brought those skills and practicality to the Tea Party.”<sup>80</sup>

At a Harvard panel in late April, Martin recounted how she became a Tea Party activist. She had been involved in Republican politics in Georgia. Then after the TARP bill in

2008, when McCain put his campaign on hold, “he and Obama voted the same—there was no difference,” she said. “People were angry at McCain—they cut his name off the bumper stickers in my county, Cherokee County. After Rick Santelli’s rant about the stimulus bill—it was like lighting a match...The next day, we had a conference call, on Friday night. There were 22 people on the call—we said, we’ll have a tea party...The following Friday, there were 48 tea parties with 35,000 people.”<sup>81</sup>

Today, Martin holds a conference call every Monday night, and she has said that 50 percent of the activists on her call are women.<sup>82</sup> Many of these women are part of what they call the “Sisterhood of Mommy Patriots,” a.k.a. As a Mom. (Frank Luntz, the Republican pollster, had advised that any sentence beginning with the words “speaking as a mom,” would generate support.<sup>83</sup>) “People are so angry still, and now they are really angry at the Republicans,” Martin said at Harvard. “First we were dealing with a Democratic majority, now we’re learning how to deal with a Republican majority.”

Though many female Tea Party organizers say they are personally inspired by Sarah Palin, she is not necessarily their choice for president. The *New York Times* poll that accompanies Kate Zernike’s book shows that a plurality of Tea Party supporters (47 to 40 percent) didn’t think Palin was qualified to be president.<sup>84</sup> Jenny Beth Martin says the TPP doesn’t endorse candidates at the national level, but nevertheless, “nobody is excited about one person yet. Everyone is sitting back, waiting.”<sup>85</sup> Stacy Mott echoes that sentiment. “Palin motivates a lot of women, but that doesn’t automatically give her our vote. We’re waiting for someone to break out.”<sup>86</sup>

For Tea Party activists, Stacy Mott cautions against an over-reliance on social networking. “Republicans and conservatives [need to] take the movement offline. In 2008, Democrats were better at the ground game, especially reaching youth. One thing Palin does do well, [is that] she posts on Facebook and it becomes news. She does this as someone who’s a citizen, and she gets a response from the White House. [But for]

Bachmann, Palin, Pawlenty—if they use it to beef up their ground game, that’s good, but they can’t rely strictly on social media.”<sup>87</sup>

Still, Mott is proud of her work. “Women are having political connections through our site,” she says. “Stay-at-home moms, working moms. We’ll have teens talking to grandmothers. We reach women who haven’t been reached before. We get them in their homes—my activism happens with my three kids at home. [Social media gives women] a greater opportunity to get involved.”

Andrew Noyes of Facebook offers this assessment: “In 2010, the Tea Party was about more than grassroots mobilization—Tea Party took social media to a new level.”<sup>88</sup>

## **Social Media and Electoral Success**

This is an issue for which there are few official metrics so far. I interviewed political and social media analysts about the role social networking actually plays in getting women elected to office, and explored ways of establishing metrics for this issue.

Data from Targeted Victory, a political and advocacy firm that specializes in online and mobile communications, showed a correlation between social media presence (web traffic, Twitter, Facebook and YouTube usage) and the electoral success of 2010 women candidates for governor. However, increased exposure through social media seemed to have the opposite correlation for women candidates in Senate races: The most visible social networkers lost their elections.<sup>89</sup>

In their study, “What Is a Social Network Worth? Facebook and Vote Share in the 2008 Presidential Primaries,” Bentley University’s Christine Williams and Jeff Gulati analyzed the impact of Facebook on the 2008 presidential nomination. They found that Facebook support was an important additional indicator of electoral success independent of traditional measures like expenditures, media coverage and organizing activities represented by campaign events.<sup>90</sup>

Facebook's own U.S. Politics page presented evidence that popularity on Facebook was a predictor of success in the 2010 midterm elections. Facebook tracked 98 of the most hotly contested House races, as decided by leading political observers, and found that 74 percent of the candidates with the most Facebook fans won their races. By their measure, Facebook popularity also predicted 81 percent of the Senate victories.<sup>91</sup> Andrew Noyes of Facebook acknowledged that this was not a scientific metric. Facebook would not disclose any more specific data. But at the time, Julia Boorstin of CNBC wrote: "Facebook popularity is a pretty good indicator of popularity at the polls: The social network just established itself as the new pulse of the electorate."<sup>92</sup>

