


# Senate Representation on Twitter: National Policy Reputations for Constituent Communication

Annelise Russell , *University of Kentucky*

*Objective.* American politics has become more nationalized, and this trend is buoyed by senators' social media patterns that incentivize connections with an expansive digital constituency. This article examines how U.S. senators reflect and perpetuate this trend of national policy priorities with their constituent communication on Twitter. *Methods.* I investigate how senators reflect and perpetuate this era of national policy priorities by using a two-year data set of tweets to show how senators are using Twitter to articulate a robust policy agenda. *Results.* Senators' policy-driven messaging is the dominant style of reputation building on Twitter. Senators are adopting digital styles of representation that prioritize policy, positioning themselves as legislative experts to emphasize salient policies rather than local concerns. *Conclusion.* Senators are communicating a policy-first style of representation that meets the expectations of cultivated policy coalitions, and Twitter offers a birds-eye view of one source for the public's nationalized attention.

Senators talk about how social media is making it easier to connect with constituents. In 2019, Republican Sen. Chuck Grassley penned a local op-ed that touted his ability to keep his Iowa constituents informed with a single tweet or photo on Instagram.<sup>1</sup> Sen. Grassley is known for his retail politics on Twitter, fueling the perception is that Twitter allows for better and more comprehensive constituent communication given the potential for low-cost public engagement. Platforms such as Facebook and Twitter “enhance the ability of Members of Congress to fulfill their representational duties by providing greater opportunities for communication between the Member and individual constituents” (Glassman, Straus, and Shogan, 2010). In 2014, Twitter produced a handbook for politicians arguing that “the best way to earn a voter’s support is no different today than it was a century ago: a simple handshake and a look in the eye... Twitter helps fill the void, enabling a virtual ‘handshake.’”<sup>2</sup>

But social media practices in the Senate, particularly on Twitter, rarely resemble localized, constituent conversations. Senators, despite representing the interests of a specific state, still curate a Twitter feed that looks a lot more like the rundown for the nightly news by capturing those issues that are most salient. Even Grassley himself admitted that Twitter is not actually the same as shaking someone’s hand. Some senators, such as Sen. Grassley, use Twitter to address local questions and host town halls—making a habit of using Twitter to directly communicate with constituents. But Sen. Grassley appears to be an exception rather than the rule. In reality, many senators use their Twitter feeds to build

Direct correspondence to Annelise Russell, Martin School for Public Policy and Administration, University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY 40506 (anneliserussell8892@gmail.com).

<sup>1</sup>See ([https://siouxcityjournal.com/opinion/columnists/tuesday-topic-grassley-open-lines-of-communication-are-essential/article\\_871b6649-7e33-5627-a166-9374334fced8.html](https://siouxcityjournal.com/opinion/columnists/tuesday-topic-grassley-open-lines-of-communication-are-essential/article_871b6649-7e33-5627-a166-9374334fced8.html)).

<sup>2</sup>“The Twitter Government and Elections Handbook.” 2014. U.S. edition.

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a reputation based on their legislative prowess and policy preferences—offering a distinct style of representation for a digital constituency that extends beyond geography.

In the era of cable news, shuttered local papers, and networked, global constituencies on social media, “all politics is local” is more like a distant fable rather than a modern assessment of American politics. Politicians from the Senate to state Houses are addressing policy in a political environment where one tweet on immigration policy from the president can consume the entire political narrative for the day. Senators’ political communication on social media reflects the nationalization of politics (Hopkins, 2018), reinforcing a dialogue of salient issues with digital constituencies and furthering a shift away from local politics. This shift toward prioritizing nationalized policy problems shapes both how senators build their reputations with constituents and the information that voters have about their elected officials. Senators have unparalleled discretion and an expansive audience on Twitter, meaning the choices they make about what to say and to whom signals what they see as important to their job in office. I analyzed U.S. Senate tweets over two years to show how senators are using their policy agendas rather than local ties to connect with voters on social media—offering a style of representation based on issues rather shared community. I find that senators’ policy-driven messaging—what Hopkins (2018) refers to as nationalized political behavior—is the dominant style of reputation building as the average senator spends more than half of his Twitter agenda on policy. Senators are adapting new “digital homestyles” that prioritize policy representation, acting as legislative entrepreneurs to emphasize their position on salient issues (Wawro, 2000). Senators’ agendas on Twitter offer new insight into how senators build a nationalized style of representation to connect with constituents at home and online. Senators are meeting their constituents where they are—on their phones, tablets, and laptops—and using Twitter to affect public opinion and perceptions by relaying necessary information to voters.

### **Tweeting Policy-Focused Agendas**

Members of Congress have common goals while in office—good public policy, political power, reelection (Fenno, 1978; Mayhew, 1974), but senators are not connecting with constituents by spending equal time talking about each priority. One of the most common tradeoffs in normative models of representation is constituent service as an appropriator versus targeting a national audience as a policy statesman (Grimmer, 2013). And despite some surveys that show constituents care more about local issues than national policy problems (Doherty, 2015), senators are using Twitter to promote themselves as policymakers and spend most of their time in Washington highlighting legislative work (CMF, 2015; Russell, 2018). Public policy problems and state concerns are not necessarily mutually exclusive—members are routinely explaining how pending legislation will affect constituents back home (Arnold, 1992; Grimmer, 2013)—however, senators are spending more time tweeting about the Affordable Care Act and tax reform and less time advertising localized projects or engaging online with constituents.

