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Candidates Be Posting: Multi-Platform Strategies and Partisan Preferences in the 2022 U.S. Midterm Elections

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Abstract

In this multi-platform, comparative study, we analyze social media messages from political candidates ($N = 1{,}517$) running for Congress during the 2022 U.S. Midterm election. We collect data from seven social media platforms: Facebook, Twitter, Truth Social, Gettr, Instagram, YouTube, and Rumble over the 4 weeks before and after election day. With this unique dataset of posts, we apply computational methods to identify messages that sought to mobilize individuals (online and offline) to donate money, vote, attend events, engage with the campaign online, and visit the campaign's content on other platforms. We find that Democrats were not on alt-tech platforms in 2022 and that both Republicans and Democrats use video-based platforms for multiple mobilization strategies. Mobilization messages varied for House and Senate candidates of both parties across platforms, before and after election day.

Keywords

social media, multi-platform, mobilization, platform affordance

Introduction

Given the popularity of digital platforms over the past quarter-century, political campaigns[1] have adjusted their media strategies from mass persuasion tactics to targeted messaging tailored for a wide array of social media. In doing so, campaigns often consider the differences, in both audience and affordances, across platforms. For example, mainstream platforms like Twitter[2] and Facebook are suitable platforms for candidates to directly communicate with voters and mobilize media coverage (e.g., Wells et al., 2016). Visual platforms like Instagram and YouTube enable candidates to construct visual or performative narratives of their personal identities and party's agenda, building strong connections with supporters. But platforms can also have distinct audiences; for example, alt-tech platforms like Gettr, Truth Social, and Rumble, which position themselves as free speech advocates, have gained popularity among right-wing users (Stocking et al., 2022).

When studying political campaigns, scholars often analyze one or two platforms (e.g., Haßler et al., 2024). Comparative multi-platform strategies, on the other hand, remain a scholarly gap in the field, despite the importance of comparative studies to analyses of mass communication (Esser & Vliegenthart, 2018; Russmann et al., 2024). In more recent years, scholars have called for more multi-platform comparative studies to understand how different affordances facilitate different communication strategies and foster diverse communities (Matassi & Boczkowski, 2023).

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To help fill this gap, we conduct a comparative study bounded by time, space, and topic (Esser & Vliegenthart, 2018): we explore how political campaigns used different social media during the 2022 U.S. Midterm election, from October 1 to November 30, 2022. We compiled a list of candidate accounts on seven platforms, with various communication modalities (text-, image-, video-based) and audiences (mainstream, niche): Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, Gettr, Rumble, and Truth Social. We analyzed messages from candidates in both the Democratic and Republican Parties to identify mobilization strategies. Our results suggest that candidates tailor their content based on the modalities of a platform. These results enhance our understanding of political campaigns' varied mobilizing strategies and offer a more comprehensive overview of political campaigning in the multi-platform social media system, particularly campaigning with visual content (Larsson, 2015).

Literature review

Multi-social media platform political campaigns

The social media information system is more fragmented than ever, a trend projected to continue (Di Martino et al., 2024; Smyrnaios & Baisnée, 2023). As audiences move to platforms that align with their interests, some platforms may cater more to increasingly niche groups. This affects candidates, who generally want to gain and maintain voter support (Mayhew, 1974) by drawing attention from the media and public. Campaigns require coalitions of supporters, which may behave or mobilize differently based on the circumstances of the election (Hirano & Snyder, 2014; Lee, 2016) and the media landscape. In the digital era, campaigns can use social media to reach different groups of potential supporters.

Within the multi-platform environment, strategically leveraging the unique functionalities, affordances, and audiences of each platform is important for building voting coalitions. Interviews with digital directors of the 2016 presidential campaigns (Kreiss et al., 2018) revealed how campaign communications may differ across social media platforms. For example, campaigns viewed Facebook as having the widest demographics and used it to reach a broad range of age groups; Twitter, a place where journalists congregated, was often used by campaigns to shape campaign coverage by legacy media; Instagram was seen as a way to reach younger audiences—however, its effectiveness in converting user engagement into electoral resources was limited as it prevented hosting external links.

Notably, campaigns' communication strategies may differ based on content modality. An overview of this variation by platforms that we include in our study is shown in Table 1. Kreiss et al. (2018) found that candidates produced content that was "native" to the platform they used. Compared to text-based platforms like Twitter, where candidates might give quick responses to live events, photo-based platforms like Instagram are amenable to storytelling through visuals that emphasize personal or party traits, such as behind-the-scenes photos that allow voters to look at the campaign trail (Kreiss et al., 2018). Video-based platforms allow users to create videos and incorporate visual and auditory characteristics to gain visibility (Zulli & Zulli, 2022). As the most widely used social media among U.S. adults (Auxier & Anderson, 2021), YouTube, for example, is effective for viral and social sharing of audiovisual content. Such platforms may be better suited for specific mobilization strategies.

Table 1. Social Media Platform by Modality and Classification (Mainstream vs. Alt-Tech).

	Mainstream	Alt-tech
Text-based	Facebook, Twitter	Truth Social, Gettr
Image-based	Instagram	
Video-based	YouTube	Rumble

"Each platform is distinct" (Heft et al., 2024, p. 326), and specific affordances determine potential advantages and challenges. For example, discussion platforms such as 4chan, 8kun, and Reddit utilize threaded and interconnected conversations. While platforms such as Facebook and Twitter use a network-based communication structure (Heft et al., 2024). These differences may result in specific engagement patterns; for example, social media use by populist leaders in Europe demonstrated differences between Facebook and Twitter (Davidson & Enos, 2025). Larsson's (2015, p. 1) comparison between Facebook and Twitter suggests that they have different, "technical infrastructures, terminology, and appearance."