My research assistant, Thao-Anh Tran, an MPP candidate at Harvard Kennedy School, devised a methodology that confirms Facebook's predictive role in some races. Examining Facebook fans of Senate and gubernatorial candidates, and using random sampling of posts and the gender breakdown based on the "likes" the notes received, she found that:

1. Based on the 2010 midterm election results, it appears that there is a positive correlation between the number of a politician's Facebook fans and his or her electoral success.
2. Based on the 2010 results, Senate races that involved at least one woman candidate show a positive correlation between the number of a woman politician's female Facebook fans and her electability. (See Appendix.)

While we cannot definitively conclude that a large number of Facebook supporters will yield winning results for candidates in Senate and gubernatorial races, we noted a positive correlation in a candidate's number of Facebook supporters and his or her electoral success.

Bryan Merica of Activate Direct has data on electoral success utilizing a different approach. With social listening tools, his firm measured social media chatter from January 2010 to November 2010 around the California gubernatorial race between Meg



Whitman and Jerry Brown. They gauged the sentiment of conversations, to determine whether they were positive, neutral or negative. And they looked at traditional polling to see if those results tracked with what they were turning up through social media. They found that during Whitman’s “Nannygate” problems—the scandal surrounding her firing of her undocumented housekeeper and nanny for nearly a decade—Whitman’s negatives on social media went up four times. “It was a major spike,” said Merica. “The campaign downplayed the episode, but it only got worse as it played out over a week. Social media listening showed how bad it was. In the end, we could marry up the negative social media conversations with polling data.”<sup>93</sup>

In a white paper on their research, Merica and his colleagues concluded that

Social media...immediately captured the impact of Nannygate and also indicated it was causing a severe impact to the Whitman campaign.

With social media, you have the ability to ask, and re-ask, many different questions to get the correct answer, while with traditional polling you have to ask the correct question to [elicit] the correct answer.

Perhaps more significant is the ability of social media listening to spot trends in almost real time (vs. the days polling takes). In a 24/7 news cycle reality, relying on polling data alone may be very much like driving 100 mph at night with the headlights turned off, while social media is like driving during the day with GPS to keep you updated on your location. In addition, social listening may also be a lower cost option for smaller campaigns that are unable to afford expensive polling.<sup>94</sup>

## **Does Social Media Help or Hurt Women Politicians?**

Nicco Mele invokes his former Dean campaign colleague Joe Trippi in describing the three key factors to winning elections: fundraising, persuasion via speeches and advertising, and get-out-the -vote efforts on election day. “The Internet is well understood for raising money, and reasonably well understood for GOTV—the Obama data nerds figured out how to increase turnout,” said Mele. “But the persuasion piece is not well understood at all. The Internet is not a persuasive medium.”<sup>95</sup>

Jeanine Turner of Georgetown University, who specializes in the study of communications, holds a similar view. She contends that “social media creates a dialogue—it doesn’t get someone to do something, which is the holy grail of persuasion.”<sup>96</sup>

Jeff Gulati of Bentley University takes a different view. “If social media didn’t exist, would people like Palin and Bachmann be out there saying controversial things?” he asks. “You’d still cover them on TV—they’re media savvy candidates. Would JFK have been president without TV? If you don’t have a message, it doesn’t matter. Obama didn’t win because of the Internet—new media was powerful for Obama because he had a message and he had a strategy.”

He doesn’t think Palin has a message that resonates or makes Republicans feel that she’s a winner. “Palin sees herself as a power broker—this is what Facebook helps her with. Having so many friends [is] just like having a lot of money. Facebook can give you the appearance that you have influence, but most people who have friended you are already behind you—or are soft supporters who can’t help you. If you can create a perception that you’re a strong candidate, it’s powerful. Otherwise, it just complements existing communication tools.”<sup>97</sup>

One Democratic strategist (who did not want to be quoted on the record because of possible involvement in the coming campaign) said that the issue of whether social media hurts or helps women candidates is “a sociological question in environments that are designed as relationship experiences. Women are treated very differently, and judged very differently than men. When Hillary cried, it was a big deal. The media and people who take women candidates seriously desexualize them. That negates the intimacy part, which should be the advantage women have in social media.”

