

**Consistent and Cautious: Congressional Campaigning  
on the Web in 2016**

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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores congressional campaigning on the web in 2016. What impact did the unique nature of the 2016 election have on those involved with the creation and maintenance of congressional campaign websites? Did it cause them to alter their approach to online campaigning? Using data from a survey of campaign insiders, the researchers find that the factors that influence how congressional campaigns view and use their websites were largely impervious to the unique electoral environment. Results show that, consistent with research on previous election years, campaigns maintained a fairly uniform view of likely visitors and target audiences, and they tended to see their campaign websites as digital hubs, best used for capturing the campaign's overall message. They also find that, as in other years, non-incumbents continued to use their websites to campaign more aggressively than incumbents. Additional analysis finds that the majority of congressional campaign websites did not mention either of the presidential candidates, although those that did were more likely to be from Democratic and female candidates. Overall, the results suggest that congressional campaigning on the web is primarily driven by stable factors that transcend technological advancements and shifts in the political environment.

Every election cycle provides an opportunity for campaigns to reassess their use of the Internet. As technologies advance and the political environment shifts, campaigns can reconsider their likely visitors and target audiences, the information they post online, and the tools they use to deliver their message—will they cling to proven online strategies, modify their approach, or move to new innovations? Congressional campaigns might also think about whether their websites will engage with the national political discourse by mentioning the policies and comments of presidential candidates. The ever-changing political and technological environment gives campaigns a chance to continually rethink their approach to web campaigning.

In a recent study, however, we found that U.S. congressional campaigns were fairly consistent in how they viewed and used their websites and other online technologies in the four elections between 2008 and 2014 (Druckman, et al. n.d.). Survey data shows that most campaign insiders saw their websites as digital hubs, ideal for presenting the campaign's overall message but less than ideal for communicating directly with voters. Meanwhile, incumbency was a consistent determinant of website goals and online negativity. In short, despite the changing political and technological context between 2008 and 2014, there was little change in how congressional campaigns viewed and used the Internet.

What effect did the 2016 election have on congressional campaign insiders? Did it cause them to finally rethink their approach to online campaigning? The 2016 election was unique in certain ways, giving it the potential to upend established behavior. To begin with, 2016 witnessed a noticeable rise in the prominence of social media. YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and other platforms had been gaining momentum for some time, but 2016 seemed to represent a new high point in their ascendancy. Social media had gone from cutting edge technology to campaign necessity, being implemented more widely than ever before (Hess 2016). Some even suggested

that 2016 was “the year that social media changed everything” (Romano 2016). This could have led social media to supplant standard websites as the primary tool for communicating the campaigns’ overall message.

The 2016 election also featured a historic presidential race. Congressional campaigns had to decide whether they would engage with the battle between Donald Trump, a Washington outsider whose unpredictability put him in a contentious relationship with Republican leaders, and Hillary Clinton, a seasoned politician and the first woman to capture a major party presidential nomination. Congressional campaigns had to appeal to voters in this context—a context in which gender, civility, populism, and partisanship all played critical roles. However, entering the broader discussion could be risky because an online mention of either presidential candidate could alienate potential supporters. Still, certain candidates, particularly female candidates, might have found it especially difficult to avoid referencing the presidential race given the gender dynamics at play (see, e.g., Leslie and Rudner 2016). Ultimately, congressional campaign insiders had to decide between localizing or nationalizing their online appeals.

While there were certainly incentives for congressional campaigns to rethink and broaden their approach in 2016, these incentives were competing with a number of well-established factors that have driven online decisions for some time. As we explain below, we expect that, despite the unique nature of 2016, congressional campaign insiders will follow a consistent and cautious approach in which they view and use their websites in familiar ways while largely avoiding the presidential race.

We start in the next section by describing our survey and data. We then present our results in two main sections. The first focuses on how respondents viewed and used the web in 2016, compared to previous years. This includes an analysis of target audiences, likely visitors,

and the website's relative effectiveness compared to other forms of communication. This section also includes results on website goals and whether the site was used to go negative against the opponent. The second results section focuses on the tendency of congressional campaign websites to mention the presidential candidates. We conclude with a brief discussion of our findings.

### **2016 Campaign Survey Data**

Between 2008 and 2014, we conducted four surveys of those involved with the creation and maintenance of online congressional campaigns. Each survey captured basic information about the candidate, the race and how respondents viewed and used the Internet (see Druckman et al. n.d.). We replicated this survey in 2016 with additional questions about online references to the presidential candidates.

As in past years, we used Project Vote Smart to create a list of all major party, general election congressional candidates. We then searched each candidate's website for contact information, such as the names, emails, and phone numbers of possible respondents (e.g., Campaign Manager, Communications Director). In mid-September, we sent an email request either to the specific contact or to the campaign more generally asking for someone "involved in the construction and/or maintenance of the [campaign] website" to complete a brief, confidential survey via an online link or email. We repeated our request up to three more times either by email or phone (when available), including a final request in the days immediately following the election.

We sent our requests to the 830 campaigns for which we had a workable email address (772) or online inquiry form (58). We received 118 responses, leading to an overall response rate

of 14.2%, which is not far off the typical range for these types of web surveys (see Couper 2008: 340). In our analysis, the Ns are slightly smaller due to item non-response.

To confirm that we had contacted appropriate individuals, we posed an initial screening question asking respondents to indicate the extent to which they were informed about how the content of the site was determined, on a seven-point scale with higher scores indicating more knowledge. The average response was 6.57 (standard deviation = 1.00, n = 115) with 76.52% of respondents rating themselves at the top of our scale (i.e., “very informed”).

Respondents were then asked about the campaign for which they worked. This included questions about race competitiveness and the candidate’s office level (House or Senate), party, gender, and incumbency status. Our sample reflects the actual population of 2016 congressional campaigns fairly well in terms of race competitiveness (Toss-Up: 15.52% sample / 6.81% population), office level (Senate: 11.02% sample / 7.67% population), party (Democratic: 55.56% sample / 50.16% population), candidate gender (Male: 80.17% sample / 79.03% population), and incumbency status (Challengers: 52.99% sample / 41.60% population).<sup>ii</sup> While there are some discrepancies between our sample and the population, the modes are the same in all categories except candidate status, where we have a slightly higher number of responses from challenger campaigns. Nevertheless, we have plenty of responses from incumbents (44), sufficient variation between incumbents and non-incumbents, and no clear basis to believe that incumbents who responded systematically differ from those who did not.