Other explanations for why different political candidates use different platforms may be (1) their party or (2) what office they are running for. Most studies consider House and Senate candidates separately due to their differences in size, election schedule, constituencies, and national prominence. During the 2010 election, Livne et al. (2011) found that Republicans may have been more cohesive in their messaging. Senators used polarized language in their tweets at higher levels for Republicans than Democrats (Russell, 2018). Senators also varied in their tweets' focus on policy, partisan politics, or district issues (Russell, 2021). Members from the House and Senate also vary which policies they prioritize on Twitter (Hemphill et al., 2021). Senate candidates in 2010 used more negative language in their Facebook posts when facing a competitive general election opponent, which did not further vary by party (Auter & Fine, 2016). O'Connell (2018) examined how members of the House and Senate used Instagram, finding differences in uptake and use between Republicans and Democrats.

While there has been scholarly attention on politicians' social media use for campaigning and while in office, much of the literature has focused on one or two platforms and on

one chamber at a time. There are some exceptions (e.g., Blum et al., 2023; Green et al., 2024), which find differences by party and that politicians use different strategies across different modes of communication on social media and offline. However, it remains unclear whether politicians' use of multiple social media platforms during elections has systemic patterns. We therefore ask several questions: to what extent do Republicans and Democrats communicate differently on social media (RQ1a), to what extent do candidates communicate differently by platform (RQ1b), and to what extent does this vary between House and Senate candidates (RQ2)?

Platforms also cater to different audiences.[3] One type that has emerged is alt-tech social media, which champion themselves as advocates of free speech. Alt-tech platforms like Gettr, Truth Social, and Rumble serve a niche population compared to mainstream platforms (Stocking et al., 2022; Vogels et al., 2021). Users join the alt-tech platforms to avoid stricter content moderation policies or deplatforming (Rogers, 2020). Although alt-tech platforms are believed to operate for a niche audience, they have become more integrated with the mainstream media environment, amplifying right-wing news media (Zhou et al., 2019) and conservative politicians like Trump on Truth Social (Zhang et al., 2025). Far-right groups and influencers strategically use these platforms to broaden their reach and ideological influence, recruit allies, and establish the discourse, challenging the mainstream or so-called "left-wing" hegemony united on mainstream platforms. As a result, these "niche" platforms may be useful for right-wing politicians to build support and amplify their campaign messages.

In the United States, alt-tech platforms have gained notoriety for being used to organize right-wing extremist activities, including and especially the insurrection of the Capitol on January 6, 2021 (Buntain et al., 2023; Johnson et al., 2022). Alt-tech platform users are more ideologically congruent than their mainstream counterparts (Park et al., 2024) and can facilitate public spheres that advance conspiratorial, false, and extremist narratives. While little research has explored the presence of political candidates on these platforms, candidates who espouse such beliefs are likely to be on those platforms compared to others. We therefore hypothesize that candidates who have publicly supported claims of election fraud or who have aligned politically with Trump are likely to be more present on platforms with users who are ideologically similar (H1).

Campaign mobilization on social media

Persuasion is inherent to political communication. Mobilization—the desired outcome of political actors' persuasion efforts—can be defined as the development of a social relationship between an individual and a political entity within a political system (Cameron, 1974), like a political party (Nedelmann, 1987) or social movement (Taylor & Whittier, 1992). This social dynamic could facilitate interest formation, community building, and means of action (Nedelmann, 1987). One common goal of mobilization is to increase voter turnout (e.g., Cameron, 1974; Schraff, 2014). However, citizens can be mobilized to engage in other political acts, from participating in social movements and protests (Munson, 2010), donating (Heersink et al., 2021) or fundraising (Kowal, 2023). In today's digital environment, U.S. candidates have shifted their communication practices to target "super-supporters" (Stromer-Galley, 2014) and increase the opportunity structures for action (Suk et al., 2022).

While much of the existing scholarship on mobilization efforts has found that in-person, offline contact is more effective at increasing turnout than online contact (Aldrich et al., 2016), modern campaigns continue to make extensive use of online tools to mobilize their supporters not just to vote, but also to volunteer and donate. Social media platforms are potentially useful, as they are cheap and do not require having a target's email address or phone number.

Given social media's mobilizing potential, political campaigns have sought to mobilize voters across offline and online realms. Through *offline mobilization*, campaigns encourage voters to attend rallies or candidate events, and to vote. While these mobilization efforts can take place online and offline, the resources that candidates gain from offline mobilization are non-digital, including political resources (votes), non-digital support (event attendance), and economic resources (money). Politicians adopting social media have been more successful at offline mobilization than those who do not (Ballard et al., 2023). Challengers and "underdog" candidates were especially likely to use social media for offline mobilization (Auter & Fine, 2018).

Through *online mobilization*, politicians ask audiences to engage with or view digital content. Existing work has examined how different topics or sentiments used by campaigns influence the online behavior of audiences (e.g., Auter & Fine, 2016; Gervais et al., 2020; Macdonald, Russell, & Hua, 2023). For example, women congressional candidates received more likes and comments on their posts when using more negative sentiment than men, but there was no difference in shares (Macdonald, Hua, & Russell, 2023).

Our study groups these mobilization efforts broadly into seven categories: rallies and event attendance (Somma & Medel, 2019), boycotts/buycotts (Lightfoot, 2019), fundraising, voting (Hansen, 2016), "calling your politician" (Baumgardner & Richards, 2005), engaging with digital content (Koc-Michalska & Lilleker, 2017; Tromble, 2018), and looking up digital evidence ("do your own research," see Prochaska et al., 2023).