As senators seek to maximize their attention and resources, the rise of social media offers additional incentive for these lawmakers to position themselves as policy experts and for researchers to examine the issue agendas senators are projecting for the public. Social media is offering a new window into representation in the Senate such that to understand the business of the Senate, you do not need a newspaper subscription or a cable TV package with MSNBC or Fox News. Senators build public, accessible reputations with the information that voters consume while waiting in line for coffee. Senators use social media

to frame their political brand for a public audience and cultivate a public image that defines his or her style of representation with the audience they target and the issues they address.

Senators are using Twitter on a daily basis to advertise anything from bills to town halls, but even in a world of unlimited 280-character updates, they are making important decisions about how they want to frame their political narrative. Twitter aggregates senators' priorities in one space that is public and accessible—offering a rhetorical agenda that will help define their political brand and representational style. Twitter enables senators to directly convey their priorities outside of the news media or chamber floor, incentivizing them to comment on issues that capture public attention and appeal to a digital constituency.

Congressional scholars have long considered policy one of many lawmaker goals, but in a political time where a Democrat from Illinois looks increasingly like a Democrat from Colorado, national policy problems are likely to take precedence in a senator's agenda. Senators are tasked with national policy making (Sievert and McKee, 2018), despite their state representation. Senators' governing rhetoric on Twitter is similar to trends in campaigns and among the public. During elections, even low-level politicians are stressing national issues and talking points provided from the two major parties (Sievert and McKee, 2018). High rates of straight party voting are now the norm (Abramowitz and Webster, 2016), reflecting national parties' ability to frame down-ballot races in terms of national policy debates. Some refer to this nationalized policy climate as an ideological nationalization (Caughey, Dunham, and Warshaw, 2018; Hopkins, 2018). In House elections, there has been a growing correlation with the results of the presidential election (Abramowitz and Webster, 2016)—and that trend is only likely to be more pronounced in the Senate where districts are larger and more diverse.

Additionally, the broad constituencies on Twitter incentivize a policy-focused agenda that appeals to coalitions of constituents with shared policy and partisan preferences. The fact that social media can bypass traditional media institutions altogether requires a differentiation between how we study social and traditional media sources (Jungherr, 2014). The rise of Twitter as a norm for senators' press operations adds additional incentive for senators to carefully craft rhetorical agendas that appeal to as many people as possible—regardless of geographic constraints. Social media is a fundamental shift for lawmakers, incentivizing rapid responses that range from polarizing partisan attacks to detailing policy alternatives. On social media, senators capture constituents and advocates' attention through direct connections with followers or indirectly through media and special interests. Senators are unconstrained in what they choose to tweet about, but Twitter gives senators the opportunity to reinforce a reputation can be felt beyond the walls of Congress and far beyond the geographic boundaries of a lawmaker's constituency. Senators' publicized agendas on Twitter are likely to fuel a fundamental shift in how and what gets communicated to a digital constituency—particularly when that constituency can balloon both nationally and globally. Social media is reshaping communication norms so as the platform shifts so too does the information and constituents drawn to that media platform. Local issues and state politics that appeal to a smaller constituency may take a secondary position to constituent communications that build broad coalitions and support with low-cost messaging. I expect senators' communication with the public, particularly in an era where elections and governing are less distinguishable, to reflect and contribute to a national, policy debate.

## Explaining the Variance in Senators' Twitter Agendas

Elections and partisan conflict make for good television and flame Twitter fights, but policy is arguably at the core of many of those battles, that is, “Obamacare,” “bathroom bills,” and international travel bans. Position-taking fosters politicians’ ultimate goal of reelection (Mayhew, 1974), and this research argues that it is the primary way senators connect with constituents in this digitized political environment. Policy priorities—or at least the appearance of policy attentiveness—are at the core of a senator’s rhetorical agenda on Twitter (Russell, 2018), and because of this I expect national policy to play a primary role in a senator’s constituent communication on social media.

**Policy priority hypothesis (H1):** Senators are most likely to tweet about policy priorities relative to competing priorities of constituent service or party politics.

While many inside and out of Congress talk about social media in terms of constituent outreach, the nature of that outreach is largely grounded in legislative priorities. Twitter is an equally if not more appealing platform for policy discussions because senators can reach beyond a state’s constituency and reinforce broad coalitions with whom their policy messages resonate. Constituents’ expectations for a policy-oriented style of communication lead senators to engage the public on policy debates; however, the question remains whether senators constrain their policy rhetoric to nationally salient debates. Senators have issues that resonate with their districts (i.e., flood management in Louisiana) and many may be more likely to skirt national issues in order to avoid partisan debates and maintain control of their messaging. Sens. Grassley and Alaska Republican Lisa Murkowski are two examples of the typical constituent servant, always turning to Twitter to talk about local problems and visits to the state while reinforcing their connections to local voters. Some issues such as public lands and agriculture are often geographically defined and require senators to routinely engage these issues, but I expect the nationalized policy environment means Grassley and Murkowski are the exception such that senators are more likely to devote their agendas on Twitter to national policy issues that garner public attention. These national issues resonate with constituents in their local communities and more broadly those online, networked coalitions united by shared policy priorities.