Our survey asked respondents to indicate their perception of how often an average member of several groups (e.g., undecided voters, supporters, journalists) visited the site, on a seven-point scale, with higher scores indicating more frequent visits. Respondents used a similar scale to rate the priority of these same groups in terms of each being a target audience of the

website, with higher scores indicating higher priority. We also asked respondents to assess, again with a seven-point scale, how they thought campaign websites compared to other communications (e.g., direct mailings, television ads, candidate speeches) in terms of “capturing the campaign’s overall strategy,” how websites compared to email and social media in terms of communicating directly with voters, and to rate the importance of various content goals for their site (e.g., persuading undecided voters, increasing awareness of issue positions, fundraising). Respondents also noted whether their sites included any negative mentions of their opponent, and whether the site referenced either Hillary Clinton or Donald Trump.

It is important to reiterate that all responses were given on the promise of complete anonymity, so we have no way to know exactly which campaigns responded. This means that we are unable to match individual survey results to other measures such as actual website contact, fundraising data, or district partisanship. We believe a survey of those involved in campaign website design and maintenance has particular advantages over relying on content analysis data of the websites (e.g., Foot and Schneider 2006; Druckman, Kifer, and Parkin 2014). Specifically, it allows us to isolate the expressed motivation of campaign insiders. Moreover, repeating the survey conducted in earlier years (2008-2014) allows us to assess how their motivations might have changed in 2016.

### **Views and Uses of Congressional Campaign Websites in 2016**

In this section, we analyze how campaign personnel view *and* use their campaign websites. We address each topic—views and uses—in turn. For each, we compare the stable trends we uncovered from 2008 through 2014 to present data from 2016 to answer the question of whether this particular election affected (e.g., interrupted) what had become typical. This is a particularly interesting question given the unique nature of the 2016 presidential campaign. For

example, intensifying polarization and incivility at the national level might have led congressional campaigns to shift their website target audience from voters in general to supporters, and to see supporters as even more likely to visit their sites than in past years (Soergel 2016). The general campaign also could have stimulated greater negativity such that even incumbents—who historically avoid negative campaigning (Kahn and Kenney 2004)—go negative. Additionally, advances in technology may have led campaigns to see websites as relatively less effective as hubs for communicating the campaign’s overall message. The bottom line is that 2016 appears to be a strong test case for stability. If campaigns maintained their traditional strategies in 2016, it would be powerful evidence that the place of websites in congressional campaigns is quite stable.

### *Views of Websites*

Our expectations about how congressional campaign insiders view their websites are based on three key premises. First, campaigns have limited control over the audiences that visit their websites. Regardless of technological advancements, the decision to visit a campaign website still requires deliberate choice and action by individuals. The implication is that those most engaged in the campaign—engaged voters, journalists and bloggers who write about the campaign, and supportive voters and activists who selectively expose themselves to media (Taber and Lodge 2006)—will visit much more often than the typical voter. Second, this lack of control does not constrain who campaigns target. Campaigns realize that any items placed on their websites can potentially become central to the campaign narrative—it takes only a journalist or an opponent to make it so (see Ireland and Nash 2001: 14-15, Owen 2011, Gruscynski 2015). For this reason, campaigns need to be cognizant of the latent audience of all voters, regardless of the frequency with which average voters access the site. The main targets



will thus be voters in general and undecided voters. Third, websites are a relatively unique media insofar as they provide an unmediated and virtually unlimited presentation of information (see Druckman, Kifer, and Parkin 2009). This contrasts with other media (e.g., television news) that do not allow campaigns to communicate directly or communications that face finite time and space limits (e.g. speeches, mailers, most other digital media such as email and Twitter). This means websites, relative to other media, can serve as digital hubs that encapsulate their entire campaign message.

These three points, in theory, are exactly what we found in our 2008 to 2014 surveys, both in aggregate and year to year results (see Druckman, et al. n.d.). We expect that they will hold even in 2016 as they reflect fundamental realities of voter behavior and inherent technological limits and opportunities. For example, an individual must still choose to visit a website and websites still provide an ideal medium for communicating vast amounts of campaign information. We therefore expect continuity between past findings and results from 2016.

In Figure 1, we present the averages and standard deviations from our questions about the perceptions of the frequency of website visits (black bars) and the primary target audiences (gray bars). The black bars show that, as predicted, campaigns perceived highly engaged voters, supportive voters, supportive activists, journalists, and then bloggers as the most frequent visitors in 2016. There is then a statistically significant drop in perceived frequency of visits by voters in general and undecided voters, with opponent's voters and non-voters considered the least likely to visit (comparing bloggers to voters in general gives  $t_{98} = 1.767$ ,  $p = .080$  in a two-tailed test). The gray bars in Figure 1 also confirm expectations by showing that campaigns targeted voters in general and undecided voters over all others (comparing undecided voters to highly engaged

voters gives  $t_{100} = 2.364$ ,  $p = .020$  in a two-tailed test). This, even with the polarized nature of the 2016 campaign where people may have been particularly likely to be selective in media exposure, did not change congressional campaign strategy on the web when it came to targets. The reality of “potential” access to all meant the targets remained voters writ large.

**[Figure 1 Here]**

Stability in views of the website audience is accentuated by the fact that the results in Figure 1 are virtually identical to the results from our 2008-2014 surveys (Druckman, et al. n.d.). In fact, the relative rankings and absolute values given to each group are remarkably similar. For example, respondents gave highly engaged voters an average target rating of 5.37 and an average frequency rating of 4.79 between 2008 and 2014, compared to 5.38 and 4.62 respectively in 2016 (comparing highly engaged voters’ target rating between 2008-2014 and 2016 gives  $t_{559} = 0.045$ ,  $p = .964$  in a two-tailed test and comparing highly engaged voters’ frequency rating between 2008-14 and 2016 gives  $t_{522} = 0.995$ ,  $p = 0.320$  in a two-tailed test). Thus, congressional campaigns clearly did not change how they viewed their likely visitors and targets in 2016. Rather than adapting to the new context, congressional campaigns stuck to their original perceptions of who visits and to whom they should tailor their website.