Platform-varied mobilization efforts

Despite a robust literature on candidates' use of social media in soliciting offline and online mobilization, comparatively less scholarly attention has considered whether politicians leverage different platforms for specific mobilization tactics, though it is likely that candidates of either chamber may

consider differing platform affordances. For example, Facebook's capability to build public-facing pages, along with its hyperlinking functionality, algorithmic filtering, and nonrestrictive rules for message length and modality, has allowed it to be the dominant platform for campaigns (Bossetta, 2018).

One potentially important difference may be whether platforms afford the use of different modalities—that is, text, images, or videos. For example, Instagram, YouTube, and Rumble are well-suited for visual communication, where images or footage of crowds at rallies and campaign events can be effective in delivering a mobilizing message (Lu & Peng, 2024). However, Instagram's lack of functionality to include actionable links can limit some mobilization efforts, including making online donations or visiting another website. Research in visual political communication shows that video or photographic recordings of media events help candidates construct their public persona (Schill, 2012), and that candidates often use photos of them at rallies or events, on platforms like Instagram (de-Lima-Santos et al., 2023). This may be because events provide opportunities for candidates to present themselves as in a position of strength and authority (Mazzoni & Mincigrucci, 2023). Based on this literature, we expect that candidates are more likely to use visual-based platforms (images and videos) to mobilize for events and rallies (H2). Researchers have also found that URLs, hyperlinks, and linguistic appeals to voters are important to political campaigns on platforms like Facebook (Keena & Wintersieck, 2022) and Twitter (González-Cacheda & Outeda, 2022). We therefore anticipate that text-based platforms or platforms that allow links are more likely to be used for fundraising and linking strategies (H3).

A further reason why candidates use different mobilization strategies may be the platform's audience. Alt-tech platforms may have functionalities that mirror those of mainstream platforms, for example, but the more niche audience may alter a campaign's mobilization strategy. Some candidates may choose not to use those platforms at all, particularly if they are not ideologically aligned with their users. Candidates who are ideologically aligned with alt-tech platform users may promote more intensive or time-consuming mobilization efforts. While some studies have explored grassroots and social movement mobilization using alt-tech platforms (e.g., Karell et al., 2023; Wilson & Starbird, 2021), the use of these platforms by political elites and candidates is not well understood.

The relationship between candidates and audiences on alt-tech platforms may be mutually beneficial: candidates on these social media can confer a perception of legitimacy for users' more politically extremist viewpoints and can unintentionally share low-quality information (Lasser et al., 2022). In turn, candidates could mobilize these users to achieve their political goals (whether candidates do so is the crux of this study). Given that there is less literature on candidates' use of alt-tech platforms for different mobilization strategies, we ask to what extent candidates vary their mobilization strategies on Gettr, Truth Social, and Rumble (RQ3).

It is important to recognize that these mobilization strategies are not necessarily equal in value (to the candidate) nor equal in effort (for the citizen participant). They are also not discrete: political parties and campaigns can (and do) leverage various mobilization activities to build robust support for candidates. Before understanding the effects or consequences of these mobilization strategies, it is necessary to consider how frequently candidates leverage different electoral mobilization efforts. That is our goal: to describe the frequency with which congressional candidates during the 2022 U.S. midterm elections sought to encourage online and offline mobilization.

The 2022 U.S. midterm election

We selected the 2022 U.S. midterm elections for several reasons. Politically, it was the first federal election since 2020 and served as a referendum on then-President Joe Biden (Balz & Sotomayor, 2022). This was also the first election since the attempted insurrection on January 6, 2021, and the first opportunity that new candidates espousing "the Big Lie" (i.e., that the 2020 election and Biden's win was illegitimate) could run for office.

There are also several pivotal changes to the digital information environment that likely shaped how politicians used social media. After the attempted insurrection, several mainstream social media platforms suspended thousands of users who shared election-related misinformation, including then-President Donald Trump, who was temporarily suspended from Facebook (Facebook Oversight Board, n.d.) and suspended from Twitter (2021), though his account was later reinstated (BBC, 2022). The suspension of these users, across several mainstream platforms, likely contributed to the growth of alt-tech platforms (Buntain et al., 2023; Johnson et al., 2022). This is also the first election that took place after the release of Truth Social, the platform Trump developed following his Twitter suspension.

These changes to the political landscape and the social media system create opportunities for researchers to explore how political candidates may utilize different communication strategies. While the 2022 U.S. Midterm election is unique in its circumstances, the strategies employed are likely to inform future elections wherein candidates are communicating across many platforms to build coalitions of supporters.

Methods

Data collection

We focus on social media content produced by congressional candidates during the 2022 U.S. Midterm election. To derive this list, we first purchased data from Ballotpedia (Ballotpedia, n.d.), which compiles a list of candidate

accounts on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube. We annotated the candidates by labeling which Republican candidates were endorsed by Donald Trump[4] and which candidates were skeptical of or denied the outcome of the 2020 U.S. Presidential election.[5] We collected posts from U.S. general election candidates on seven platforms from October 1 to November 30, 2022, roughly a month before and after the midterm election day on November 8, 2022.

