



## The role of authenticity in electoral social media campaigns by Gabrielle Grow and Janelle Ward

### Abstract

Authenticity is a popular buzzword in electoral politics: Electoral candidates and politicians are expected to be authentic in their public interactions. Since 2008, campaigning via social media has become an integral part of elections in the United States, and continues to gain importance. In such an environment, this paper presents research into the role of authenticity in electoral social media campaigns. Using Gilpin, *et al.*'s (2010) definition of authenticity as the theoretical basis, interviews were conducted with U.S. Democrats to query their perceptions of candidates' Facebook pages, and particularly in relation to authenticity. This study refines existing definitions of authenticity and offers insights into how electoral candidates can demonstrate authenticity in electoral social media campaigns.

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### Introduction

This above all: to thine own self be true, and it must follow, as the night the day, thou canst not then be false to any man.

Some 400 years after Shakespeare first penned these words in *Hamlet*, they still ring true for modern-day electoral campaigns and the politicians behind them. Candidates' perceived authenticity or lack thereof may be especially relevant in a social media environment and may have implications on whether and how voters decide to cast their ballot. Past research has shown authenticity to be important in electoral political campaigns (Parry-Giles, 2001; Loudon and McCauliff, 2004), and this may be particularly relevant in a social media environment due to a focus on identity and self-presentation (Coleman, 2005; Ellison, *et al.*, 2007).

Social media campaigns have become a regular tool in electoral campaigns in the U.S. Since the 2008 U.S. Presidential election, nearly all candidates for national and state-level offices have adopted Facebook (Foot and Schneider, 2006, in Robertson, *et al.*, 2010). This suggests that Facebook has become a primary communication platform for candidates to communicate with their constituents.

Several bloggers and commentators have noted the importance of authenticity in electoral social media campaigns, but little academic research exists regarding authenticity's role in this environment. As a contemporary "buzzword," the concept of authenticity has received attention from politicians and media alike. Before Herman Cain dropped out of the Republican Presidential primary race in 2011, there were claims Cain was a threat to Mitt Romney because he was more authentic (Fournier, 2011). The problem with buzzwords, at least from an academic perspective, is that sometimes they fail to demonstrate theoretical rigor: it may not mean the same thing, even in the same context. This article attempts to tackle this problem by presenting authenticity as a robust theoretical concept.

Past studies on electoral campaigns noted that a candidate's impression management, political

style and self-presentation are relevant to electoral political campaigns (Pels, 2003; Corner, 2003). Previous research has shown that voters want authentic representatives (Parry-Giles, 2001) however research specifically examining authenticity in electoral social media campaigns has not been previously performed. In particular, deeper investigation into how authenticity plays a role in electoral social media campaigns can build upon research by Loudon and McCauliff (2004) who claimed voters seek authentic candidates as “politicians are a class presumed to be self-serving and are granted only provisional trust” [1], and that authentic electoral candidates “know who they are and behave consistently with themselves” [2]. Parry-Giles (2001) stated the anxiety caused by the Vietnam War, the Watergate and Iran-Contra scandals and the Clinton impeachment created the desire for authentic candidates among the American electorate [3]. Pels (2003) similarly argued the electorate scrutinizes politicians for authentic identity, and Parry-Giles (2001) said political authenticity is central to American political campaigns in which “political opponents seek to deconstruct the authenticated image” [4], therefore seeking to undermine the opposing candidate’s identity.

Media content can influence a candidate’s identity as politicians have used both traditional and new media to create a public image (Mughan, 2000). Norris (2000) argued that those who “watch more TV news, read more newspapers, surf the net and pay attention to campaigns” are more trusting of government [5], which may imply that people who pay attention to electoral social media campaigns are more trusting as well. A politician tries to appear as “a likeable, trustworthy, and competent person, who is sincere in promising changes for the better, as well as capable of bringing about these changes” [6]. At the same time, social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter can actually work against the cultivated image, undermining authenticity and revealing the disagreement between private and public self-representation (Coleman, 2005). Gueorguieva’s (2008) findings on MySpace and YouTube’s role in the 2006 election showed that social media platforms pose a challenge to campaign strategists by weakening the amount of control campaigns have over a candidate’s image and message. This was mainly due to the user-created content on social media sites.

Authenticity is argued to be an important factor in political and social media campaigns, but research has yet to examine how voters perceive authenticity in social media campaigns. This paper investigates this arena, focusing on the campaigns of four Democratic candidates for the U.S. Congress and Senate. Using Gilpin, *et al.*’s (2010) definition of authenticity as the theoretical basis, interviews were conducted with U.S. Democrats to query their perceptions of candidates, particularly in relation to authenticity. This study refines existing definitions of authenticity and offers insight into how electoral candidates demonstrate their authenticity in electoral social media campaigns.