Clearly, the realities of voter behavior and technological limits and opportunities, and not the uniqueness of the 2016 campaign, drove views of websites. Moreover, the consistency of the approach is an important reminder to avoid confounding the perceived frequency of visitors with the intended targets of the website. Certain groups may be seen as more important even if they visit less often (c.f., Trent, Friedenber, and Denton 2011: 368-369). This disconnect also demonstrates the danger, particularly in a highly polarized environment like 2016, of targeting supporters with websites that might alienate some other crucial group of voters. Focusing the

website on a broad audience may do little to fire up the base, but it ensures that potentially persuadable voters will not be turned off, even if they do not visit all that often.

We also suspected that technological realities would lead campaigns to continue to view their websites as digital hubs reflecting their entire campaign message. This is the case both because of the unmediated and infinite information capacity of websites and also because the main target audience of voters in general would be best persuaded by full information, rather than potentially contrary targeted information.

We asked respondents to rate how well campaign websites, candidate speeches, informal conversations, mailings, media coverage, and television ads “capture the campaign’s overall strategy.” Figure 2 presents averages and standard deviations, and shows that, as expected, respondents in 2016 estimated websites to be more representative of their overall strategy than all other forms of communication. Campaign websites are rated slightly higher than candidate speeches and informal conversations while clearly outpacing the ability of mailings, media coverage and television ads to capture the campaign’s overall message.<sup>iii</sup> Moreover, these results match those from previous years. For example, campaign websites received an average rating of 5.85 between 2008 and 2014, compared to 5.81 in 2016, while candidate speeches and informal conversations were basically unmoved from 5.59 to 5.60 and from 5.48 to 5.49 respectively.<sup>iv</sup> In fact, the only change over time that approaches statistical significance is with television ads, which dropped from 4.75 to 4.28 (comparing television ads between 2008-2014 and 2016 gives  $t_{354} = 1.661$ ,  $p = .098$  in a two-tailed test). Campaign insiders clearly still value websites for their ability to present an unlimited and unmediated portrait of their entire campaign strategy.

**[Figure 2 Here]**

Our last inquiry into how campaigns view their websites concerns the relative effectiveness of different new media. We asked respondents to estimate their use of campaign websites, email, and various social media to communicate with voters in 2016. The results in Figure 3 show that respondents saw websites as moderately useful, although significantly less effective than Facebook and email (comparing email to campaign websites gives  $t_{93} = 5.090$ ,  $p = .000$  in a two-tailed test). While congressional campaigns used Twitter moderately in 2016, they reported much less use of YouTube, Instagram, LinkedIn, and other social media, indicating a nuanced view of social media as a direct communications tool (comparing Twitter to campaign websites gives  $t_{92} = 0.362$ ,  $p = .718$  in a two-tailed test, campaign websites to YouTube gives  $t_{91} = 5.806$ ,  $p = .000$  in a two-tailed test). Perhaps campaigns resist relying on social media that constrains their communication in terms of length (Twitter) or written content (Instagram), even if the communication is active and targeted.

We have less data on trends when it comes to this issue as our past work only explored it in 2014. Nevertheless, the results above replicate those we received in 2014 when we asked about websites, email, Facebook, and Twitter. In fact, the only statistically significant difference between 2014 and 2016 was with Twitter, which dropped from 5.39 to 4.76 in terms of perceived effectiveness.<sup>v</sup> The fact that websites maintained a relatively lower ranking than Facebook and email is sensible insofar as websites, despite providing an opportunity for holistic messaging, are limited in terms of reach. As mentioned above, individuals must make a concerted effort to visit a campaign website, which means that only a select portion of the population is likely to visit. Websites represent a passive form of communication compared to email and social media that can be used to actively distribute information to subscribers and followers. Thus, campaigns are relatively unsure that website information is reaching voters, but they can be fairly certain that

email and social media posts are being received. This makes emphasizing Facebook and email sensible.

This ostensible stability means that even though 2016 was purported to be the ultimate social media campaign (McCabe 2015, Romano 2016), little changed in terms of how much congressional campaign websites were used to communicate with voters. The consistency between media also reflects the fact that, despite all of the social media hype in 2016, we find campaigns holding consistent views on the fundamental differences between social media, email, and campaign websites in terms of their inherent ability to communicate with voters—i.e., their fundamental qualities have stayed the same. It may take a more dramatic technological shift for congressional campaigns to rethink how they communicate with voters online.

**[Figure 3 Here]**

All of these results present a virtually unchanged view of congressional campaigning on the web in 2016. Those who design and maintain campaign websites clearly resisted the opportunity to reassess their approach in the context of a historic election, which speaks to the power of fundamental strategic incentives over technological innovations and changes in the political environment. As predicted, campaigns continue to see their websites as digital hubs, ideally suited for presenting broad messages to voters in general while favoring email and Facebook for communicating directly with supporters and engaged voters. Moreover, in results available from the authors, we find limited variability in these findings across campaign types—the views of websites reported here are virtually constant regardless of race competitiveness, candidate party, office level, incumbency, or gender. The realities of voter behavior and technology apply across campaigns, which speaks to the fact that these views are based on powerful premises that are largely constant across both time and electoral context. Even the 2016

campaign could not dislodge views of websites, at least at the congressional level. This also speaks to perhaps the potentially limited direct impact that presidential campaigns have on congressional campaigning (Jacobson 2013). The lesson is *continuity*.

### ***Website Uses***

While campaigns may have a fairly uniform and stable *view* of their websites, this does not necessarily mean that they all *use* their websites in the same way. Indeed, the logic underlying website usage differs from the aforementioned key points about how they view their websites. This is because different types of candidates—even if they all view voters in general as the central target—have distinct incentives on what type of message to put forth. The central point of variation in message preference concerns incumbency status.