To collect Facebook and Instagram data, we used CrowdTangle, a Meta-acquired "public insight tool" (CrowdTangle, n.d.) with some data about popular public Facebook groups pages, and Instagram accounts. For Twitter data, we used the Twitter 2.0 academic track API (Pfeffer et al., 2023).[6] For YouTube data, we used youtube-dl to download videos and closed captions (Ajwani & Arolkar, 2019; youtube-dl, 2021). To collect Truth Social data, we used the Truth Social API.[7] For Gettr, we collected data with Gettr's undocumented API. For Rumble, we collected candidate videos by scraping channel pages. We used the OpenAI tool Whisper to transcribe the videos (Lukito et al., 2024). For additional details about our collection, see Supplemental Appendix A1.

One of the challenges of working with data from many platforms is the processing needed to make comparable variables. Our study focused primarily on the content of the posts (Feal et al., 2024), as content production is an essential affordance for social media platforms (Carr & Hayes, 2015; Larsson, 2015). As platforms name their content different things (for example, messages on Twitter are called "tweets" and messages on Facebook are called "posts"), we use the umbrella term "message" referring to any spoken or written language post in our data set.[8] We also merged date-timestamps (all set to EST) and the account or profile using the name of the candidate. Owing to the different sizes of the platforms and the different engagement metrics used by each platform (what is the conversion rate of a Facebook love reaction to a Twitter like?), we did not consider these variables.

Data analysis

To analyze the data, we used our collection framework to identify how many Democratic and Republican candidates were on each of the seven respective platforms during the month before and after the election. Next, we leveraged the text data to identify common mobilization strategies (see Supplemental Appendix A2 for how each was selected). Finally, to identify the mobilization strategies, we built five dictionaries: three for offline mobilization strategies (fundraising, voting, and attending events/rallies) and two for online mobilization strategies (sharing content and visiting another platform). These were selected because they represent a wide array of political behavior, inclusive of both online and offline activity (see Supplemental Appendix A3 for the validation process for these dictionaries).

We analyzed data from before and after the election separately for three main reasons. First, mobilization strategies will likely change before and after the election. Second, past work has found that whether a candidate wins or loses significantly changes how they communicate on social media after the election (Mirer & Bode, 2015). Third, supporters of winning versus losing campaigns demonstrate differing levels of mobilization leading up to and after the election, suggesting there may be differences in the mobilization strategies of candidates before and after the election (Dahlke & Zhang, 2024).

Results

Candidate presence across platforms

We first ask whether candidates use different social media platforms (RQ1b) and how this may vary by chamber (RQ2) or party (RQ1a). We find several interesting trends. Notably, in our time frame, we did not find a Democratic candidate with an account on any alt-tech media platforms. Among all Republicans, there is a less than 15% adoption rate for any alt-tech platform. For mainstream platforms, adoption by parties is somewhat similar: in our time frame, both Democrats and Republicans were most likely to use Twitter, followed by Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube. Generally, higher proportions of Senate candidates were on each platform compared to House candidates. This is particularly true for mainstream platforms. Table 2 displays the overall number of candidates who posted on each of our social media platforms during our time frame by chamber and party. In total, there are 838 candidates. 770 ran for the House (389 Republicans and 381 Democrats) and 68 ran for the Senate (34 for each party). The average House Democratic candidate was on 2.5 platforms, compared to 2.7 for the average

Table 2. Number of Candidates on Each Platform by Party and Chamber.

Chamber	Party	N	Facebook	Twitter	Instagram	YouTube	Gettr	Rumble	TruthSocial
House (*N* = 770)	Republican	389	328 (84%)	332 (85%)	179 (46%)	114 (29%)	34 (9%)	14 (4%)	45 (12%)
	Democratic	381	333 (87%)	341 (90%)	214 (56%)	78 (20%)	-	-	-
Senate (*N* = 68)	Republican	34	32 (94%)	31 (91%)	27 (79%)	18 (53%)	3 (9%)	2 (6%)	9 (26%)
	Democratic	34	33 (97%)	33 (97%)	28 (82%)	13 (38%)	-	-	-

Note. Percentages refer to the proportion of candidates in a party–chamber for a given platform. For example, 84% of Republican House candidates are on Facebook; 87% of Democrats House candidates are on Facebook.

Table 3. Candidates' Post Frequency Across Platforms.

Chamber	Party	N posts	Facebook	Twitter	Instagram	YouTube	Gettr	Rumble	TruthSocial
House (*N* = 112,730)	Republican	51,718	13,903 (27%)	30,244 (58%)	3,537 (7%)	427 (1%)	414 (1%)	146 (0.3%)	3,047 (6%)
	Democratic	61,012	13,801 (23%)	42,443 (70%)	4,461 (7%)	307 (1%)	-	-	-
Senate (*N* = 21,894)	Republican	9,304	2,488 (27%)	5,623 (60%)	842 (9%)	163 (2%)	15 (0.2%)	15 (0.2%)	158 (2%)
	Democratic	12,590	3,615 (29%)	7,632 (61%)	1,210 (10%)	133 (1%)	-	-	-

Note. Percentages refer to the proportion of posts by candidates of a party-chamber for a given platform. For example, 27% of posts made by Republican House candidates were Facebook posts, compared to 23% of all posts made by Democratic House candidates.

House Republican candidate. Democratic Senate candidates were on average of 3.1 platforms and for Republican Senate candidates the average was 3.6.

To answer H1, we focus on the Republican candidates. Of the 177 Republican candidates who competed in the 2022 general elections for either chamber and are election skeptics or deniers (42% of candidates), 29 were on Gettr, 22 were on Rumble, and 56 were on Truth Social. Of the 195 Republican candidates who were endorsed by Trump (46% of candidates), 40 were on Gettr, 23 were on Rumble, and 69 were on Truth Social. Of the Republican candidates who were not election skeptics nor deniers ($n = 224$, 53% of candidates), only 9 were on Gettr, 2 on Rumble, and 19 on Truth Social. These trends support our expectations from Hypothesis 1.