## Section 1: Social media and electoral campaigns

Social media have become a primary means for electoral campaigns to communicate with citizens. Henderson and Bowley (2010) defined social media as online platforms that allow for participation, information sharing, communication and user created content in a community of users. Before the mid-1990s, campaigns mainly used print media, town hall meetings, phone banks, and radio and TV ads to reach voters; now the internet is taking on a larger role in Presidential campaigns (Anderson, 2009).

Notable scholars have proposed broad theoretical frameworks to address the evolution of electoral campaigning (Norris, 2000; Blumler and Kavanagh, 1999). Since 1996, political candidates have used the Internet as a tool for campaigning, however online campaigning has moved from merely providing information about the candidate to becoming engaging and interactive (Trammell, *et al.*, 2006). A great deal of research has examined the content of such political Web sites (Gibson, *et al.*, 2003; van Selm, *et al.*, 2001). In the U.S. electoral context, early studies found a variety of features provided on political Web sites, such as interactivity, links to other political sites, and opportunities for political participation, both on and off-line (Foot and Schneider, 2002; Klinenberg and Perrin, 2000). Other research concluded that political sites consisted of little more than online versions of off-line material: Schneider and Larsen (2000) found a prevalence “brochure-ware” in their analysis of Web sites for the eight major candidates in the 2000 U.S. Presidential election.

Times have changed: Social media platforms have become increasingly popular in social media campaigning. Barack Obama’s 2008 Presidential campaign, which made use of social media platforms like Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter to communicate with his supporters, was a vital and visible example of how social media can be used in electoral political campaigns and showed that its strategic use may help win elections (Reynolds, 2011).

Social media’s role in electoral campaigns has been shown to be just as important as traditional marketing and advertising campaigns, as Silverman (2010) argued it allows candidates and office holders to interact with voters, allowing for transparent communication, and for arguing against opponents. Ellison, *et al.* (2007) suggested a candidate’s image on social media is probably authentic because the information on social media can be verified off-line.

Candidates from different political affiliations may have different approaches to social media, which could have implications for their perceived authenticity. Democratic Senate and Congressional candidates were more popular with Facebook members during the 2008 mid-term elections (Williams and Gulati, 2009). Research by Benkler and Shaw (2010) on political blogs demonstrated conservatives and liberals approach social media differently: the left adopts platforms that enhance participation among all contributors (collectivist), while right wing blogs have a hierarchical structure with less discussion (individualist).



## Section 2: Authenticity

Norris (2000) stated it may become harder to trust political messages and political messengers “if everything in politics is designed for popular appeal,” [7], supporting the previous research that showed a decline in political trust (Louden and McCauliff, 2004). Scandals have diminished the credibility and trustworthiness of politicians, though research has shown trust is already on the decline when it comes to political representatives (Dalton, 2002). These scandals may be particularly important in understanding social media use in political campaigns (Coleman and Blumler, 2009), since social media enables participation and the sharing of information (Henderson and Bowley, 2010). Due to the opportunities to collaborate and share on social media, it is presumable that these opportunities offer politicians the possibility to be more transparent in their communication, perhaps helping them establish authenticity. After all, it is a primary goal of candidates to present themselves to the public through their campaigns.

Recognizing the growing use of digital media in public communication, Gilpin, *et al.* (2010) proposed a model of authenticity in online communication, drawing on comments from the U.S. State Department blog for their research. Their model of authenticity is based on four underlying dimensions of authenticity: authority, identity, transparency, and engagement, and will serve as a theoretical basis for the current research. While their dimensions of authenticity provide a more specific definition than proposed by Louden and McCauliff (2004), it can be further refined to fit electoral politics in social media campaigns. Furthermore, this research built on work by Henderson and Bowley (2010) who said authenticity plays an important role in recruiting constituents on social media. The current research seeks to formulate a theoretical understanding of the concept of authenticity in electoral social media campaigns.

Gilpin, *et al.* (2010) argued that clarity and consistency of identity are central to building authenticity, and presented four dimensions which influence online authenticity:

1. Authority: Perceived authority is based on expertise and credibility [8].
2. Identity: Defined along a continuum — authentic identities are perceived as reliable and genuine, while less authentic identities are unreliable or generic [9].
3. Transparency: Communication that is open to scrutiny [10].
4. Engagement: Interaction between members of the online community and the organization [11].

### 1. Authority

While previous research has not specifically focused on candidates’ authority or authenticity on social media, it has shown that credibility is related to the public’s perception of a candidate and has been an important factor in electoral politics. *Authority* is based on an actor’s expertise on the content being discussed and in the context in which the actor plays a role, and it assumes that the individual who is speaking is empowered to do so (Gilpin, *et al.*, 2010). Instead of resting within a medium or media source, authority is established through a combination of normal practices such as meeting audience expectations and persuasiveness (Robinson, 2007).

