

The Impact of Mayor Michelle Wu's Social Media Presence on Support Rate: A Comprehensive Analysis

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Abstract. Social media has assumed a central role in political communication and mobilization in the contemporary digital landscape. This study aims to audit and analyze Mayor Michelle Wu's social media presence and data to examine the significance and influence of a politician's social media presence on their support rate. Specifically, this analysis focuses on her Twitter account, @wutrain, secondary quantitative research resources, and literature reviews. The thesis statement of this study asserts that Mayor Wu's passive performance on social media, arising from her decision to limit her platform presence, has resulted in a negative influence on her support rate from citizens and voters. This research suggests that politicians, particularly younger ones, should carefully consider their social media strategies and recognize the potential repercussions of limiting their online presence. It serves as a reminder of the dynamic and influential nature of digital communication in modern politics.

Keywords: Social media, politics studies, Michelle Wu, support rate.

1. Introduction

Social media is a powerful platform for politicians and public figures to directly connect with constituents and effectively convey their political objectives. More and more young politicians are recognizing the significance of social media as a pivotal tool for political communication and mobilization. Boston Mayor Michelle Wu is no exception. She is a renowned figure in the city's political realm. A lawyer with a strong dedication to community advocacy, Wu has built a reputation for championing progressive policies and social justice. Hailing from Illinois, she graduated from Harvard Law School and served on the council from 2014 to 2021. In late 2021, Wu made history as Boston's first female mayor and woman of color. Her political priorities include social and economic justice, affordable housing, education, climate action, and police reform.

Wu once adeptly employed social media as a strategic platform for her political presence. However, starting in January 2023, she decided to take a step back from all online platforms and quit running her personal social media. This research endeavors to assess and scrutinize Mayor Michelle Wu's utilization of social media and the associated data to investigate how a politician's online presence affects their level of support. The analysis concentrates specifically on her Twitter account, @wutrain, in conjunction with secondary quantitative research materials and literature reviews. The core argument of this study posits that Mayor Wu's reduced activity on social media, stemming from her choice to minimize her online presence, has led to a decline in her level of support from constituents and voters.

2. Wu's Twitter Usage and its Implications on Political Engagement

2.1. Wu's Advocacy and Social Media Presence

Wu advocates for affordable housing, quality education, and combating climate change. She also emphasizes improving transportation and police reform. Wu's political journey is marked by effective community organizing and coalition-building with fellow progressives. Her leadership and commitment to social and economic justice have made her a prominent figure in Boston's progressive movement. Wu's social media presence, particularly on Twitter (@wutrain), amplifies her impact and facilitates public engagement [1].

"Wutrain" is Michelle Wu's playful and personal nickname from college friends who imitated the sound of a steam train, symbolizing getting on board with her team [2]. Through active use of Twitter, she presents herself as a Millennial and showcases her identity as a mother, often tweeting about her daily life with her family. In 2021, @wutrain was more active in after-work hours compared to her official account, reflecting community engagement and efforts to mobilize Boston residents. Michelle started this account in 2009, and each of her followers and tweets shared on the platform is a valuable treasure for her future campaigns, especially since the world is entering a digital media communication stage. However, in January 2023, Michelle Wu declared she would step back from Twitter due to her disappointment with the discussion environment dominated by conspiracy theories and misinformation, such as criticism of her COVID-19 vaccine mandate policy [3]. Also, Wu is one of the politicians who is against and shows concerns over Twitter's recent changes brought about by Elon Musk's purchase of the platform. Wu said in an interview with *Commonwealth*, "I've experienced this platform becoming more and more toxic over the last year, and it's a direction that makes it a less productive use of my personal time to reach constituents about local issues" [4].

2.2. Wu's Withdrawal from Social Media

Since January 2023, Michelle Wu has stopped any original tweets on her account @wutrain and done only retweets from other organizations and accounts. Her retweets do not include any comments or replies from herself. Wu stopped interacting with her followers on Twitter, too. During the audit period, comprehensive observation and quantitative data collection were conducted on @wutrain's social media metrics to better understand her online presence and engagement with her audience, to the support rate from citizens.

Over the course of a month, from March 22, 2023, to April 22, 2023, Michelle Wu (@wutrain) focused primarily on retweeting content rather than tweeting original content. The data collected during this period reveal several interesting patterns and trends in her social media presence. With a total of 98 retweets, averaging 3.2 retweets per day, Wu's frequency of tweeting had a significant decrease compared to her performance one year ago in December 2021, when she tweeted about 7 tweets/day [5]. Wu's retweets can be categorized into three main themes: Boston City Updates (54.8%), Community Engagement (25.8%), and Policy Issues (19.4%). These categories help provide insight into the topics she finds essential to share with her followers. Boston City Updates include news and events happening in the city, such as the Boston Marathon and the opening of the Swan Boat in the Public Garden for 2023 [6]. Policy Issues encompass discussions on new state building codes and city budgets and also follow-up on her political objectives such as finishing new affordable housing construction. Community Engagement highlights her participation in local events like cleaning up Franklin Park with organizations and attending a Red Sox event at a local school.