Focusing on the messages rather than the candidates, Table 3 displays the number of posts made by Democratic or Republican candidates, 134,624 posts across the platforms. House candidates posted 112,730 times (51,718 by Republicans and 61,012 by Democrats) and Senate candidates 21,894 times (9,304 by Republicans and 12,590 by Democrats). Candidates may have had accounts on a platform, but if they did not post from October to November 2022, or if they did not post at all, there would be no data for this table. We find that Twitter was the most used platform for candidates of all parties by number of posts, followed by Facebook. Table 3 also shows that Republican candidates were active across other platforms, including the alt-tech platforms Gettr and Truth Social.

Candidate mobilization strategies

RQ3 asks whether candidates used different mobilization strategies across alt-tech platforms. We examine this by looking at the distribution of mobilization strategies across alt-tech platforms for Republican candidates. We further explore variations in the behavior of all candidates by party and chamber, out of their posts that used at least one mobilization strategy. The raw number of posts by platform, mobilization strategy, and party are in Supplemental Appendix Tables B2 and B3. The five labels that we assigned (voting, fundraising, attending events/rallies, online audience, and online engagement) correspond to column labels voting, fundraising, participation, (online) audience, and (online) engagement.

We test our remaining research questions and hypotheses using candidate-level OLS regression analysis (ordinary least squares). The unit of analysis is candidate-platform during a given period (pre- or post-2022 midterm election day, November 8, 2022). Our dependent variable is the proportion of a given candidate's posts on a given platform that invoke each mobilization strategy either pre- or post-midterms: the percentage of the posts about fundraising, voting, events and rallies, online engagement, and online audience, respectively. In equation (1), this is denoted by "*Prop_Mobilization*." We estimate these results separately for members of each party and chamber:

$$Prop\_Mobilization = Platforms + X + e. \quad (1)$$

Our main independent variable, "*Platforms*," denotes which platform the candidate-mobilization strategy observation is from. For all the analyses below, Facebook is the excluded platform. Thus, each coefficient should be interpreted as that party's chamber's mobilization usage on YouTube, for example, compared to Facebook. A politician who uses many platforms would have one observation for each platform they were active on, pre- and post-election day.

All models include "*X*," a vector of controls. Models for both parties control for district competitiveness using Cook Report scores at the district level (House) and state level (Senate) from November 2022. A district or state is considered competitive if it was rated as a toss-up, lean Democratic/Republican, or likely Democratic/Republican. Models of Republican candidates also include a control for whether the politician was a 2020 election denier or skeptic.[9] Additional models in the Supplemental Appendix control instead for whether the Republican candidate was endorsed by Donald Trump.[10] We do not include election denial/skepticism and Trump endorsement in the same model as they are correlated at .70.

We estimate four models for each mobilization strategy: Democratic-House, Democratic-Senate, Republican-House, and Republican-Senate. The full regression tables are presented in Supplemental Appendix C. We present the results here using coefficient plots.[11] For ease of visualization, we present only the coefficients from each model that correspond to mobilization messaging on each platform. We split the results between mainstream platforms (Figures 1 and 2,

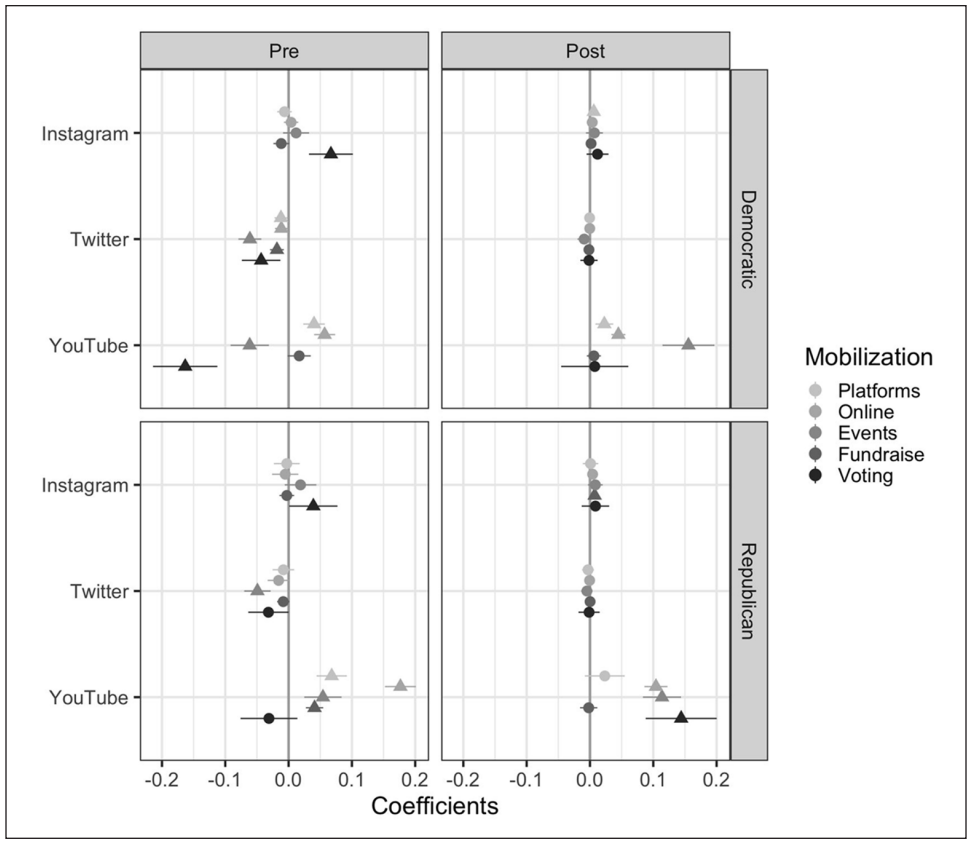

Figure 1. Coefficient plots of all mobilization strategy coefficients for mainstream platforms by House candidates.
Note. The left facet is pre-election day, and the right facet is post-election day. Controls for the competitiveness of the district are included for all candidates. For Republican candidates, we include a control for whether they were an election denier or skeptic about the 2020 elections. Triangle coefficients are statistically significant at the .05 level.