Online content may influence constituents’ perceptions of candidate authority in electoral social media campaigns. Parry–Giles (2001) observed that constituents seek authoritative, authentic candidates, and showed citizen blogs may address the lack of authority and authenticity of politicians.

### 2. Identity

Impression management, public image and self–presentation are all tied to an electoral candidate’s identity and have long been important in electoral politics. Building *identity* is an ongoing and socially constructed narrative (Ricoeur, 1985; Somers, 1994; Elliott, 2005) and relies upon several factors including language, writing style, graphics and other interactions (Dahlberg, 2001). The concept of identity is similar to Mitra and Watts (2002) concept of a voice, which is a “phenomenon constitutive of ethical and emotional dimensions that make it a dialogic event” [12]. In socially mediated conversation, “power structures are more closely tied to the ability to create a voice than in real life” [13]. This close relationship between voice and identity shows that there may be a relationship between identity and authority, which are two main concepts of authenticity.

### 3. Transparency

Transparency can be seen as essential to an electoral campaign as it gives constituents the opportunity to know what happens within an organization (Strathern, 2000). Transparency can refer to verifying online claims (Slater, 2002, in Gilpin, *et al.*, 2010). Media trends such as reality television and Web 2.0 have been argued to increase the pressure on organizations and the government to be more transparent (Andrejevic, 2006). The importance of transparency is supported by Molleda (2010) who wrote that organizations are increasingly pressured by stakeholders who demand greater transparency, openness and responsibility from organizations [14], and that all of these are factors of authenticity.

Social media offer forms of interpersonal communication like user communities, friendship maintenance, social interaction and the development of personal identities and relationships online (Hanson, *et al.*, 2010). Therefore, they provide constituents and candidates the possibility to communicate and spread political information. Aspects of transparency, including interactivity and dialogue, have been studied for their influence on political engagement. Interactive Web 2.0 tools like blogs and grassroots activist sites have been found to have a bigger impact on voters than static platforms and newsletters (Rackaway, 2007). Though many are not that active on social media, including youth organizations (Ward, 2012), non-profit organizations that tweeted more, had more likes and more followers were perceived as more transparent and credible by their stakeholders. On the other hand, those who updated less frequently were perceived to be less transparent, showing a relationship between activity frequency and perceived transparency and credibility (Sisco and McCorkindale, n.d.).

To estimate the individual characteristics and factors, a set of observable blog parameters had to be defined. Herring, *et al.* (2006, 2004b) selected various author characteristics, text statistics and the use of media and Internet links to describe blogging practices. Scheidt and Wright (2004) focused on visual design elements, such as sidebar elements used in private blogs. Lee, *et al.* (2008) and Lee, *et al.* (2006) highlighted the importance of author characteristics for corporate blogs. Fleck, *et al.* (2007) outlined the role of content, especially the topics covered in blog posts. Turck (2007) evaluated corporate blogs' authenticity by rating blogs based on their writing style. In order to assess the formality and indicate the degree of authenticity of blog posts, Puschmann (2007a, 2007b) has identified grammar statistics of blog posts as a meaningful characteristic.

#### 4. Engagement

Campaigns that have higher levels of constituent and campaign *engagement* may be perceived to be more authentic. Research is plentiful on the role that social media play in facilitating political engagement. According to Mascaro and Goggins (2011), the "truthfulness in profiles makes social mobilization and discourse in online social networks authentic because social capital developed in the physical world is at stake online" [15]. This shows how engagement and transparency work together to as demonstrators of authenticity. Gilpin, *et al.* (2010) suggested that high levels of engagement may be important to authenticity, as the "willingness to engage directly with constituents, or to provide places where these may interact with each other with minimal restrictions, may increase the perceived authenticity of the communicative space" [16]. Thus, an authentic candidate can be expected to transparently engage with their constituents online.

The content of political social media campaigns may influence user engagement, and campaigns that users perceive as authentic may be more successful in constituent engagement. Online engagement requires the willingness of citizens to participate (Ward, 2011; 2005), thus electoral social media campaigns must effectively communicate with their constituents online to encourage participation.



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### Section 3: Methodology

The aim of this research is to explore the role of authenticity in electoral social media campaigns and how authenticity is demonstrated via electoral social media campaigns. This is accomplished via qualitative content analysis of data that is drawn from 10 semi-structured interviews with U.S. Democrats, ranging from 41 to 57 minutes in length. We examine how the concept of authenticity plays a role in electoral politics, namely how it relates to a candidate's social media campaign on Facebook. The main research question is:

How does authenticity play a role in electoral social media campaigns?