This strategist also is dubious about the ways in which some Republican women have used social networking. “Palin and Bachmann use social media as a broadcast channel,

not an engagement medium. Broadcast communication is one way. Engagement—it's a dialogue, where people are being activated, brought into the community."<sup>98</sup>

And then there is what Susan Carroll of Rutgers calls "the vile factor"—the Internet can be a mean and sexist environment. The crudest attacks on both Clinton and Palin were found online, as Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Jacqueline Dunn documented in "The B-word in Traditional News and on the Web," an article for Nieman Reports. "Entering "Hillary" and "bitch" we found more than 500 YouTube videos," they wrote. The piece also included a chart of Facebook groups with obscene or sexist names; in March 2008, a group called "Hillary Clinton: Stop running for president and make me a sandwich" had the most members (41,025).<sup>99</sup>

"Social media is a mixed blessing for women," says Carroll. "That whole sphere lets people be more hostile, negative and vile. The normal social sanctions don't exist. It happened to Hillary Clinton and Sarah Palin. Social media has the potential to reach people, but then there's the vile factor. It's worse on the blogosphere, more intense."

I asked if she thought this could have a deterrent effect on women who might run for political office. "It's all so new," Carroll said. "Maybe."<sup>100</sup>

Ultimately, social networking is not a panacea for politicians. Sarah Palin's poll ratings dropped after the shootings in Tucson,<sup>101</sup> following a bitter political fight about whether a target map she posted on her Facebook page during the 2010 elections with crosshairs over 20 districts, including that of Rep. Gabrielle Giffords, might have contributed to an atmosphere that inflamed the gunman. "Republicans, at times indignant, focused blame on the apparent psychological problems of the suspect, Jared L. Loughner, and suggested that liberals were trying to politicize a personal tragedy," wrote the *New York Times*. "As much as anyone, Ms. Palin emerged as a fulcrum for the debate, once again personifying a broader cultural and ideological divide."<sup>102</sup>

Palin's public response to the tragedy in Tucson took place on Facebook. Her first posting, on January 8, expressed condolences to Rep. Giffords' family and the other victims. As the debate over Palin's map escalated, she posted a video on Facebook condemning violence, and made a comment that set off another controversy: "But especially within hours of a tragedy unfolding, journalists and pundits should not manufacture a blood libel that serves only to incite the very hatred and violence they purport to condemn," Palin said.<sup>103</sup>

Apart from the political controversy that the map and the "blood libel" comment generated, it seemed odd that at a time of grief and shock, Palin expressed herself through social media. The personal responses to tragedy by the country's leaders remain emblematic in the national experience: Bill Clinton going to Oklahoma City after the 1995 bombing; George W. Bush standing on the rock pile of Ground Zero after 9/11; Obama touring Alabama in April after tornadoes ravaged the state. They were present in person, surrounded by real people.

But Palin's public remarks after Tucson were only virtual. Sherry Turkle spoke about this in the language of the technological world, "like when you're watching a digital movie and you get a breakup" of the image. "This was like a digitized image of Palin breaking up. She had to come out [of the virtual world], but couldn't. In real life, her images were indefensible. In real life, she could have said [about the crosshairs map], 'that was bad judgment, metaphors can get us into trouble.' If she'd been smart, she would have done that. She couldn't do that," said Turkle. "Sometimes you can be an avatar, sometimes you can't."<sup>104</sup>

The research I have done for this project has opened further questions for inquiry. If social media values authenticity, as so many observers note, then what does that mean for a politician like Sarah Palin, who may use social networking tools to create an alternative persona, as Sherry Turkle suggests? Given how rapidly technology is changing, who will be the political beneficiaries of the next generation of social media

tools? Does the use of social networking have more to do with the political skills of the candidates than the medium itself? Or do the uses of social media in the end boil down to behavioral, gender differences that have been documented in psychological and cognitive science research? The answers to those questions will enliven the worlds of both technology and politics.

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## Appendix

We were interested in exploring the correlation between a female politician's electoral success and her number of Facebook supporters by focusing on Senate and gubernatorial races during the 2010 midterm elections. Since the gender breakdown of Facebook supporters was not available, we first had to establish a correlation between politicians' electability and their number of Facebook supporters before proceeding to explore our question of interest. In an effort to minimize biases, we obtained our samples by consistently using the "likes" of each politician's status following the announcement of the results of the 2010 midterm elections.