House and Senate) and alt-tech platforms (Figures 3 and 4, House and Senate) due to the high number of coefficients.

Figures 1 to 4 are of the same base form and used to test H2 and H3. The platform associated with each estimate is on the y-axis. The left facet of each plot shows results from before midterm election day, November 8, 2022, and the right facet shows results from after. The top facet presents estimates of Democratic campaign strategy, and the bottom facet for Republicans. To make time comparisons, compare the left and right facets, holding political party constant. To make party comparisons within a single period, compare the top and bottom facet, holding time constant.

Each coefficient, denoted by a different color, corresponds to one of the five mobilization strategies. Coefficient shape shows whether the estimate is statistically significant at the .05 level—a triangle if it is, a circle if it is not. In this way, we can see how politicians of the same party, during the same period, used different mobilization strategies on social media platforms around the midterms. If there was no difference between candidates' use of mobilization strategies across platforms, we would find no statistically significant coefficients.

Figure 1 shows the results for House campaigns on mainstream social media platforms, by party and time. We find little support for H2 for Democratic House candidates' pre-election but find greater support post-election—Democratic candidates were much more likely to mobilize for events and rallies on YouTube than other mainstream platforms. In contrast, Republican candidates behaved in line with our expectations pre- and post-election by using greater mobilization strategies around events and rallies on YouTube. We do not find support for H3 for candidates of either party in Figure 1. Instead, we find evidence that linking strategies are more common for Democrats and Republicans on YouTube, as are fundraising appeals for Republicans.

Figure 2 shows the same analysis for Senate campaigns. We see similar results for H2 for Senate candidates. Democratic Senate candidates were more likely to post about events and rallies on YouTube post-election but not pre-election. Republican Senate candidates were more likely to make those types of mobilization messages on YouTube during both periods. One trend across the mainstream platform results (Figures 1 and 2) is that campaigns used different mobilization strategies across platforms. This suggests that politicians were not simply copying and pasting the same content on every platform, but instead varied their messaging.

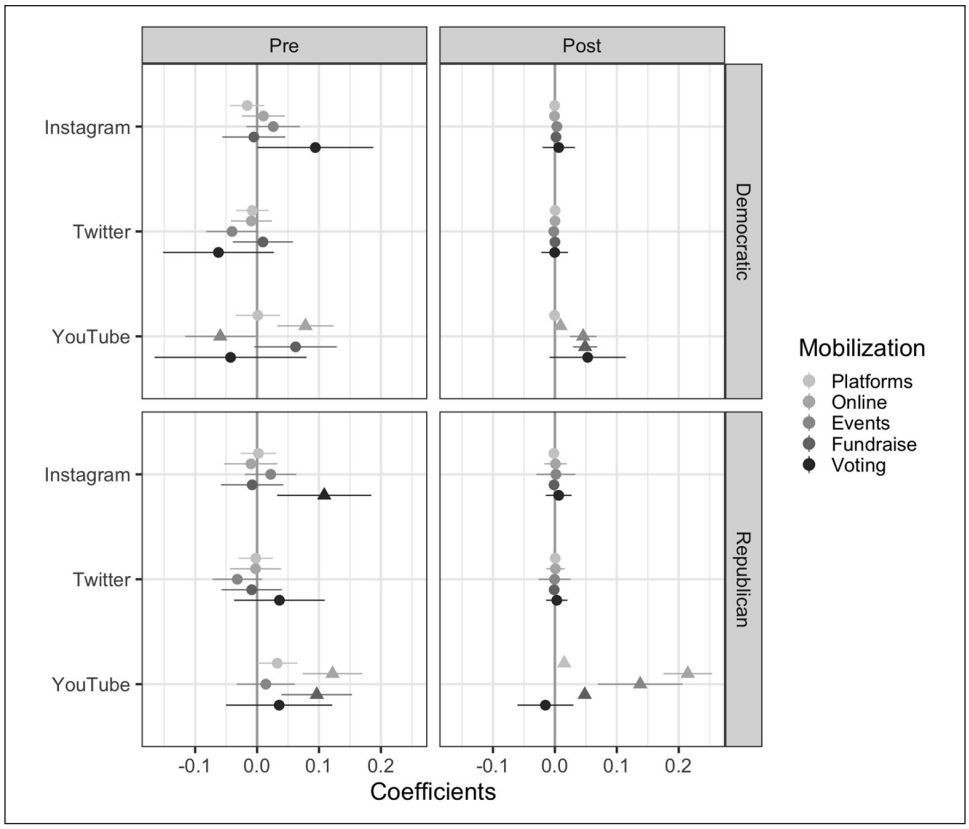

Figure 2. Coefficient plots of all mobilization strategy coefficients for mainstream platforms by Senate candidates.
Note. The left facet is pre-election day, and the right facet is post-election day. Controls for the competitiveness of the district are included for all candidates. For Republican candidates, we include a control for whether they were an election denier or skeptic about the 2020 elections. Triangle coefficients are statistically significant at the .05 level.