Qualitative interviewing is the chosen method. According to DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree (2006), qualitative interviews are meant to "contribute to a body of knowledge that is conceptual and theoretical and is based on the meanings that life experiences hold for the interviewees" [17]. Qualitative interviewing is worthwhile as this research seeks to determine how voters perceive the content of candidates' electoral social media campaigns, which is built upon their own experience of and opinions about viewing the content. Interviews took place with U.S. Democrats. Campbell, *et al.* (1960) suggested that party identification "raises a perceptual screen through which the individual tends to see what is favorable to his partisan orientation" [18]. Similarly, Goren (2002) said, "Democrats are likely motivated to render poor judgments

about Republican nominees just as Republicans are for Democratic candidates" [19]. Due to the inherent partisan bias that may exist against the opposing party, only Democrats were interviewed, and were asked questions about screenshots from the pages of Democratic candidates. Interviewees ranged in age from 23 to 55, with six female and four male respondents from a mix of states, including California, Michigan, Georgia, New Hampshire, and Texas.

Facebook was the only social media platform used for this research due to its popularity among both electoral candidates and voters, and because it encompasses all of the features of social media (Kushin and Yamamoto, 2010; Beer, 2008; Henderson and Bowley, 2010). According to Smith (2009), 50 percent of users younger than 30 used Facebook for electoral information gathering or expression in the 2008 election, showing the popularity of Facebook as a tool for electoral participation. Furthermore, Williams and Gulati (2009) found that major party candidates from both the U.S. House of Representatives and the U.S. Senate embraced Facebook during the 2008 election.

Four Democratic candidates were chosen for this research: two Congressional and two Senatorial candidates, all from different states. The Democratic Congressional candidates were found through the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee's Web site [20] which listed all Democratic Congressional candidates in the November 2012 election. Senatorial candidates were found through the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee's Web site [21] which listed the Democratic Senatorial candidates in the November 2012 election. The first candidate chosen for this research was Ami Bera, running for Congress in the Seventh District of California. The second candidate was Tom Carper, running as an incumbent candidate for Senator in Delaware. The third candidate was Joe Donnelly, running for Senate in Indiana. Lastly, Sal Pace, Democratic Congressional candidate for the Third District of Colorado was chosen. These candidates were chosen randomly and were selected because they were the first that met the criteria for candidate Facebook page selection.

During the interviews several screenshots from electoral candidates' Facebook pages were shown as accompaniment to interview questions. Xenos and Foot (2008) used a similar method in which they gave laptops to focus groups and showed participants campaign and non-partisan Web sites. Roessing and Siebert (2006) gave participants hardcopy screenshots of online discussion forums, and were asked to describe how seriously they took the depicted material.

Screenshots were chosen to reflect dimensions of authenticity. For authority, screenshots of candidates' "About" sections from their Facebook pages were shown: this is the section in which most candidates list their educational, work, or electoral experience. Questions regarding a candidate's identity were accompanied by screenshots of a picture of a candidate with his wife and daughter (all selected candidates were married heterosexual males with families), a screenshot of a candidate's interests and activities, and a screenshot of a "Note" a candidate had written. Questions about transparency were accompanied by a screenshot of a candidate's "Wall Post" in which he responded to a fan's question, and a screenshot of a user's complaint against a candidate, with the candidate's response. Finally, questions about engagement were accompanied by a screenshot of a photo of a house party posted by a candidate on his page, a photo of two women supporting a candidate at an off-line event, and a Facebook event page dedicated to a fundraising event for a candidate.

Participants were asked to describe the candidates they saw on Facebook (identity), how they perceived on and off-line participation in the candidate's campaign (engagement), how qualified the candidate seemed for the position (authority), and the communication they saw with constituents (transparency).

Each interview was digitally recorded and manually transcribed. The transcripts included only the interviewer and interviewee's dialogue, and do not include non-verbal cues. Mayring said, "The object of (qualitative) content analysis can be all sorts of recorded communication (transcripts of interviews, discourses, protocols of observations, video tapes, documents ...)". After transcription of the interviews, transcripts were analyzed using Mayring's (2000) method of qualitative content analysis, which is based on three steps: summarizing, explication and structuring (Fink, *et al.*, 2005). To structure the results, emergent patterns were organized based on their relation to Gilpin, *et al.*'s (2010) dimensions of authenticity, while at the same time allowing for new patterns to emerge.



## Section 4: Results

Analysis of the interviews showed seven patterns of authenticity. The seven emergent patterns are tech savvy-ness, credentials, insincerity, ability to relate to constituents, open communication, social media participation, off-line participation, and skepticism. All of these patterns, with the exception of skepticism, emerged in relation to the four original dimensions of authenticity. In this section, these patterns are discussed in relation to the initial four dimensions to show how they arose and how they fit, or divert from, the original theory. Responses from interviewees showed that the dimensions of authenticity are interrelated, as several topics



overlapped. An overview of the relationship between the dimensions of authenticity and the emergent patterns is visualized in [Figure 1](#).