Step 1: In order to establish the correlation between a Senate/gubernatorial candidate's number of Facebook supporters and his/her electability, we calculated the average number of Facebook supporters for winning and defeated candidates using the number of current Facebook supporters. (Several defeated candidates removed their official Facebook page after the 2010 midterm elections so their number of Facebook supporters was not available.) Based on those calculations, we arrived at the following conclusion:

*Winning candidates in both Senate and gubernatorial races of the 2010 midterm elections had a greater average number of Facebook supporters than defeated candidates (Figure 1).*

Step 2: Once we established that there was a positive correlation between a candidate's number of Facebook supporters and his/her electoral success, we proceeded to explore the correlation between a female Senate/gubernatorial candidate's Facebook supporters and her electability. We separated the candidates into two categories: winning and defeated candidates. For each category, we found the percentage of female supporters for each female candidate based on the number of females that clicked "like" on the status following the announcement of the results of the 2010 midterm elections. From this process, we found the following:

*Winning female candidates in Senate races of the 2010 midterm elections had a greater average percentage of female Facebook supporters than defeated female candidates. (Results are based on races with at least one female candidate.)*

There was a positive correlation between the number of Facebook fans of winning female candidates in Senate races in the 2010 midterm elections and their electability.

*Winning female candidates in gubernatorial races of the 2010 midterm elections had a smaller average percentage of female Facebook supporters than defeated female candidates (Figure 2).*

However, perhaps due to a limited number of samples available—few female gubernatorial candidates—there was a negative correlation between the number of Facebook fans of winning female candidates in gubernatorial races in the 2010 midterm elections and their electability.

When the same process was applied for male gubernatorial candidates in the 2010 midterm elections, we discovered the following:

*Winning male candidates in gubernatorial races of the 2010 midterm elections had a greater average percentage of female Facebook supporters than defeated male candidates (Figure 3).*

Unlike female gubernatorial candidates, we noted a positive correlation between the number of Facebook fans of winning male candidates in gubernatorial races of the 2010 midterm elections and their electability.

We cannot extrapolate this finding to political candidates in all races until we perform the same analysis for other elections. However, since the use of social media for campaigning purposes is a fairly new phenomenon, we would have to wait for future elections to conduct this analysis.

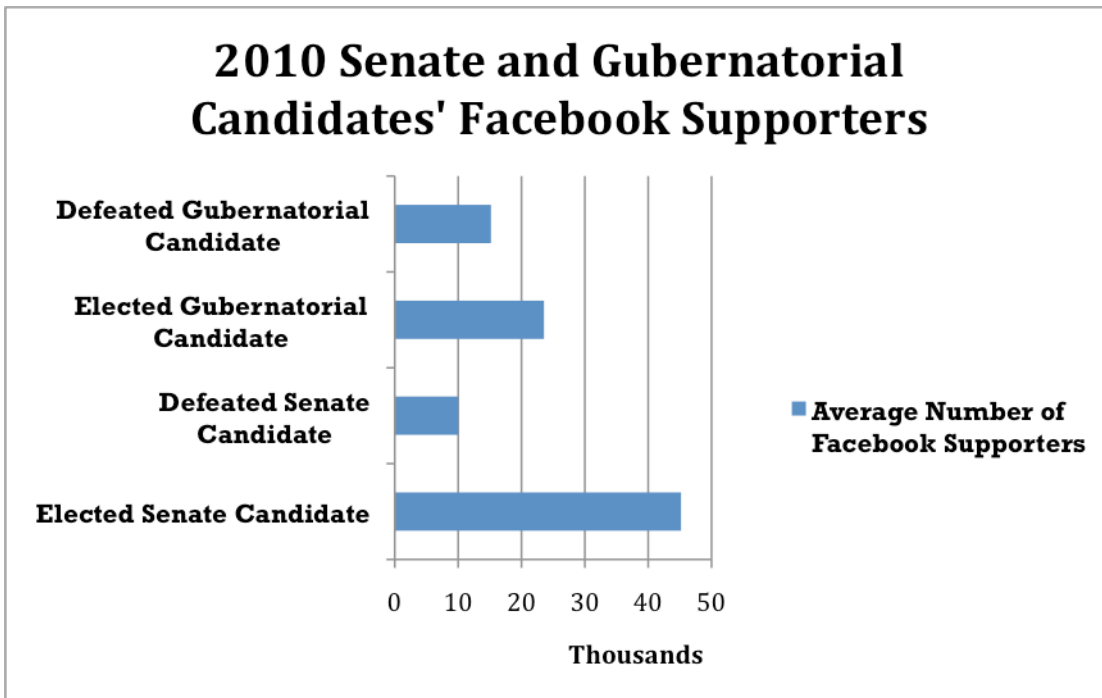


Figure 1.