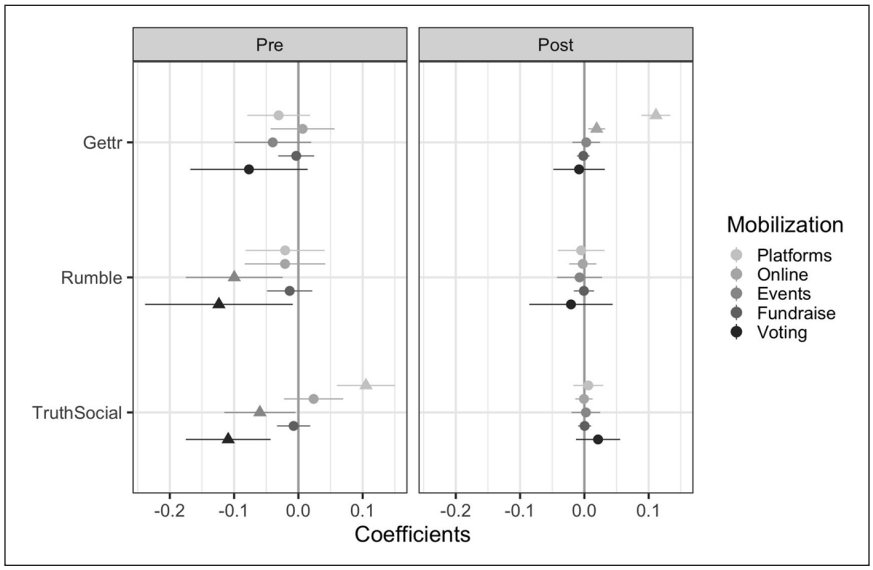

Figure 3. Republican House candidates on alt platforms.
Note. Controls are included for the competitiveness of the district and whether the candidate was an election denier or skeptic about the 2020 elections. Triangle coefficients are statistically significant at the .05 level.

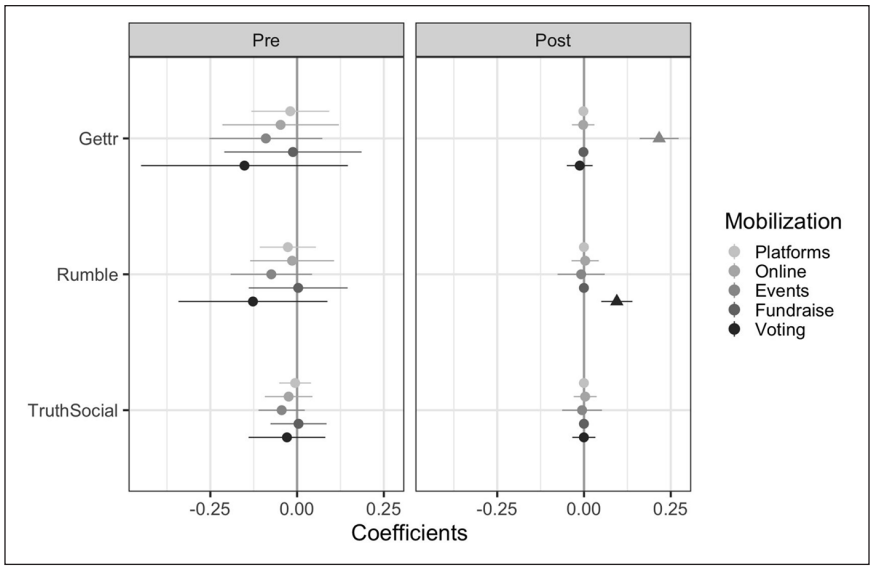

Figure 4. Republican Senate candidates on alt platforms.
Note. Controls are included for the competitiveness of the district and whether the candidate was an election denier or skeptic about the 2020 elections. Triangle coefficients are statistically significant at the .05 level.

In Figures 3 and 4, we present results of Republican campaigns for the House and Senate on alt-tech platforms. We do not find support for H2 in Republican candidates for the House or Senate—they did not use visual-based platforms more than other platforms to mobilize for events and rallies. We find some support for H3 for Republican House candidates, who were more likely to make linking mobilization messages on Gettr post-election and Truth Social pre-election. However, we do not find support for Hypothesis 3 for Senate Republicans on alt-tech platforms. These results hold when controlling for whether the candidate was a 2020 election denier or skeptic.

Discussion and conclusion

Our results suggest that candidates leveraged different mobilization strategies across mainstream and alt-tech platforms. Most noticeably, with regard to whether Republican and Democratic candidates were on different platforms (RQ1a), there were no Democratic candidates in our dataset that were on an alt-tech platform in 2022, whereas Democratic and Republican candidates for the House and Senate used mainstream platforms. We also find that non-election-denial Republicans were less likely to use these platforms, providing further evidence for H1; however, adoption by election denial candidates or Trump-endorsed candidates remains quite small as a proportion of all candidates. In addition, our results show that Facebook remains the dominant platform for political candidates in terms of registration (Bossetta, 2018), but they are increasingly using multiple platforms to mobilize voters (Auter & Fine, 2018). Our results suggest that Republican candidates are more likely to be on YouTube (rather than Facebook), but Democrats are more likely to be on Instagram.

In terms of mobilization strategies (RQ3), we considered whether there were differences in how candidates utilized platform and mobilization type. Both Democrat and Republican candidates were likely to use several mobilizing efforts, particularly about events and rallies, on YouTube relative to Facebook, offering some support for H2. These results highlight the need to explore video-based platforms more. While early literature on video-based platforms were skeptical about its value to politicians (e.g., Gulati & Williams, 2010), our work indicates that candidates have found a useful niche, particularly now with the ease of recording and sharing video content, which makes it more likely that candidates will shift their mobilization strategies based on the affordances of a given platform (Kreiss et al., 2018).