**Figure 1:** Authenticity and emergent patterns. Dimensions of authenticity: green ovals. Emergent patterns: red ovals. Blue lines: relationships between authenticity and original dimensions and between dimensions and emergent patterns. Dashed orange lines: interrelationships between patterns.

#### *Authority in electoral social media campaigns*

The first dimension of interest related to the authority of electoral candidates. Results revealed that authority is demonstrated via information about the candidate's credentials and via the candidate's technological savvy-ness on Facebook.

Respondents perceived authority in biographical information about the candidate's professional, educational, and leadership credentials in the "About" section of a campaign's Facebook page. In other words, these experiences demonstrated expertise. Additionally, results showed that constituents thought electoral candidates with political or military experience have more authority than those without political or military experience. One respondent said: "... the army is the largest branch of our government, they learn the ropes of working with local government organizations, and when he walks on to DC's campus, I would say he has a leg up with familiarization." So electoral candidates' authority can be demonstrated on a campaign's social media page by providing information about the candidate's professional, educational, and leadership credentials in the "About" section of the campaign's page. As credentials define authority as one of Gilpin, *et al.*'s (2010) dimensions of authenticity, these findings show that information that demonstrates a candidate's credentials or authority may help to express authenticity.

Unexpectedly, respondents found the tech savvy-ness of electoral candidates to be an indicator of authority, as tech savvy-ness showed that the candidate had expertise in current technological and social media trends. Respondents mentioned a candidate's tech savvy-ness when viewing a screenshot of a candidate's Facebook page vacant of biographical information. A lack of biographical information on Facebook showed the candidate did not understand how to use the platform. This finding supports research that showed citizens expect candidates to be at least as active online as the citizens themselves, and that citizens expect candidates to be at least as tech-savvy as themselves (Wagner and Gainous, 2009; Chadwick, 2006; Foot and Schneider, 2006). Electoral candidates' and campaigns' use of social media also exhibited tech savvy-ness to respondents, relating to social media participation, an emergent pattern of engagement. "... this is where my [the candidate's] constituents are going for information or this is where they are spending their social time ... it means you are in the know about your constituents," said one respondent. Hall and Sinclair (2011) argued it is imperative to a politician's success to use cutting-edge technologies, because it helps them stay relevant and competitive [22].

These relationships demonstrate how the emergent patterns supported other dimensions of

authenticity. For example, a candidate with a higher level of tech savvy-ness was perceived as having more authority, but also as being more willing to engage with their constituents, connecting authority and engagement. Therefore, demonstrating the ability to use Facebook to provide constituents with more information and using it to communicate with constituents was crucial to a candidate's perceived authority.

The emergent pattern of credentials fit Gilpin, *et al.*'s (2010) dimension of authority. They stated, "an actor's perceived authority is based on his or her expertise in the content being discussed and his or her credibility" [23]. Respondents here perceived candidates' educational, professional and leadership experience as demonstrating their credibility as an electoral candidate. Although Gilpin, *et al.*'s (2010) definition of authority does not directly address an electoral candidate's tech savvy-ness, it fits with their notion that authority is based on expertise and credibility. Further, the candidate was perceived by voters to be more competent in communicating with his constituents. Therefore, the demonstration of a candidate's authority also had implications for how voters perceive his or her identity and engagement, showing the dimensions of authenticity are interrelated.

### *Identity in electoral social media campaigns*

The second dimension was identity. Findings revealed that an electoral candidate's identity was perceived to be an important determinant of authenticity, and two patterns emerged that demonstrated identity: the ability to relate and insincerity. Interestingly, respondents said it was very important to see a "human" candidate, and they noticed insincerity rather than sincerity in Facebook posts. Candidates demonstrated their ability to relate to constituents by including information on Facebook about their hobbies and interests outside of politics in the "About" section of their campaign pages, and by showing themselves in an informal setting by posting personal photos of themselves with their families or participating in non-political activities in their free time.

The "human" side of a politician or electoral candidate allowed constituents to see a candidate outside of the political realm. Respondents said that they could better assess how the candidate would perform in office by getting an overall picture of the candidate's persona on Facebook, supporting research by Loudon and McCauliff (2004) that showed voters assess a candidate's future performance on their character, and also supporting Gilpin, *et al.*'s (2010) definition that an authentic identity is one that is reliable. Therefore, it may be the case that a reliable social media identity demonstrates authenticity to constituents. As one respondent said, "it's hard for me to understand how someone can do that (relate) if he or she can't be one with the people ... the über formal, stoic, unapproachable look does not say the ability to do that."