Despite her focus on retweeting content related to Boston City Updates, Community Engagement, and Policy Issues, her lack of original content, personal comments, and interaction with followers has limited her effectiveness in these specific facets. It is essential to note that from January 17th to April 22nd, 2023, @wutrain experienced a net audience growth of -46 and an audience growth of -0.03%. Moreover, the public engagement of her retweets has not been very optimistic. With an average engagement per retweet of 138, including 118 reactions, 12 comments, and 8 shares, the engagement rate is 0.915 [7]. Based on these three months' observations, @wutrain shows a significant decrease in original tweets and interactions with followers. While her retweets focus on Boston City Updates, Community Engagement, and Policy Issues, her lack of personal comments and interaction has limited her effectiveness. Additionally, her net audience growth and engagement rate have declined. Normally the engagement rate from 1 to 3 would be considered as standard. Also, considering her total followers amounting to 135,000, this engagement rate can be regarded as low [6].

Mayor Michelle Wu's decision to stop tweeting on her personal account @wutrain has been met with criticism from several perspectives. Firstly, Michelle Wu's decision to only retweet content without adding personal comments or insights has limited her ability to express her political stances or engage in meaningful conversations with her audience. Sharing original content that highlights her

opinions, policy proposals, and key initiatives would be a more effective approach to improving political communication and maintaining a strong connection with her constituents. While @wutrain's retweets cover topics and tweets from others that could potentially mobilize her audience, such as her devotion to community engagement events and policy issues, the lack of direct calls to action or opportunities for involvement reduces her impact. Without direct messages from her own voice, it is hard for her followers to understand and follow up the updated news with her organized activities.

3. The Complex Relationship between Social Media Usage and Support Rates for Politicians

Acknowledging these observations and criticisms regarding Michelle Wu's social media activity, it becomes pertinent to delve deeper into the potential consequences of her reduced online presence. While we have observed a decrease in original tweets, limited interaction with followers, and a decline in engagement rates on her personal Twitter account, these phenomena did not directly result in or disclose an answer to the question of whether these changes have had a discernible impact on her overall support and political standing.

In Fall 2021, during Michelle Wu's Boston Mayor campaign, her social media account appeared to be highly active. According to the data collected by Legislator on mayoral tweeting by the hour of the day, Michelle Wu exhibited a strong social media presence both during office hours and outside of work hours compared to other mayors in the dataset, who predominantly tweeted during the daytime [5]. On November 2, 2021, the election day, Michelle Wu received an impressive 91,794 votes, which accounted for 64% of the total voter turnout, leading to her victory in the election [8]. However, despite her initial heavy reliance on social media, recent news reports and a statewide poll within the social media audit period suggest that Michelle Wu's decision to reduce her social media activity has not significantly impacted her support rate [9]. According to a report from Platt from the *Boston Globe* on March 9th, her current initiative, which centers around advocating for rent control, has gained substantial support, reaching an impressive 68% [9]. This level of support is even 4% higher than her vote shares in the election.

While it is important to note that these numbers may not directly reflect her overall approval rating as the mayor, they undeniably demonstrate strong approval and favorability toward her political objectives and direction. This significant increase in support for her initiatives indicates that her policies continue to resonate positively with the public. It reinforces her political influence and relevance, despite her reduced social media presence. It was found that online audience and follower engagement with politicians may suffer from significant underrepresentation because the demographics of online political engagement do not accurately mirror the broader population of voters. In Sweden, those who actively engage online in political discussions are often considered part of the elite demographic. Similarly, in the United States, individuals who exhibit high levels of online political engagement tend to be younger, while many older voters are notably absent from digital platforms dedicated to political discourse [10]. Even if a declined engagement with Michelle Wu's followers on her Twitter account was observed, it still cannot be eligible to explain her support rate for her supporters in general considering the possibility of a larger group of active supporters offline.

It is worth noting that these findings differ slightly from those of another study by Niels Spierings and Kristof Jacobs. Their research outlined a statistical interaction effect, suggesting that having more followers only leads to more votes if the candidate is actively engaged on social media. However, they also noted that this interaction effect appeared relatively small [11]. Also, in a newer study, it was stated that: "The relationship between political engagement and social media use is still being challenged, however, as numerous studies have found mixed results related to how online and offline political participation work in tandem" [12].

In light of these results, it was indicated that there is no statistically significant interaction effect between politicians' social media usage and their support rates, contrary to our initial thesis statement.

Despite Michelle Wu's substantial reduction in social media activity, particularly on her account, we found that her overall support rate remained largely unaffected and even exhibited results opposite to our initial hypothesis. This article, along with the prior research, underscores the complexity of the relationship between politicians' social media usage and their support rates. While we have accounted for various factors, it is important to acknowledge potential hidden factors or biases that may influence these dynamics. For example, despite Michelle Wu's reduced personal social media activity, she maintains an official "Mayor Michelle Wu" social media account managed by her team, ensuring her continued presence on online platforms. Also, the new political poll and supportive rate towards Wu's plan could be targeted only at supporting her political objectives, which won most people's hearts, but not necessarily towards supporting Wu herself.

4. Conclusion

The examination of Michelle Wu's social media activity yields a nuanced understanding of its impact on her political standing. While criticisms and observations highlight a reduction in original tweets and engagement rates, these changes do not directly translate into a discernible shift in overall support. In light of these complexities, it is crucial to acknowledge potential hidden influences and biases that may impact the dynamics observed.

Ultimately, Michelle Wu's case underscores the intricate interplay between social media usage and political support. It serves as a reminder that while online presence is a valuable tool, it is not the sole determinant of a politician's success. Digital space will likely remain an imperfect democracy in the current and short-term political field. The quality of representation and participation is still questionable. Moving forward, future studies could explore the nuances of social media engagement and its impact on political support, considering factors such as the type of content shared, the timing of posts, and the role of campaign teams. Additionally, investigating how different social media platforms may affect support rates could provide valuable insights into the evolving landscape of political communication.

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