

# The Influence of Social Media on Perceptions of Political Authenticity

OUTSTANDING ABSTRACT: Social Media Marketing

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## ABSTRACT

The use of social media platforms by political candidates to engage voters is an increasing part of the political process in the United States. Authenticity and social media have been studied extensively in marketing research, yet the factors that shape the perceived authenticity of politicians have not been fully explored. This research takes a deeper look at what draws voters – or diverts them – from politicians based on the politicians’ presence and depiction of themselves on social media.

Authenticity has been discussed by marketing scholars with respect to its impact on leadership (Zhu et al., 2004), brand trust (Eggers et al, 2013) and engagement (Hsieh & Wang, 2015). Previous research finds that authentic leaders are considered more credible and able to motivate the people they lead (Zhu et al., 2004). Authenticity is also found to be a variable that moderates followers’ trust and commitment (Zhu et al., 2004). Despite the influence of authenticity in leadership, little research has examined the factors that contribute to perceptions of political authenticity. If authentic leaders can positively affect followers’ trust, commitment and engagement (Hsieh & Wang, 2015), we propose that authentic politicians can do the same with their constituents. As such, this research aims to advance the understanding of political authenticity by defining it and establishing a theoretical framework that can be applied in future research. Because the perceived authenticity of politicians is relatively unstudied, our research uses literature on celebrity authenticity as a guide in measuring factors of authenticity.

As social media become a growing aspect of the political landscape in the United States, it is important to explore how politicians’ authenticity is perceived through social media. The central objective of this research is to explore how social media impacts voters’ perceptions of political authenticity. This was explored by conducting two studies. In Study 1, an open-ended questionnaire was administered to a group of university students between the ages of 18 to 24. Participants were asked to choose the political candidate who seemed most authentic and most inauthentic from a set list of candidates and describe why they perceived each candidate to be authentic or inauthentic. Participants also compared select candidates’ Twitter posts and were asked to select which candidate seemed more authentic and more inauthentic based on their

social media presence. Study 2 was conducted to explore differences between first-time voters and more mature voters. The researchers ran an identical questionnaire on a group of adults 28 and older.

Findings seek to examine and compare how first-time voters and more experienced voters perceive the authenticity of politicians on social media. This research provides a deeper analysis of perceived authenticity as it relates to politicians. Based on previous research about celebrity authenticity, transformational and transactional leadership, and qualitative analysis of the open-ended questionnaires, the researchers determined three theoretical constructs – *rarity, stability, and charismatic/inspirational leadership*. Among both age segments, charisma/inspirational leadership proved to be the most important factor, followed by stability and rarity. Results yield greater insight into voter perceptions and how candidates can better reach voters of differing ages and shape their message through social media.

The findings in this research also provide insight into the nation's current political climate. The biggest factors in determining political authenticity include honesty, consistency, being uniting and caring for the country as a whole. The main factors in determining inauthenticity include dishonesty, inconsistency, and divisiveness. These factors reflect what qualities voters consider most important in authentic politicians. This comes at a time when anxiety about the political climate is at a record high (APA, 2017) and trust in government is at an all-time low of 18 percent (Silvergate, 2017). Politicians, candidates and campaign strategists can use the findings in this research as a guide to appeal to voters and develop a better understanding of how political authenticity is perceived.

Limitations of this research include the small sample size, which was limited by the time-consuming nature of coding qualitative data. Additional research should be conducted with a larger sample size to improve the reliability of results. Still, this research offers insight into political authenticity by establishing initial steps in defining the term and setting a framework for measuring it. This research is also unique and demanding of our attention because the results are, in part, a reflection of the political climate. The perception of what makes a politician authentic is ever-evolving with the changing political climate. These findings establish a framework that allows future research to analyze how these perceptions change over time.

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