**National policy hypothesis (H2):** Senators are most likely to tweet about policy topics that are publicly salient.

## Measuring Senators' Agendas on Twitter

The majority of congressional representation studies focus on the House; however, this study shifts the focus to the Senate, adding complexity to the legislative literature and analyzing how senators use their broader reputations to craft differing styles of representation. Senators walk a fine line between being state representatives while also garnering national attention beyond the scope of their geographic constituencies. This offers senators more opportunities, relative to House members, to seek public support through either local or national media attention. While some House members such as Alexandria Ocasio Cortez have used their social media platform to propel their political image beyond their limited districts, senators’ prominence and name recognition suggests they are more readily able to capitalize on a national profile compared to House members.

Senators are not dependent on newspapers and newsletters to build a reputation with voters because they can supplement these alternatives with social media that offer more discretion over the information supplied. Twitter offers a new window into senators’

TABLE 1  
Summary Statistics: Senators' Tweets in 2013 and 2015

2013	Tweet Total	Mean	Median	Min	Max
Democrat	36,871	992	904	30	2,121
Republican	31,524	1,160	1,057	23	2,272
2015					
Democrat	53,260	1,918	1,695	36	4,428
Republican	59,852	1,697	1,392	90	4,071

priorities for representation and provides clarity about how these politicians prioritize their agenda in pursuit of reelection. To analyze policymakers' strategic attention, a years-worth of tweets from senators' official accounts in 2013 and 2015 were collected via a Python-based web scraper that utilized the Twitter API to collect approximately 180,000 tweets over the two years. The study includes tweets from senators' official office accounts or their individual accounts rather than their campaign accounts given that my interest is their agenda while in office.

The number of tweets by user varies greatly over both congressional sessions by user and political party (Table 1). In 2013, the average senator sent about 675 tweets per year, and in 2015, the average tweets per year increased to 1,100. That averages out to two to three tweets per senator per day. Comparing tweets to other press activities with policy information, the average senator and his staff issues fewer than 250 press releases each year (Grimmer, 2010) and introduces fewer than 35 new bills.<sup>3</sup>

My expectation is that policy becomes the dominant frame for strategic communication on Twitter—both due to the nationalization of politics and the incentives of Twitter to appeal to a broad constituency. To test that, I catalogue tweets according to the content across three goals: policy, constituent outreach, and party politics. These three components of representation make up the lion share of what senators talk about both in Washington and on social media. Members of Congress report these activities make up the majority of their daily schedules in Washington and at home (CMF, 2015; Russell, 2018). To catalogue the tweets, each tweet was read by a student coder and noted for the presence of each of the three goals.

More specifically, tweets with policy mentions are coded according to the U.S. Policy Agendas Project coding scheme that categorizes public policy into 20 major topics (Tables 2 and 3). Each tweet is given a policy code if that tweet corresponds with one of the 20 major topics.<sup>4</sup>

I distinguish policy communication from senators' other roles in office—primarily constituent outreach and party politics. A senator's constituent outreach is measured by references to the primary duties of a senator as a constituent servant. These tweets include (1) explicit reference to the senator's state, (2) town halls or constituent meetings, (3) local sports, (4) credit claiming for legislative and local actions, and (5) direct communication with followers on Twitter where they either respond to users or encourage followers to take action. Political tweets are coded by mentions of elections and party politics, specifically

<sup>3</sup>Brookings Institution Vital Statistics on Congress. Available at (<https://www.brookings.edu/multi-chapter-report/vital-statistics-on-congress/>).

<sup>4</sup>All policy tweets were hand-coded by a graduate student coder, and 6,000 observation samples were double-coded by experienced student coders for reliability measures. Student double-coding coding yielded the following intercoder reliability statistics for policy issues: percentage of agreement = 87.4%, Cohen's kappa = 85.6%, Krippendorff's alpha = 85.6%. Coding guideline for policy coding is included in the Appendix.

TABLE 2  
U.S. Policy Agendas Topic Codes

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Macroeconomics
Civil Rights
Health
Agriculture
Labor and Employment
Education
Environment
Energy
Immigration
Transportation
Law, Crime, and Family Issues
Social Welfare
Community Development, Planning, and Housing Issues
Banking and Finance
Defense
Space, Science, Technology
Foreign Trade
International Affairs and Foreign Aid
Government Operations
Public Lands Management

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TABLE 3  
Examples of Policy Messages in Senators' Tweets

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Health	Sen. McConnell is speaking now on the Senate floor about <i>healthcare</i> .
Economy	Looking forward to continue working to move our #MadelnWI <i>economy</i> forward.
Labor	<i>\$8.75 &amp; \$9/hour</i> at the end of 2015 are still too low.
Immigration	<i>Immigration reform</i> should matter to all of us who understand the importance of family.