On the other hand, respondents viewed one candidate as insincere when he discussed his recent volunteer opportunities by promoting the community service he had performed. In reaction to a "Note" about a candidate serving food at a homeless shelter on Thanksgiving one respondent said, "I feel like he's touting his graciousness, he's using this holiday opportunity to advertise that he's gonna be giving to his community and so it just reads to me a little insincere, because I feel like he's using it to promote himself." In general, electoral candidates who were only seen in formal settings were perceived to be more insincere than other candidates. While respondents pointed to insincerity, there were no conclusions about what voters perceived to be sincere.

For an electoral candidate to demonstrate his or her authentic identity to constituents, it is important to share personal information about him or herself on Facebook. This can be done via photos and Timeline posts which give constituents insight into the candidate's everyday interests and hobbies. Respondents said it was important to read information about a candidate's personal interests on Facebook because it showed that a candidate was not "completely out of touch with reality." Sharing this type of information can set the candidate apart from other politicians. It also showed a relatable side that constituents could connect to and sympathize with. Posting formal pictures on Facebook and using Facebook to exclusively share campaign information, however, demonstrated insincerity. We found the perception of candidate insincerity to be related to skepticism. The perceived insincerity of political candidates on Facebook may result in part from the skepticism that citizens hold against politicians and political candidates in general, and may not stem solely from the content that is provided on Facebook.

Gilpin, *et al.* (2010) argued that authentic identities were perceived as reliable and genuine, and inauthentic identities were unreliable or generic. However, based on these results, authentic identities might be better defined along a continuum of sincere to insincere. Gilpin, *et al.* (2010) described an inauthentic identity as one that is generic. However, they did not include how relatable an identity is perceived to be in their definition. The concept of how relatable a candidate is deviated from their suggestions, since respondents here perceived "relatability" as the most important component in determining identity. Gilpin, *et al.* (2010) argued that identity is crucial to demonstrating authenticity and that it is determined by voice and dialogue; this argument was unsupported in the current research. Instead, respondents found the candidate's ability to relate to constituents and insincerity to be the biggest determinants of identity.

Benoit and McHale (2004) studied the importance of sincerity. They discovered that voters perceive sincerity to be the most important quality in candidates, but found that candidates do not frequently address it in campaign messages. This may help to explain why voters were only able to identify insincerity. In research on the political discourse of authenticity, Liebes (2009)

suggested that there is a “discrepancy between what it takes to be elected, and what it takes to do your job once you are there” [24] and argued that demand for politicians to be popular has led sincerity to be important in elections as well as important when the candidate is in office.

#### *Transparency in electoral social media campaigns*

Results revealed that open communication between the electoral candidate and constituents demonstrated transparency. Respondents perceived open communication between the candidate and constituents on the campaign’s Facebook page, especially when the candidate quickly responded to a constituent’s comment. Open communication was also shown by a candidate who allowed a negative comment to be posted on his Facebook page and addressed the negative commenter with advice on how to learn more about the candidate’s campaign and public services. One respondent said, “He’s very open, he didn’t delete the post which is nice, and he has full control, so he could have done that. He did well responding to the criticism.”

Unexpectedly, off-line participation also demonstrated open communication, as candidates who were pictured with their constituents off-line were perceived to be more willing to talk to their constituents and listen to them. One example of this was a photo of an electoral candidate at a house party. Respondents saw this as open communication because he was addressing constituents in an informal environment. Respondents said: “[this is] communicating to his Facebook fans that he’s in touch with his constituents,” “he would probably be willing to talk to me,” and “he’s open.” Respondents perceived off-line participation, one of the patterns related to engagement, to be related to transparency, thus demonstrating a relationship between the two. Facebook posts that exhibited transparency were used to show engagement, an example of how the features of social media can be used to demonstrate more than one dimension of authenticity at a time. Transparency was determined by off-line communication between the electoral candidate and his or her constituents. Therefore, the dimensions of transparency and engagement were interrelated.

Open communication was closely related to Gilpin, *et al.*’s (2010) definition, who referred to it as “effort to reveal the inner workings of an organization, and providing information that constituents can subject to rational scrutiny” [25]. All respondents said that responding to other Facebook users showed the candidates were open to communication and to addressing criticism. These findings contradicted Sisco and McCorkindale (n.d.) who showed that dialogic communication in social media did not influence the public’s perception of transparency. However it did support Gilpin, *et al.*’s (2010) definition of transparency.

#### *Engagement in electoral social media campaigns*

The fourth area of interest focused on engagement in electoral social media campaigns. Findings revealed that social media and off-line participation of both constituents and the electoral candidate demonstrated engagement in an electoral social media campaign. Electoral candidates showed off-line participation by posting photos or videos of themselves at off-line campaign events. Candidates’ off-line participation also influenced their perceived transparency and identity: candidates who were seen engaging with constituents in an informal environment were perceived to be more relatable (identity) and more open to communication with constituents (transparency), supporting two other dimensions of authenticity. This relationship showed how thoroughly authenticity could be expressed via social media.