It is well known that incumbents enjoy an edge over challengers, all else constant. Their status alone can generate up to a 10 percentage point advantage in vote share (Ansolabehere and Snyder 2004: 487; Abramowitz, Alexander, and Gunning 2006; Jacobson 2013; Hainmueller, Hall, and Snyder 2015) which has meant that House and Senate incumbents have historically won more than 85% of the time (Davidson, Oleszek, Lee, and Schickler 2016: 94). This gives incumbents scant incentive to actively campaign and instead they would be best served by focusing on what makes incumbents preferable, namely their backgrounds, which involves having ties to the district and experience (e.g., Fiorina 1989, Gronke 2000: 142; Jacobson 2013; also see Druckman, Kifer, and Parkin 2009, 2010). In contrast, challengers need to get voters' attention, which they can do by going negative (Marcus, Neuman, and MacKuen 2000, Druckman and McDermott 2008: 2), and they must also mobilize voters to vote and persuade them to focus on issues and other items that can counter the incumbency advantage. These are

the exact trends we found from 2008 to 2014 (Druckman, et al. n.d.), and again, we do not expect much change in 2016 given the fundamental nature of these incentives.

In 2016, we assessed these dynamics with a question that asked respondents to rate the importance of various website goals (i.e., how they used their websites) on 7-point scales. Figure 4 shows that, overall, the primary goal of most campaigns is to increase awareness of issue positions, followed by increasing awareness of the candidate's background and persuading undecided voters. The graph then shows a gradual decline from fundraising to providing information on the opponent's background. This order is almost entirely consistent with the goals expressed by campaign insiders in previous years (Druckman, et al. n.d.).<sup>vi</sup>

**[Figure 4 Here]**

Of more importance is the fact that these goals, as expected, differ based on incumbency status, as they have in past years. We analyze the role of incumbency in Table 1, where we regressed each goal on a variety of campaign features. The results show, as predicted, incumbent campaigns continue to use their websites to promote the candidate's background much more than non-incumbent campaigns, while non-incumbents put more emphasis on all other goals. These other goals include the aforementioned efforts to counteract the incumbent message by promoting issues and active campaigning (e.g., fundraising, persuading, and distributing material). While past results were a little more robust, the fact remains that, in 2016, website goals continue to differ between incumbents and non-incumbents. We also, in Table 2, studied if non-incumbents go negative more often, as we expected. We find that 2016 was no different than past years in that non-incumbent campaigns continue to use their websites to attack their opponents much more often than incumbent campaigns.

**[Tables 1 and 2 Here]**

Taken together, these results paint a clear picture of how congressional campaign insiders viewed and used their websites in 2016. They targeted voters in general while recognizing that engaged voters and supporters were more likely to visit, and they saw their websites as digital hubs, better suited for capturing their entire strategy than communicating directly with supporters. Non-incumbent campaigns also used their websites much more aggressively than their incumbent counterparts. What is perhaps most remarkable, however, is how consistent these results are with those from previous years. On nearly every measure, congressional campaign insiders reported virtually identical responses, despite the fact that 2016 provided an opportunity to reassess their approach to online campaigning—technological change and the 2016 presidential campaign *did not change incentives in congressional campaigns*. The fundamentals of congressional campaigning seem invulnerable to technological and contextual changes, at least in the face of the historic 2016 campaign. That said, one area where the presidential election may have crept in concerns when campaigns engage with the presidential race by mentioning either Hillary Clinton or Donald Trump. We now turn to this question.

### **Mentioning 2016 Presidential Candidates on Congressional Campaign Websites**

The most notable political story by far in 2016 was the presidential race, and at first glance it might make sense for campaigns to raise their profiles by engaging and mentioning that race. The 2016 presidential campaign was novel in a number of respects, including the backgrounds, characteristics, and behavior of the candidates themselves. In Hillary Clinton, Democrats had the first woman to be nominated for president by a major American political party, a politician with years of experience who had wrapped up the vast majority of in-party endorsements,<sup>vii</sup> and a politician with a history of some negative baggage. In Donald Trump, Republicans had nominated a billionaire outsider who had never held political or military office



and promised to transform American government,<sup>viii</sup> a reality television personality who had shaped his brand through controversy, and a provocateur who made numerous outlandish statements on the campaign trail and in his prior professional life, including statements about women.

Together, these candidate qualities brought extraordinary attention to the open seat presidential contest. Indeed, there were relatively large segments of the voting public who did not like them, albeit for very different reasons. Both major presidential candidates had historically low favorability ratings with the country as a whole and electorate (Saad 2016) and coverage of the presidential campaign itself was overwhelmingly negative (Patterson 2017). So, congressional campaigns had difficult choices to make about whether they would associate themselves with or mention (potentially negatively) the campaigns of Donald Trump or Hillary Clinton. There may have been some risk in doing so.

Trump's outsider status, controversial campaign style and statements, and low ratings with the electorate overall could conceivably give his own partisans reasons to distance themselves from him and Democrats motivation to attack him online to energize base voters (e.g., Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1995). On the other hand, and despite low overall favorability ratings, Hillary Clinton's historic candidacy and popularity with the Democratic base might lead more Democrats to associate themselves with her campaign.

One key dynamic in the race was the combination of Clinton's historic candidacy as the first female nominee of a major American political party and Trump's history with and statements about women. The intensity of attention to these aspects of the campaign could have made this an election in which congressional candidates and their campaigns were more acutely aware of gender (and discussion of gender) and its perceived effects on voters.

The older conventional wisdom when it comes to gender and congressional campaigns is that there is stereotyping by voters, gendered patterns in how the different sexes communicate through campaign advertisements, and differences in press coverage of men and women's candidacies (Kahn 1993, Kahn and Goldenberg 1991, Bystrom, et al. 2004). However, more recent research casts some doubt on whether there are still significant differences between male and female candidates in how their campaigns communicate and how the news media covers their candidacies (Hayes and Lawless 2016, Lawless 2015). Hayes and Lawless (2016) argue that gender gaps in issue agendas and word usage in campaign communications have more to do with differences across political parties than the gender of the candidates.

There is, however, a shortage of research on how congressional candidates of different genders relate to presidential candidates. It is possible that, contra Hayes and Lawless (2016), Trump's behavior was not an "issue" in the sense that types of policy programs constitute issues and his actions and comments about women prompted Democrats and female candidates to mention him more on their websites.