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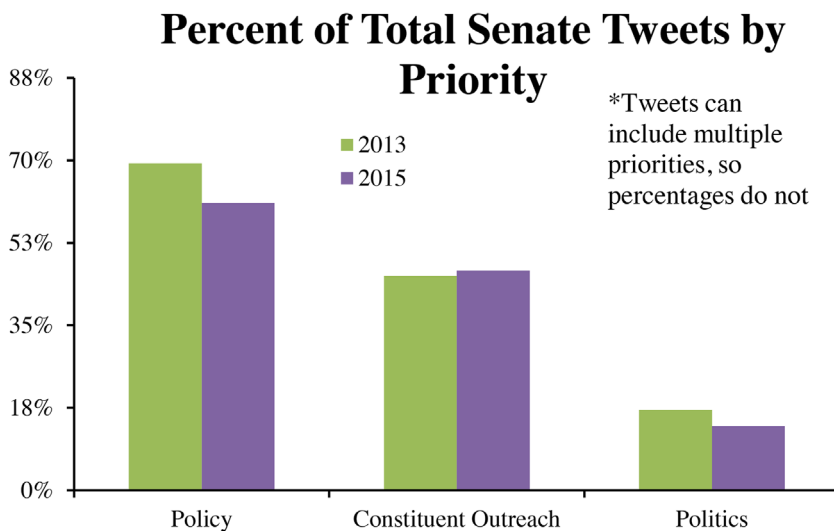
the use of partisan rhetoric to describe parties and party representatives.<sup>5</sup> Partisan rhetoric represents the language where senators often seek to shift blame and attack the other party (Sinclair, 2006; Theriault, 2013) and tweets that signal favoritism or support for one's own party. Each tweet is coded for any mention of either three priorities, and tweets can include multiple priorities (i.e., promoting tax cuts for small businesses that would help a specific community).

Even though priorities can be coupled together, I find distinct differences in the frequency that senators discuss each of these priorities on Twitter. Among the three, policy is typically the most frequently mentioned priority on Twitter (Figure 1). This offers support for my first hypothesis (H1) that among senators' goals and activities in Congress, national policy or position-taking is most often the primary or most frequently communicated

<sup>5</sup>All political tweets were hand-coded by a graduate student coder, and a sample of 4,300 tweets was double-coded by experienced student coders for reliability measures. Student double-coding yielded the following intercoder reliability statistics for partisanship: percentage of agreement = 98, Cohen's kappa = 94%, Krippendorff's alpha = 94%. Coding guidelines and additional examples of coding scheme are included in the Appendix.

FIGURE 1

Distribution of Senators' Tweets by the Percentage of Tweets Categorized by Each Priority in 2013 and 2015



priority. This matches research by Russell (2018) who finds increased levels of position-taking online by senators. President Donald Trump most prominently uses Twitter for partisan politics; however, the Senate has a history of prioritizing policy for their public outreach online. Direct communication with constituents and references to state issues are included in less than half of all tweets by senators, and politics is the least mentioned category and is easily less talked about than the other two.

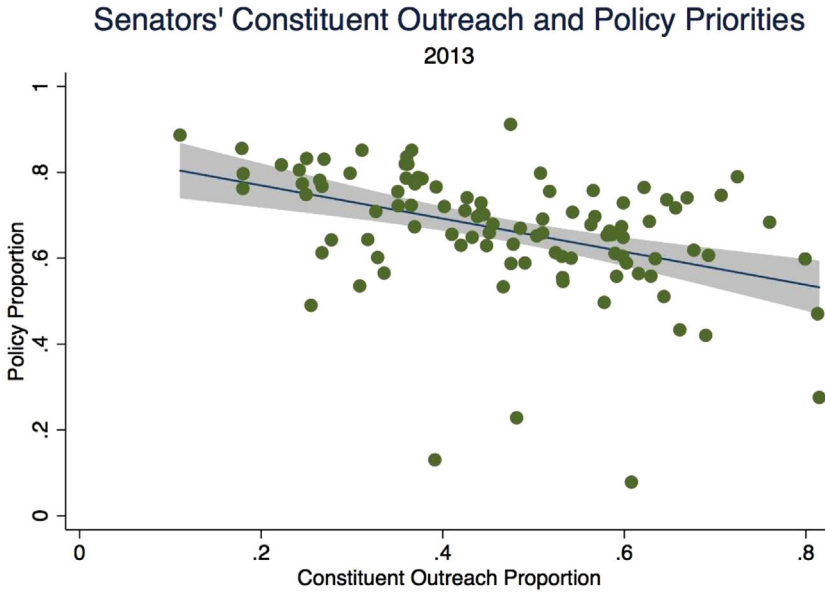
Typically, the front pages of the newspapers are filled with the horse race of elections and early descriptions of Twitter lauded it for the constituency connection, but senators' Twitter activity suggests that policy is the primary frame for how senators articulate their style of representation. The agenda that they want the public to receive and journalists to report is framed in terms of their legislative activity, presenting the senator as a legislative entrepreneur (Wawro, 2000). Even if we buy the notion of a "do nothing" Congress, the perception that senators signal to voters on Twitter is that they are actively engaged policymakers across a diverse set of issues. The emphasis on legislation and problem solving in their tweets may provide one reason why constituents continue to reelect individual members of the Senate while Congress, as a whole, is considered polarizing and ineffective. Twitter gives senators an additional opportunity to distance themselves from that negative, aggregate image by portraying their policy prowess and attentiveness on social media.

Not only are senators using policy frames to communicate their political brand, they are doing so at the expense of talking about local issues or constituent service. For example, senators in 2015 were talking about how to address the nuclear development in Iran, the threat of international terror, and government support for healthcare.