The social media participation of constituents was demonstrated via “likes” and “shares” posted via the campaign page. However, there was no consensus about how many “likes” or “shares” were necessary to show significant constituent participation. This differs from open communication, as respondents regarded comments or messages between constituents and electoral candidates as open communication, and regarded “likes” and “shares” as social media participation. Interestingly, social media participation was perceived by constituents only as a reflection of constituent engagement in the campaign, while off-line participation reflected both the constituents’ and the electoral candidates’ engagement.

These results suggest that constituents perceive the social media and off-line participation of other constituents to signal there is something of interest happening in the campaign, and may encourage other voters to become involved. One respondent said, “it shows you just how popular a candidate is, and it makes you want to look at what everyone else is talking about and looking at.” It should be noted, however, that the social media participation of constituents is somewhat dependent on how actively constituents interact with the campaign’s Facebook page.

Overall, respondents perceived off-line constituent participation in an electoral campaign to be more telling of their engagement than social media participation, as several noted that it required much more effort to participate off-line than online. Although visible constituent participation is important to see on an electoral campaign’s Facebook page, off-line participation is more important and showed more commitment and interest in a political campaign because it takes more time and effort from constituents. This is in comparison to clicking “like” or “share” on a Facebook page. As one respondent noted, “it would be a plus to see pictures of rallies, pictures of any other kind of activity that looks and shows that people are supportive, that there is momentum around the candidate.” These findings support Williams and Gulati’s (2009) argument that “active engagement by the candidate and a well maintained site could make the candidate more accessible and seem more authentic” [26].



While constituent activity on social media has become an integral part of political campaigns, it has not replaced off-line participation. In other words, off-line participation is a better indicator of overall interest in an electoral candidate. Therefore, Facebook can be an important platform for electoral campaigns for online participation, and for showing hard evidence (via photos or videos) of constituents and electoral candidates participating off-line. Social media thus provides two possible means of engagement in the campaign.

These results support Gilpin, *et al.*'s (2010) definition of engagement, as they stated that engagement was determined by interaction between members of the online community and the organization, or in this case, the campaign. The pattern of off-line participation also supported this argument since the off-line participation of candidates was perceived to signify a greater ability to relate to constituents (identity), and a greater willingness to communicate with constituents (transparency). Thus, a candidate's online and off-line interactions with constituents help determine the candidate's perceived engagement, which has implications for his perceived authenticity.

Electoral candidates are presumed to be potentially manipulative, untrustworthy, and selfish. These respondents regarded some candidate communication on their Facebook campaign pages as a tool to lure in voters. Voters' perceptions of electoral candidates overall do seem to have been influenced by the most recent and famous political scandals like those involving John Edwards and Larry Craig, as these scandals were mentioned by respondents. One respondent said "it's like an oxymoron when you ask for a candidate's character. We're kind of attuned to being skeptical of a candidate's character." Several mentioned that electoral candidates might try to project a stable family life to claim their time in office would not be hindered or distracted by scandal.

Along with this, several also mentioned that electoral candidates were purposely trying to show their potential constituents that they were family men. One respondent said, "with all the scandals that go on, and how much that affects some people's view of politicians and their ability to do their job ... to say you are married sometimes paints a less threatening picture." This might imply that voters may think electoral candidates compensate for other politicians' scandals by trying to appear to be a stable candidate. Interestingly, several respondents said they felt it was their job as citizens to be skeptical of politicians, which might imply that skepticism is a result of civic duty rather than a result of political scandal. Furthermore, Geissel (2008) suggested that the idea that political criticism is a civic duty has been scientifically neglected and that it might be crucial for the development of democracy.



## Conclusion

Results demonstrate that authenticity plays an important role in shaping voters' perception of electoral candidates. Electoral candidates can influence how citizens perceive them via the content that they post to their Facebook pages. All the features of Facebook that were shown in the screenshots, including both content from the candidates' campaigns and from the constituents themselves, were relevant in shaping the respondents' view of the candidate. This shows that all of Facebook's features can be utilized to demonstrate the candidate's authenticity. It also reinforces the notion that authenticity is determined by many factors and is a reflection of the electoral candidate overall rather than determined by one characteristic of the candidate's Facebook page.