To test these ideas, we added a new item to our 2016 survey of congressional campaign insiders that asked whether their websites mentioned any of the presidential candidates. Campaigns in general reported very few mentions of either Clinton or Trump—they cautiously stayed away from the potentially polarizing candidates. Table 3 shows only 17.09 percent of campaigns reported mentioning Trump and a slightly higher percentage—18.80 percent—mentioned Clinton. In other words, the vast majority of campaigns did not mention the presidential candidates at all. Beyond that, there appear to be some interesting partisan differences. Democratic campaigns mentioned Clinton (25.00%) significantly more than Republicans (10.00%), while Republicans were only marginally more likely to mention Trump

(22.00%) than Democrats (14.06%) (comparing Clinton mentions by Democrats and Republicans gives  $t_{114} = -1.851$ ,  $p = .067$ ; comparing Trump mentions by Democrats and Republicans gives  $t_{114} = 1.001$ ,  $p = .319$ ). These differences suggest that when presidential candidates were mentioned, there was a slight partisan slant which is perhaps not surprising given the polarized environment. Overall, though, the campaign did not cause the majority of congressional candidates to engage with the presidential race.

There also appear to be some differences between male and female congressional candidates. Female candidate campaigns mentioned both Clinton and Trump on 30.44% of their websites, while male candidates were marginally less likely to mention Clinton (16.13%) and significantly less likely to mention Trump (13.98%) (comparing Clinton mentions between female and male candidates gives  $t_{114} = -1.570$ ,  $p = .119$ ; comparing Trump mentions between female and male candidates gives  $t_{114} = -1.883$ ,  $p = .062$ ). Again, while the vast majority of congressional campaigns avoided any mention of either presidential candidate, it seems as though some female candidates were drawn in more than their male counterparts.

#### **[Tables 3 and 4 Here]**

Table 4 shows logit coefficients and standard errors for separate regressions for reported Clinton and Trump mentions. The results substantiate the findings above. First, Democratic campaigns are significantly more likely than Republican campaigns to mention Clinton on their websites; however, there is no party difference when it comes to mentioning Trump, all else constant. Second, we find that female candidate campaigns are marginally ( $p = .114$ ) more likely than male candidate campaigns to mention Clinton and significantly more likely to mention Trump.

We believe these findings suggest that, overall, congressional campaigns reacted cautiously to the presidential campaign context. Most avoided any mention of either presidential candidate on their campaign websites. However, of those that did enter the fray, there was a tendency toward Democratic and female candidate campaigns becoming more involved than their counterparts. Republicans and male candidates ostensibly had fewer incentives or felt it would be riskier to mention either Trump or Clinton. While this suggests that the political environment may have prompted a small group of congressional campaigns to mention the presidential contenders, the point remains that even major environmental forces, like the intense partisanship and gendered dynamics of the 2016 election, have a limited ability to cause most campaigns to deviate from the message they present online.

## **Conclusion**

The nature and outcome of the 2016 presidential campaign surprised most scholars, pundits, and citizens. Many point to its polarizing nature, but regardless, if nothing else, it was unique for its inclusion of a clear political outsider (i.e., Trump is the first president to have neither prior political nor military experience) and a major woman candidate. There were also technological shifts toward social media that many thought were changing the nature of campaigning (e.g., Romano 2016). We sought to assess whether these realities altered how congressional candidates campaigned on the web. We did so by following up on our prior work which entailed surveys of campaign website personnel from 2008 through 2014.

Perhaps surprisingly, we find amazing continuity in how campaigns view and use their websites. National level politics does not dislodge historic congressional campaign practices, at least when it comes to web campaigning. Congressional campaign websites continue to serve as digital hubs, capturing the campaign's overall message and being used strategically depending

on a candidate's status. Whether these trends will sustain going forward, as technologies continue to change, is a question for future research. We also find that the intense partisanship and gendered dynamics of the 2016 presidential race had limited impact on congressional candidate mentions of Trump and Clinton. Despite powerful narratives at the national level, the vast majority of congressional campaign websites stayed away from the presidential race. Overall, the results are clear: congressional campaign use of the Internet remains consistent and cautious.

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**Table 1: Campaign Website Content Goals**

|                        | Promote<br>Issues | Promote<br>Background | Fundraise       | Persuade          | Distribute<br>Material | Sign Up<br>Volunteers | Publicize<br>Campaign<br>Events | G.O.T.V.        | Coord.<br>Volunteer | Opp.<br>Background | Opp.<br>Issue   |
|------------------------|-------------------|-----------------------|-----------------|-------------------|------------------------|-----------------------|---------------------------------|-----------------|---------------------|--------------------|-----------------|
| <b>Democrat</b>        | -.213<br>(.247)   | -.337<br>(.244)       | -.199<br>(.231) | -.099<br>(.235)   | .135<br>(.224)         | -.083<br>(.225)       | -.394*<br>(.226)                | -.063<br>(.227) | .058<br>(.228)      | -.083<br>(.242)    | -.115<br>(.238) |
| <b>Senate</b>          | -.493<br>(.402)   | -.785*<br>(.414)      | .760*<br>(.429) | -.878**<br>(.395) | -.830*<br>(.397)       | -.418<br>(.394)       | -.158<br>(.388)                 | .003<br>(.429)  | -.226<br>(.393)     | -.387<br>(.438)    | -.491<br>(.439) |
| <b>Competitiveness</b> | -.104<br>(.172)   | -.021<br>(.167)       | .103<br>(.168)  | -.230<br>(.166)   | -.301*<br>(.162)       | -.077<br>(.161)       | -.122<br>(.160)                 | .055<br>(.163)  | .130<br>(.163)      | .175<br>(.171)     | .029<br>(.170)  |
| <b>Incumbent</b>       | -.646**<br>(.257) | .668***<br>(.260)     | -.238<br>(.244) | -.374<br>(.246)   | -.523**<br>(.243)      | -.414*<br>(.240)      | -.573**<br>(.241)               | -.209<br>(.241) | -.285<br>(.242)     | -.275<br>(.262)    | -.250<br>(.257) |
| <b>Female</b>          | -.067<br>(.289)   | -.075<br>(.285)       | -.282<br>(.269) | -.102<br>(.273)   | .038<br>(.262)         | .019<br>(.261)        | .010<br>(.261)                  | -.027<br>(.266) | .392<br>(.269)      | .125<br>(.286)     | -.027<br>(.283) |
| <b>Log Likelihood</b>  | -132.217          | -137.078              | -148.780        | -148.672          | -168.941               | -178.022              | -170.644                        | -177.809        | -175.235            | -143.159           | -150.013        |
| <b>N</b>               | 96                | 96                    | 96              | 95                | 95                     | 96                    | 96                              | 95              | 94                  | 95                 | 95              |

Note: Entries are ordered probit coefficients with standard error in parentheses. \*\*\* p < .01; \*\* p < .05; \* p < .10 for two-tailed tests.