To better illustrate this tradeoff between constituent outreach and policy, the scatterplots below show every senator's percentage of policy tweets and the relationship to the percentage of constituent tweets (Figures 2 and 3). On average, as policy attention goes

FIGURE 2

Scatterplot of Percentage of Senators' Policy and Constituent Priorities on Twitter in 2013



up, constituent outreach proportions go down. This finding suggests that senators are not just using social media's unlimited capabilities to tweet more about policy, but rather they are tweeting more about policy relative to local or state issues. The average senator correlation between the percentage of tweets mentioning policy and constituent outreach is  $-0.537$  in 2013 and  $-0.517$  in 2015. The cost of communicating with an eye toward policy means that constituent outreach often takes a secondary position in senators' rhetorical agendas. The diverse audience on Twitter may incentivize broad policy communications rather than localized politics, and that strategy then shapes the information the public has to evaluate their lawmakers.

**Inhofe Press Office** @InhofePress

BREAKING: "U.S. Central Command Twitter Hacked By Cyberattackers Claiming To Represent ISIS"

US Central Command Twitter Hacked By Cyberattackers Cl...  
The Twitter account of U.S. Central Command, which oversees U.S. military operations in 20 countries throughout...  
dailycaller.com

3:39 PM · Jan 12, 2015 · Twitter Web Client

3 Retweets

1 Reply 3 Retweets 0 Likes

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**Senator Dianne Feinstein** @SenFeinstein

I agree with @AmbassadorPower, additional Iran sanctions now is not the solution to the nuclear issue. [reut.rs/1xV0xoN](http://reut.rs/1xV0xoN)

4:42 PM · Jan 12, 2015 · Twitter Web Client

77 Retweets 34 Likes

10 Replies 77 Retweets 34 Likes

**Richard Blumenthal** @SenBlumenthal · Jan 6, 2015

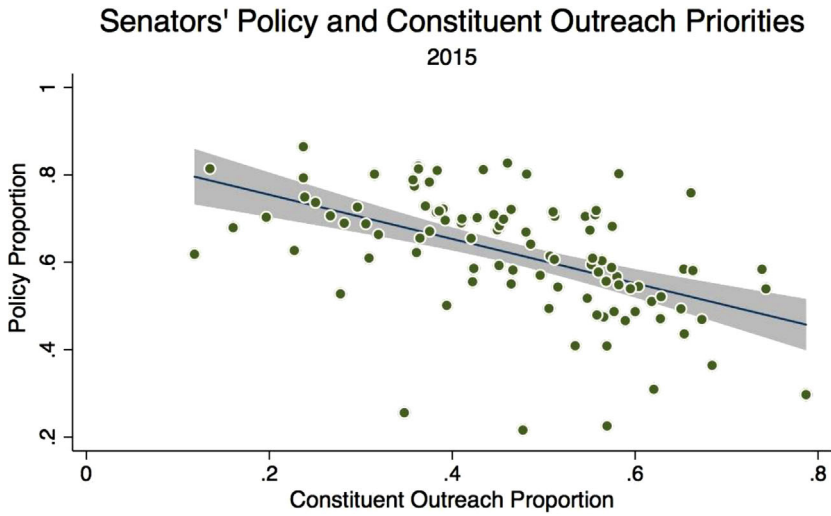
We owe it to returning vets to provide them with increased access to quality mental health services. #ClayHuntSAVAct

1 Reply 29 Retweets 25 Likes



FIGURE 3

Scatterplot of Percentage of Senators' Policy and Constituent Priorities on Twitter in 2015



Policy is, on average, the dominant priority in senators' tweets, but I also break down the variation in these communications across party and position. In 2013 and 2015, the senators who spent the highest proportion of tweets on policy tended to be Democrats and committee leaders (Table 4). For example, Sens. Patty Murray (WA-D) and Lamar

TABLE 4

Top and Bottom 10 Senators by Percentage of Tweets that Include Policy Priorities

Policy Top Ten				Policy Bottom Ten			
2013		2015		2013		2015	
Feinstein	82%	Merkley	80%	Harkin	8%	McCaskill	22%
Murray	82%	Baldwin	80%	Shelby	13%	Rubio	23%
Boxer	83%	Udall	80%	McCaskill	23%	Paul	26%
Leahy	83%	Blumenthal	81%	Mo Cowan	28%	Grassley	30%
Wyden	84%	Gillibrand	81%	Manchin	42%	Booker	31%
Durbin	85%	Feinstein	81%	Scott	43%	Vitter	36%
Alexander	85%	Sessions	81%	Pryor	47%	Scott	41%
Barrasso	86%	Alexander	82%	Hatch	49%	Stabenow	41%
Coburn	89%	Cantwell	83%	Murphy	50%	Fischer	44%
Lautenberg	91%	Murray	86%	Begich	51%	Cassidy	47%

Alexander (TN-R) spent political capital and time on Twitter trying to build support pass education reform as the leaders of the education committee. Senators who directed their attention to priorities outside of policy were often limited in their time in the Senate, such as retiring Democratic Sen. Tom Harkin-IA, or were preoccupied with other activities, such as Republican Sen. David Vitter-LA who was running for governor.