The emergent patterns support and reinforce the original dimensions of authenticity theorized by Gilpin, *et al.* (2010). These patterns also demonstrate that each of the emergent patterns is a determinant of an electoral candidate's perceived authenticity. Dimensions of authenticity may influence each other and are therefore not mutually exclusive, but support each other in demonstrating the overall authenticity of a candidate. The relationship between patterns is complex: posts to Facebook campaign pages can reveal more than one dimension of authenticity at a time. Six out of seven emergent patterns relate to the original four dimensions of authenticity defined by Gilpin, *et al.* (2010). The perceived authenticity of an electoral candidate plays a role in electoral social media campaigns as it assists voters in shaping their opinion of the candidate and in helping them to decide whether or not to support a candidate.


Most respondents were skeptical toward political candidates. Voter skepticism emerged as a deviant pattern and departs from the four original dimensions of authenticity. Almost every interviewee brought up his or her skepticism of electoral candidates without being prompted to do so. These responses support previous research by Loudon and McCauliff (2004) who stated, "politicians as a class are presumed to be self-serving and are granted only provisional trust" [27]. Previous research on political identity showed that citizens looked for genuine and authentic politicians in response to political scandal (Parry-Giles, 2001). Given this, it is not surprising that respondents overwhelmingly discussed their political skepticism. Political skepticism is worth further investigation, particularly in relation to authenticity. It has been suggested that political scandals have created voters' desire for authentic candidates (Parry-Giles, 2001), showing that there may be a relationship between voter skepticism and their resulting desire for candidates whom they perceive to be more authentic.

Future studies could examine the relationship between skepticism and authenticity by drawing on Pels' (2003) argument that a politician's perceived authenticity helps build trust between the citizen and the politician. This could provide insight into the role that the perceived authenticity of electoral candidates plays in determining voter skepticism. The pattern of skepticism suggests new topics for consideration: Does voter skepticism interfere with perceptions of candidate authenticity? Are voters skeptical of a candidate's authentic self, and do they view it as a campaign tool?

Additionally, interview results show that the dimensions of authenticity proposed by Gilpin, *et al.* (2010) are generally applicable to electoral social media campaigns. However, as the emergent patterns show, they are not specific enough. In relation to the current research we therefore propose revised dimensions of authenticity: authority should be determined by an electoral candidate's tech savvy-ness and credentials; identity should be determined by the candidate's ability to relate and level of sincerity, ranging from sincere to insincere; transparency should be determined by how open the candidate is to communication with constituents; and, engagement should be determined by social media participation and off-line participation. Additionally, skepticism should be considered as a dimension that emerges out of constituents' uncertainty of the candidate's motives for sharing certain information.

This research is socially relevant, with authenticity being a popular buzzword in reference to electoral campaigns (Silverman, 2010; Fournier, 2011; Reynolds, 2011; Rosenbloom, 2011). Social media, namely Facebook, have become an important part of electoral campaigns, as nearly every electoral candidate now uses social media sites as campaigning tools. Generally speaking, electoral candidates can follow the following suggestions to demonstrate their authenticity. Electoral candidates/campaigns should:

- Fully fill out the informational sections of their Facebook pages and provide biographical information with educational, professional, military and leadership experience;
- Stay up to date on technological trends and use all the features of technological trends;
- Show their informal (non-political) side by sharing information about their hobbies and interests in the "About" section of their Facebook page, and by posting photos of themselves in informal settings;
- Avoid the perception of insincerity by showing evidence of volunteer efforts via photos or videos;
- Allow constituents to post comments, including criticism, on the campaign pages, and address comments and criticism in a timely fashion; and,
- Interact with constituents in an informal environment, and provide evidence of these interactions (e.g., with photos or videos) on Facebook.

This research is especially relevant for upcoming elections as social media continues to grow in prominence in campaigns. Despite Facebook being the medium of delivering the message of authenticity, results from this research reveal that off-line efforts (documented on Facebook) depict more authenticity than just social media content alone, showing that off-line participation is still important in electoral campaigns. Insight into what demonstrates authenticity in an electoral social media campaign is relevant for campaign managers to create an authentic electoral campaign profile for their candidate. Although political beliefs and stances remain important factors in voter choice, the projected authenticity of electoral candidates also plays a crucial role in determining how voters perceive their candidates. 

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## Notes

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2. Louden and McCauliff, 2004, p. 94.

3. Parry-Giles, 2001, p. 214.

4. *Ibid.*

5. Norris, 2000, p. 12.

6. Schutz, 1995, in Stanyer, 2008, p. 415.
7. Norris, 2000, p. 7.
8. Gilpin, *et al.*, 2010, p. 262.
9. Gilpin, *et al.*, 2010, p. 265.
10. *Ibid.*
11. Gilpin, *et al.*, 2010, p. 266.
12. Mitra and Watts, 2002, p. 483.
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14. Molleda, 2010, p. 223.
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16. Gilpin, *et al.*, 2010, p. 267.
17. DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree, 2006, p. 314.
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