The coefficients and standard errors for  $\tau_1$  through  $\tau_6$  are (reading across the table): for model 1, -2.709 (.486), -2.402 (.449), -2.197 (.429), -1.612 (.399), -1.089 (.392), -.597 (.387), for model 2, -2.567 (.530), -1.645 (.413), -1.498 (.405), -.893 (.384), .386 (.378), .044 (.378), for model 3, -2.198 (.512), -1.499 (.402), -1.251 (.389), -.354 (.372), -.077 (.370), .549 (.373), for model 4, -3.116 (.558), -2.267 (.424), -1.806 (.393), -1.391 (.380), -.818 (.375), -.396 (.371), for model 5, -2.314 (.419), -1.347 (.382), -1.183 (.378), -.620 (.368), -.016 (.364), .458 (.367), for model 6, -1.936 (.398), -1.356 (.379), -1.016 (.373), -.542 (.365), .030 (.360), .510 (.361), for model 7, -2.561 (.428), -1.756 (.387), -1.471 (.381), -.878 (.372), .325 (.364), .363 (.359), for model 8, -1.363 (.385), -.740 (.371), -.545 (.369), .042 (.366), .306 (.367), .703 (.368), for model 9, -.710 (.365), -.230 (.359), .083 (.358), .589 (.362), 1.175 (.372), 1.671 (.390), for model 10, .105 (.381), .405 (.380), .579 (.381), 1.144 (.398), 1.287 (.404), 1.605 (.420), for model 11, -.254 (.379), .071 (.377), .183 (.377), .659 (.385), 1.001 (.396), 1.589 (.425).

**Table 2: Going Negative**

| <b>Negative Mention of Opponent</b> |                      |
|-------------------------------------|----------------------|
| <b>Democrat</b>                     | .123<br>(.512)       |
| <b>Senate</b>                       | 1.045<br>(.801)      |
| <b>Competiveness</b>                | .459<br>(.310)       |
| <b>Incumbent</b>                    | -1.638***<br>(0.575) |
| <b>Female</b>                       | .462<br>(.631)       |
| <b>Log Likelihood</b>               | -53.5433             |
| <b>N</b>                            | 95                   |

Note: Entries are logit coefficients with standard error in parentheses. \*\*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*  $p < .05$ ; \*  $p < .10$  for two-tailed tests.

**Table 3: Presidential Candidate Mentions**

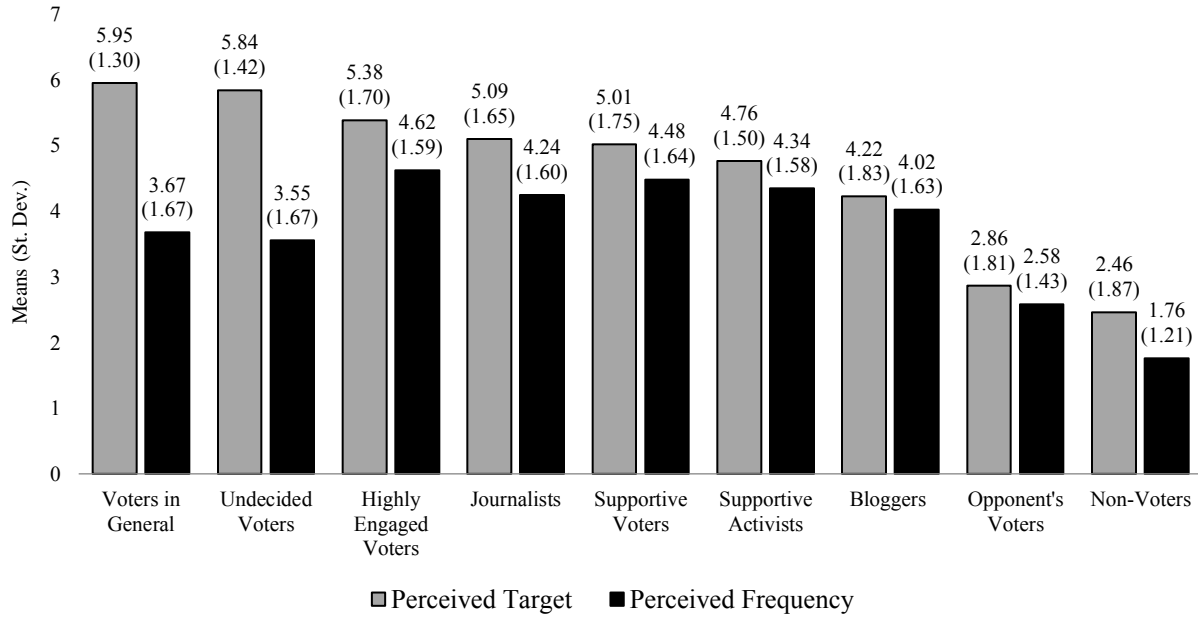
|                        |                             | <b>Clinton</b> |          | <b>Trump</b> |          |
|------------------------|-----------------------------|----------------|----------|--------------|----------|
|                        |                             | <b>%</b>       | <b>n</b> | <b>%</b>     | <b>n</b> |
|                        | <b>All Candidates (117)</b> | 18.80          | 22       | 17.09        | 20       |
| <b>Party</b>           | <b>Democrats (64)</b>       | 25.00          | 16       | 14.06        | 9        |
|                        | <b>Republicans (50)</b>     | 10.00          | 5        | 22.00        | 11       |
| <b>Gender</b>          | <b>Female (23)</b>          | 30.44          | 7        | 30.43        | 7        |
|                        | <b>Male (93)</b>            | 16.13          | 15       | 13.98        | 13       |
| <b>Office</b>          | <b>House (104)</b>          | 20.19          | 21       | 16.35        | 17       |
|                        | <b>Senate (13)</b>          | 7.69           | 1        | 23.08        | 3        |
| <b>Status</b>          | <b>Incumbent (44)</b>       | 25.00          | 11       | 15.91        | 7        |
|                        | <b>Non-Incumbent (72)</b>   | 15.28          | 11       | 18.06        | 13       |
| <b>Competitiveness</b> | <b>Solid (62)</b>           | 20.97          | 13       | 16.13        | 10       |
|                        | <b>Leaning (36)</b>         | 16.67          | 6        | 22.22        | 8        |
|                        | <b>Toss-Up (18)</b>         | 16.67          | 3        | 11.11        | 2        |