I formally assess the characteristics that lead to a higher percentage of policy priorities in a senator's tweets with a fractional logit model, specifically a generalized linear model with a binomial distribution and a link logit function with robust errors:

$$\text{logit}\{E(y)\} = x\beta, y \sim \text{Bernoulli}$$

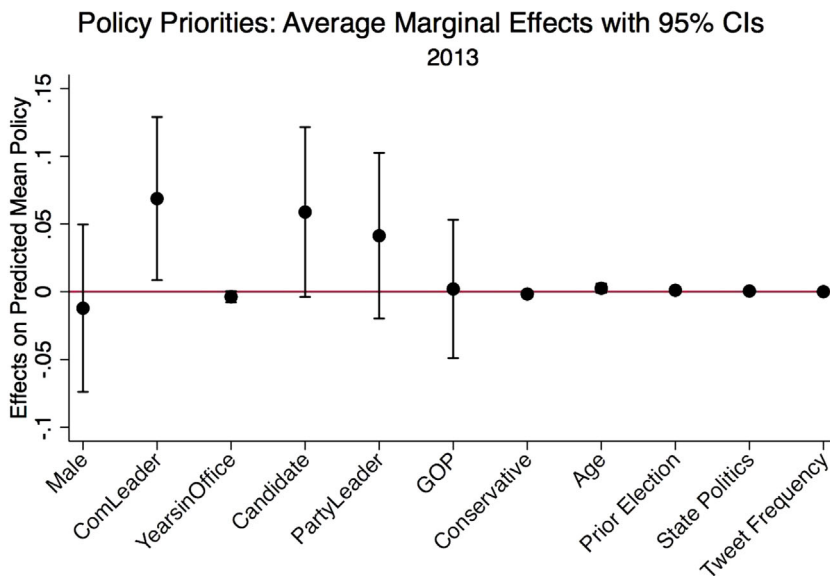
The unit of analysis is the senator and the dependent variable is the proportion of a senator's Twitter output that includes policy.<sup>6</sup> I expect the proportion of tweets mentioning policy to differ according senators' individual characteristics and electoral pressures. I consider a senator's party, ideology, and role within the institution, that is, committee leadership, in addition to a member's age, gender, Twitter frequency, candidacy in the upcoming election, the politics of the constituency, seniority, and previous electoral success.

The average Twitter user is younger than that of Facebook or traditional news, so I control for age because older politicians may be less likely to use Twitter compared to other platforms. Work by Evans and Clark (2015) finds that gender has an effect on congressional candidates' social media messages. A binary code for candidacy is included in the model to account for a senator's likelihood to focus on non-institutional issues and the influence of campaign activities. Evans, Cordova, and Sipole (2014) find incumbent effects on Twitter communications during congressional campaigns, and I expect different rhetoric from candidates. In addition to candidacy, I consider seniority because established senators may redirect attention away from constituents and toward policy. The politics of the senator's constituency may also influence how senators communicate policy priorities on Twitter. I control for a senator's electoral constraints by the same-party presidential candidates vote share in the previous election and the senator's individual margin of victory in their last senate race. Some senators may have the political capital to shift their reputation

<sup>6</sup>This model specification is desirable because like a beta regression it accounts for the skewness of the dependent variable, but it can consider values including 0 and 1 (Papke and Wooldridge, 1996). Logit models are a common practice with explanatory variables that are attributes of individuals.

FIGURE 4

Margin Plot of Predicted Probabilities of Senators' Policy Priorities on Twitter in 2013



to a national rather than locally driven political brand. I also control for the number of tweets a senator sends to understand if high-volume Twitter users can avoid the tradeoffs between priorities and to control for the variability in social media performance.

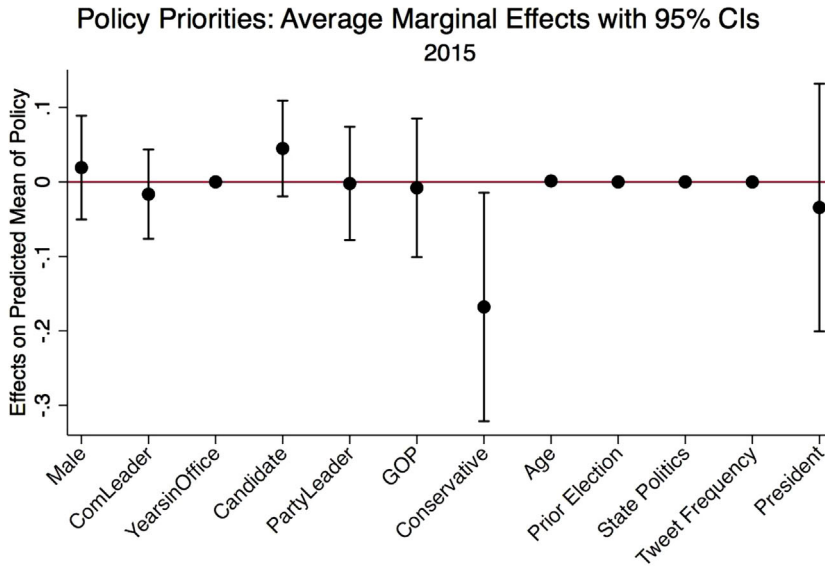
The dots on the margins plots represent the marginal effects of the coefficients; whereas, the lines represent 95 percent confidence intervals for each estimate (Figures 4 and 5).<sup>7</sup> The results from the models largely reflect observational analysis and expectations about who is most likely to prioritize policy. In 2013, committee leaders were 6 percent more likely to prioritize policy in their public communications on Twitter, suggesting that their role as policy specialists and leaders within the policy process influence their public communications. In 2015, senators with more liberal ideologies were most likely to reference policy than their moderate or conservative counterparts. This finding supports research by Grossman and Hopkins (2016) that progressive lawmakers are more committed to specific policies designed to benefit particular groups. Both Democrats and committee leaders have broad constituencies that extend beyond geographic boundaries, incentivizing policy communication that reinforces that base of constituent support and highlights their specialization and shared policy goals.