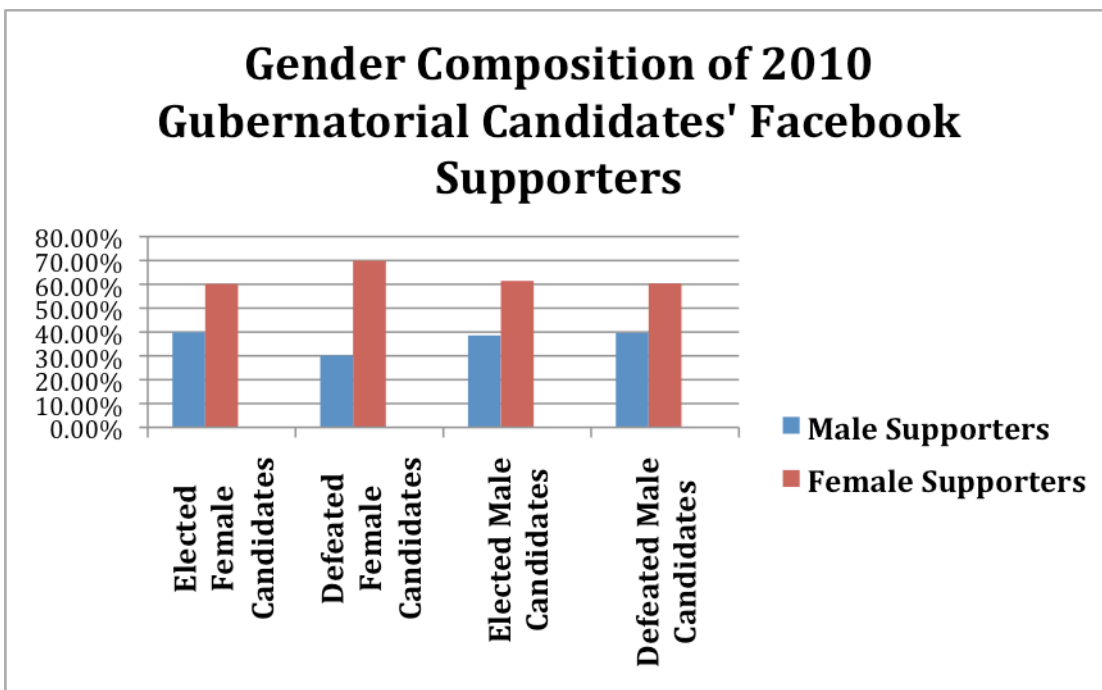
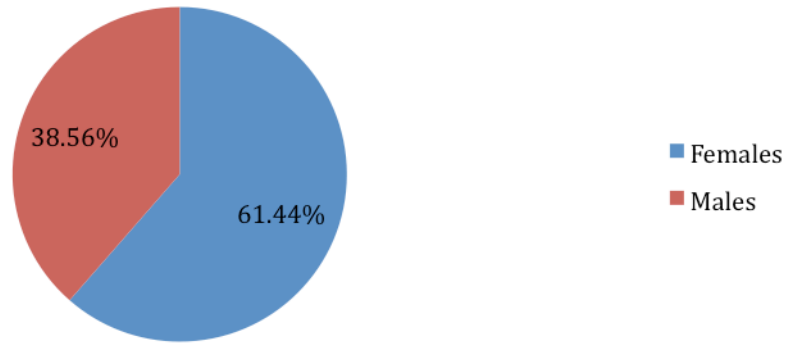


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## Composition of Elected Male Gubernatorial Candidates' Facebook Supporters



**Figure** Error! Main Document Only.

Source: Data and analysis by Thao-Anh Tran, from individual official Facebook campaign pages of each of the Senate and gubernatorial candidates for the 2010 midterm elections. Methodology developed in consultation with Andrei Munteanu, Ph.D. Computer Science Student, University of Notre Dame.