**Table 4: Presidential Candidate Mentions**

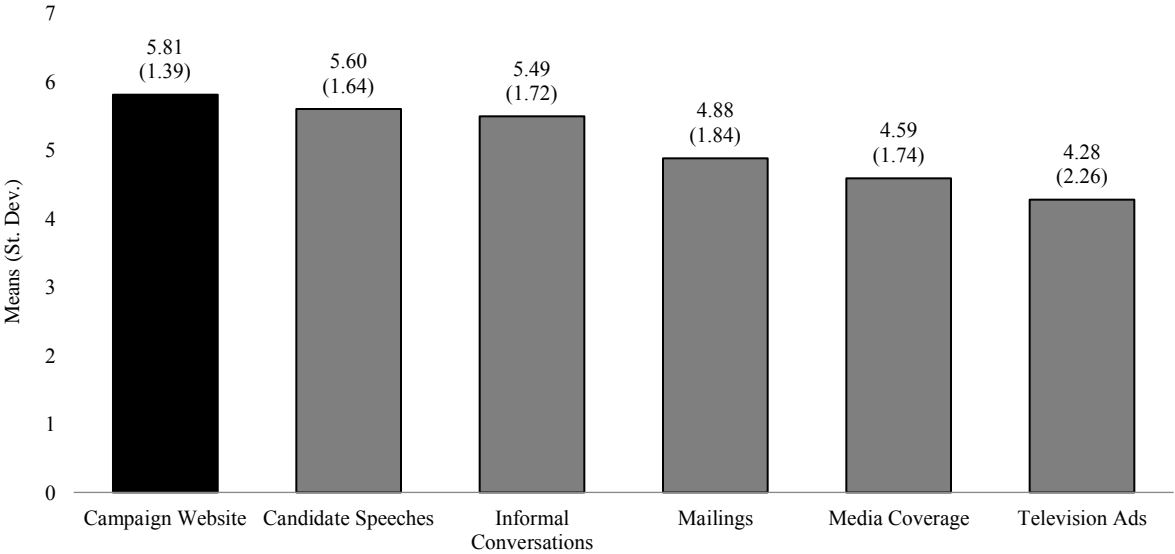
|                        | <b>Clinton</b>    | <b>Trump</b>     |
|------------------------|-------------------|------------------|
| <b>Democrat</b>        | 1.116**<br>(.568) | -.521<br>(.533)  |
| <b>Senate</b>          | -.732<br>(1.11)   | .292<br>(.773)   |
| <b>Competitiveness</b> | -.084<br>(.355)   | -.106<br>(.358)  |
| <b>Incumbent</b>       | .760<br>(.546)    | -.460<br>(.564)  |
| <b>Female</b>          | .901#<br>(.571)   | 1.078*<br>(.561) |
| <b>Log Likelihood</b>  | -51.4356          | -50.4996         |
| <b>N</b>               | 115               | 115              |

Note: Entries are logit coefficients with standard error in parentheses. \*\*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*  $p < .05$ ; \*  $p < .10$ , #  $p < .115$  in two-tailed tests.

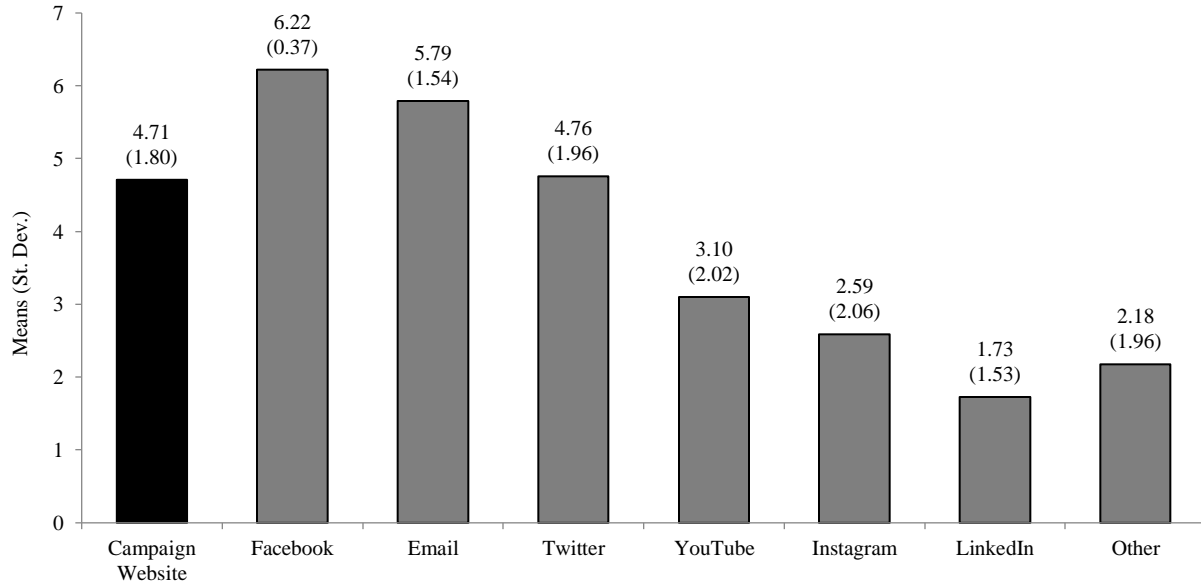
**Figure 1: Website Perceived Targets and Perceived Visitor Frequency**