Additionally, it is worth noting that the total number of tweets a senator sends does not affect his likelihood to prioritize policy. Senators are not just tweeting more and thus spending more time on policy. Even when I move the analysis from the proportion of all tweets to the total count, those senators who tweet more frequently are no more likely to talk about policy than their counterparts who spend less time on social media. They do not “get around” the tradeoff of policy and constituent outreach simply by tweeting more.

<sup>7</sup>Full regression tables for the margins plots are located in the Appendix.

FIGURE 5

Margin Plot of Predicted Probabilities of Senators' Policy Priorities on Twitter in 2015



### *Estimating Specific Policy Issues*

Public policy attention is not only about votes and bills but more specifically the issues those activities represent. I anticipate variation in the issues that senators prefer, likely due to expertise and issue reputations by party, but I also expect senators to defer to national policy issues that capture a broad audience. I measure public policy attention via the Gallup Poll's annual measure of "Most Important Problem" (Figures 6 and 7). I find that senators' attention to policy on Twitter mostly reflects the policy issues that the public is most attuned to, with a significant correlation of  $+0.58$  in 2013 and  $+0.36$  in 2015. This supports my second hypothesis that senators are tweeting about issues that garner public attention.

In 2013 and 2015, the public reported to Gallup that economics was the most important policy problem facing the country, and economics is the second most common policy topic discussed by senators on Twitter (Figure 8). Healthcare dominated the policy issues discussed by senators, particularly GOP senators, in response to President Obama's recent health care law and resulting court challenges. In 2013, healthcare was a top-5 problem reported by the public and a top-10 problem in 2015. Traditionally, defense and international affairs capture public attention, particularly during times of war or international crisis. Defense is a priority for many senators on Twitter, in addition to law and government operations. In 2013 and 2015 government operations was the most important problem for more than 10 percent of persons surveyed. Issues that rarely garner public attention—agriculture, transportation, public lands—also draw limited attention from senators on Twitter. While public attention to issues is more punctuated and concentrated to fewer issues, the trends between public and Senate attention on Twitter suggest that the issues the public and senators discuss are associated. How lawmakers market their

FIGURE 6

The Percentage of Senators' Policy Attention to 20 Major Issues on Twitter in 2013

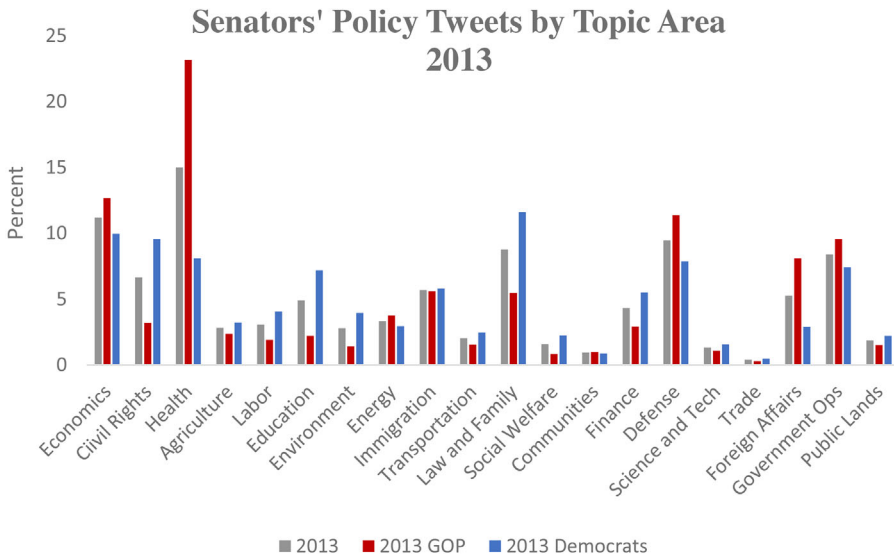
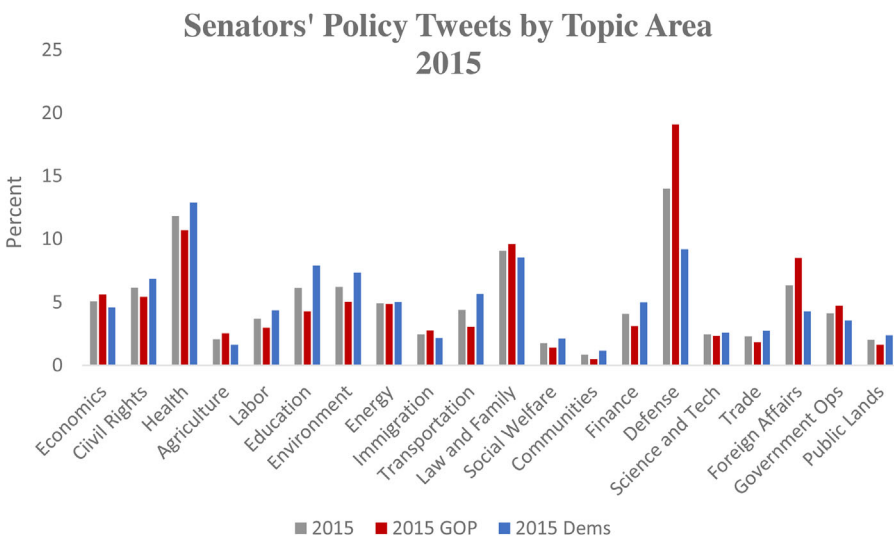