We also found some similarities, as Republican and Democratic candidates used mainstream platforms similarly. This suggests that, in the United States, the two major parties are likely to use similar mobilization strategies when utilizing mainstream platforms. One reason for this may be the professionalization of campaigns' social media: content is vetted extensively, and campaigns may use very similar strategies to mobilize and persuade voters (Cohen, 2021; Russell, 2022).

The use of a mobilization strategy is not only a function of a candidate's partisanship or chamber, but also the affordances of a platform. As candidates develop larger, more complex digital campaign strategies, they may tailor their messages to account for a platform's affordances, especially as social media campaign tactics become more professionalized and routinized (Cohen, 2021). Researchers must take this into account when studying platforms' campaign

strategies, which may be a challenge as platform lifespans vary. Nevertheless, multi-platform studies also reveal important similarities across platforms, as we find.

Furthermore, with alt-tech platforms, a different story emerges: during the 2022 midterm elections, no Democrat was on an alt-tech social media platform, highlighting the platforms' niche audience. We also found some support for H3 where House Republican candidates were more likely to make linking mobilization messages on Gettr and Truth Social around the election day. Such results suggest an interconnected utilization of alt-tech platforms, at least for House Republicans.

As we noted, during our time frame, Democrats did not register for alt-tech platforms. However, this may change, as the Biden campaign created a Truth Social account (Associated Press, 2023). Journalists have framed Biden's account (with its nearly 28,000 followers) as more popular than Trump's campaign account (with 23,600 followers), but both pale in comparison to Trump's personal account on Truth Social, which has over 6 million followers (Tan, 2023).

Overall, our study suggests that in the United States, it is platform differences—whether because of the audience or affordances—rather than party differences that shape mobilization efforts. This highlights a maturation in how political campaigns leverage social media. Gone are the days of impromptu posting, or the treatment of social media as the "little kid" to mainstream media advertisements (Street, 2021). Now, campaigns carefully craft their messages to leverage a platform's features or userbase.

Of course, our study is not without limitations. We exclude independents and candidates who are not affiliated with the two major parties. Our study also looks at a narrow scope (mobilization) over just a few weeks around the 2022 U.S. midterm election, during which other topics could have been discussed. Consequently, our results are not necessarily representative of campaigns' social media use internationally. Prior research of Norwegian elections suggests that candidates did not vary their content across platforms (Larsson et al., 2024). Future studies can build on this work with a multi-country comparative approach, though comparing across countries *and* platforms would complicate an analysis. Given that many platforms considered are U.S.-based companies, it is possible that our findings are a result of how embedded social media have become in U.S. elections, whereas candidates in other countries may not need as complex of a social media mobilization strategy.

We also acknowledge that this study is descriptive. Some may view this as a limitation, but we argue it is a strength. Not every paper should be causal; in fact, causal work relies on an empirically grounded understanding of the social system under study. That being said, even descriptive multi-platform work poses challenges. While we collected data from many platforms, we were limited in what variables we could merge or compare, focusing primarily on the content produced by candidates. Future studies can consider other variables, such as temporal variation, or viewership metrics. However, an inherent challenge of comparative platform studies stems from the varied differences in how platforms measure engagement and viewership (Heft et al., 2024), and researchers seeking to compare data across multiple platforms should carefully consider what is comparable, what requires significant transformation for comparability, and whether such a transformation could account for new and emerging platforms in the future.

Even with the platforms that we had, studying seven platforms is no trivial matter (strategies for data collection, the data structure, and the pre-processing steps to clean the data varied drastically across platforms). Nevertheless, to understand the social media ecology better and produce results that can apply across multiple platforms, we argue it is necessary for researchers to continue conducting multi-platform studies.

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Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. We define a "campaign" as the group of people (whether volunteers or staff) who work together to achieve a candidate's electoral goals.
2. The platform is now renamed "X." At the time of the study, the platform was still called "Twitter." We therefore use Twitter henceforth.

3. We provide demographic information of users of social platforms from surveys of the American public by the Pew Research Center in Supplemental Appendix B4.
4. https://ballotpedia.org/Endorsements_by_Donald_Trump#2022
5. https://promiseinstitute.law.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Summar-List-of-Election-Deniers-and-Skeptics-Elected-to-Office-During-the-2022-U.S.-Midterms.pdf (no Democratic candidates were endorsed by Trump or were election deniers/skeptics)
6. Unfortunately, data from Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook are no longer retrievable as academic access to the Twitter 2.0 API was shut down in Spring/Summer 2023, and access to CrowdTangle was shut down in Fall 2024.
7. Truth Social does not technically have an API; Truth Social source code is taken from Mastodon code, https://github.com/justjosias/truth-social, and users can access data via an "API url."
8. In cases where there were two or more columns of content (e.g., post text and optical character recognition text), we concatenated these strings.
9. https://promiseinstitute.law.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Summar-List-of-Election-Deniers-and-Skeptics-Elected-to-Office-During-the-2022-U.S.-Midterms.pdf
10. See Note 4.
11. Tables B1, B3, B5, and B7 show results for Democratic campaigns pre- and post-election day by chamber. Tables B2, B4, B6, and B8 show results for Republican campaigns pre- and post-election day by chamber. Tables B9 to B12 offer robustness tests for the models of Republican campaigns, controlling for Trump endorsement rather than election skepticism or denial.

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