**Figure 2: Effectiveness of Various Media in Communicating the Campaign's Overall Strategy**

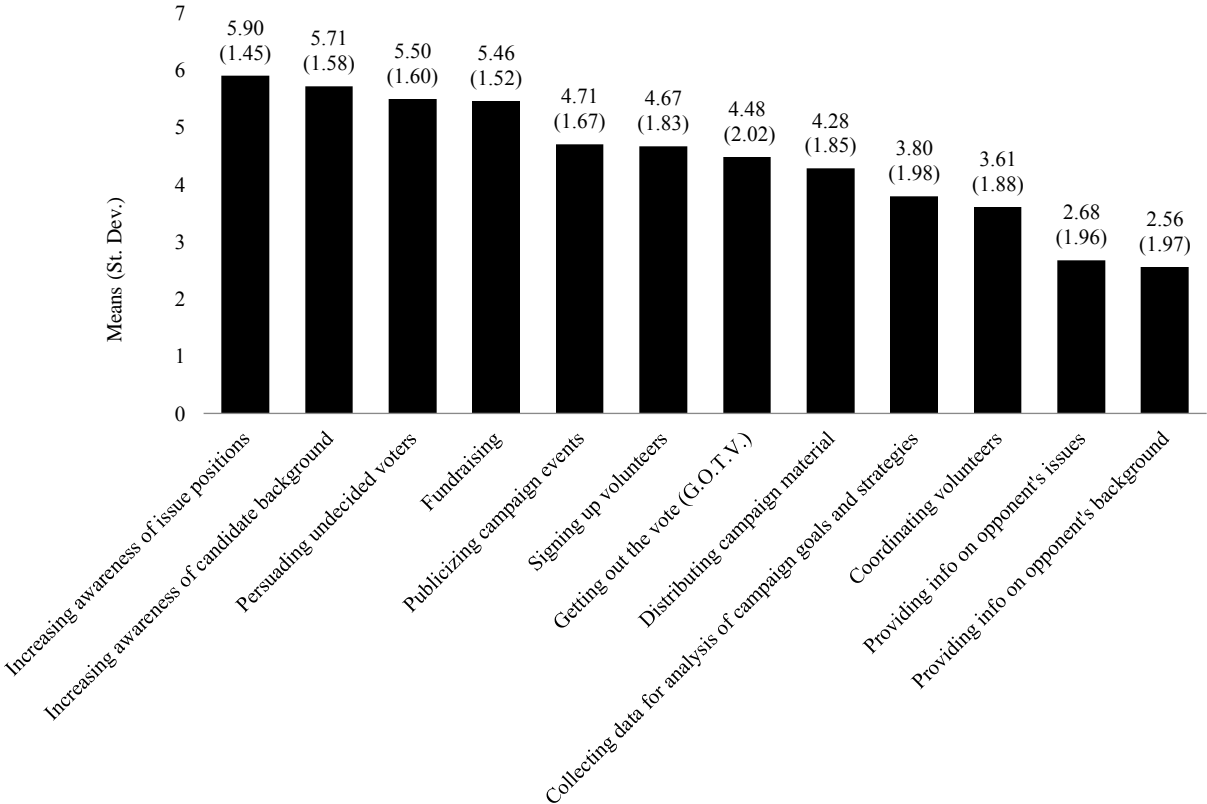


**Figure 3: Use of Various Media in Communicating with Voters**





**Figure 4: Campaign Website Use**



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- i A full copy of the survey is available from the authors.
- ii Population competitiveness comes from the Cook Political Report. For House results, see Cook Political Report, October 27, 2016, <http://cookpolitical.com/house/charts/race-ratings/10124>. For Senate results, see Cook Political Report, November 2, 2016, <http://cookpolitical.com/senate/charts/race-ratings/10145>. All other population figures are based on data from Project Vote Smart, see <http://votesmart.org>.
- iii Although websites have the highest absolute mean, the differences between websites, candidate speeches and informal conversations fail to reach conventional levels of statistical significance (comparing campaign websites to candidate speeches gives  $t_{93} = 1.093$ ,  $p = .277$  in a two-tailed test and campaign websites to informal conversations gives  $t_{94} = 1.555$ ,  $p = .123$  in a two-tailed test). There is, however, a significant difference between campaign websites and mailings, media coverage, and television ads (comparing informal conversations to mailings gives  $t_{91} = 2.080$ ,  $p = .040$  in a two-tailed test). The lack of statistical significance on the first two comparisons with campaign websites is almost certainly the result of sample size, as the absolute differences are nearly identical to the statistically significant differences we found for campaigns between 2008 and 2014 (see, Druckman, et al. n.d.).
- iv Two-tailed t-tests between 2008-14 and 2016 yield no statistically significant results on websites ( $t_{511} = 0.234$ ,  $p = .815$ ), candidate speeches ( $t_{507} = 0.062$ ,  $p = .951$ ) or informal conversations ( $t_{509} = 0.065$ ,  $p = .949$ ).
- v Two-tailed t-tests between 2008-14 and 2016 yield no statistically significant results on website use ( $t_{178} = 0.440$ ,  $p = .660$ ), Facebook ( $t_{176} = 0.390$ ,  $p = .697$ ), and email ( $t_{177} = 1.879$ ,  $p = .062$ ) although the difference on Twitter is significant ( $t_{176} = 2.508$ ,  $p = .013$ ).

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vi Two-tailed t-tests between 2008-14 and 2016 yield few statistically significant results. The only differences that reached statistical significance are on increasing awareness of issue positions ( $t_{529} = 1.792$ ,  $p = .074$ ), signing up volunteers ( $t_{528} = 1.720$ ,  $p = .086$ ), and providing information on opponent's issues ( $t_{525} = 2.546$ ,  $p = .011$ ).

vii Clinton won the nomination by securing insider and elite support and defeating an outside candidate—Senator Bernie Sanders—who had always run for U.S. House and Senate as an independent (see Qui 2016). Fivethirtyeight.com featured an “endorsement primary” tracking influential elected officials who had endorsed presidential candidates (see Bycoffe 2016).

viii Trump, who had not always been a registered Republican, ran as the consummate outsider candidate with statements and tactics that defied primary and general election campaign norms. Trump's victory in the primaries despite the vocal opposition from establishment party figures was seemingly at odds with expectations that the “party decides” presidential nominations (see Cohen, et al. 2008; Kolowich 2016).