FIGURE 7

The Percentage of Senators' Policy Attention to 20 Major Issues on Twitter in 2015



political brand is more closely tied to issues of national importance or major legislation moving through Congress, such as healthcare or sequestration.

In addition to comparing the correlations across the graphs, I estimate the effect of public attention on senators' policy priorities in 2015. The model relies on data from Gallup and the Policy Agendas Project where the public identifies the "most important problem." The dependent variable remains the proportion of a senators' Twitter agenda

FIGURE 8

Percentage of Gallup Survey Respondents Listing 20 Issues as the “Most Important Problem” in 2013 and 2015

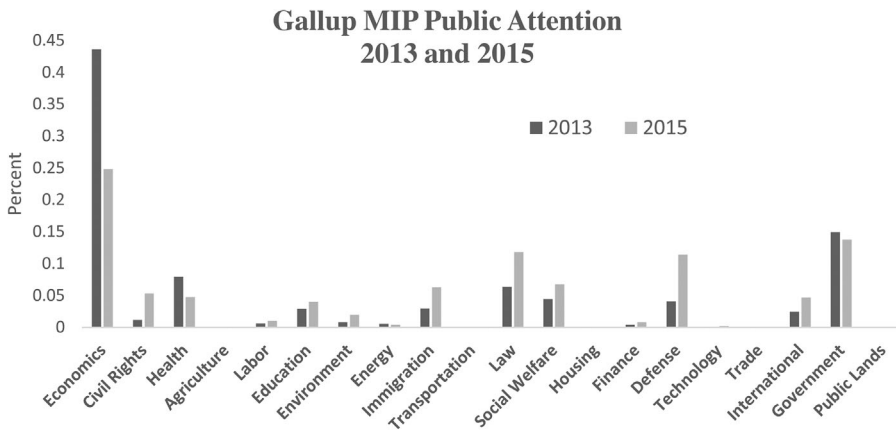
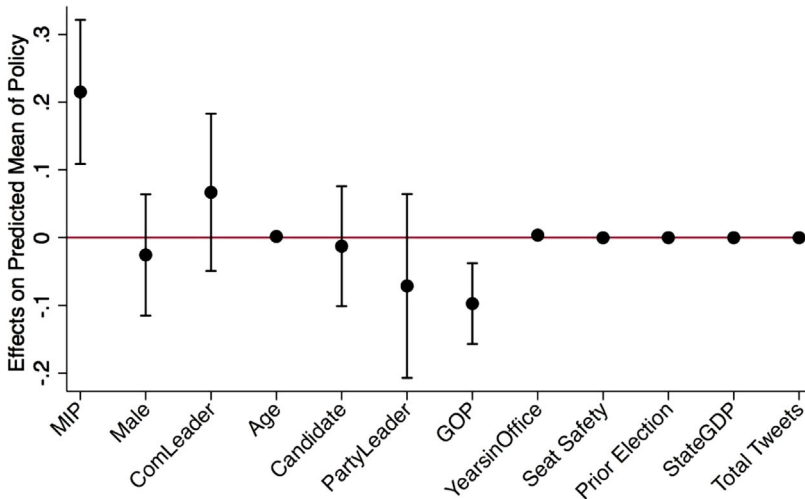


FIGURE 9

Margin Plots of Predicated Probabilities of Senators’ Attention to Policies with Public Attention on Twitter in 2015

Policy Priorities w/ Public Salience: Marginal Effects of Senators’ Tweets 2015



that references policy and the explanatory variables are consistent with the models above, with the addition of the MIP measure. The results of the analysis in 2015 suggest that those issues that garner national public attention are associated with higher levels of policy communication by senators (Figure 9). Senators with a higher proportion of policy tweets are talking about those issues that draw more national and public attention. Each senator has policy preferences and issue specializations, but these results suggest that

issues with high public salience play a role shaping senators' strategic communication of policy issues.

## **Conclusion**

This article examines Senate representation by exploring senators' constituent communication on social media and offers new information about how senators build a reputation when given the opportunity to write their own narrative online. Senators work to ensure their constituents are aware of what they are doing for them, and each senator invests substantial resources to ensure they convey their reputation to constituents and advocates. This research shows how senators, with the ability to curate different styles of representation, are adopting a nationalized reputation online that suggests who and what is important to them lies beyond their state. Senators' social media choices signal their representational style to constituents and those choices reinforce the salience of national policy debates for the public. How senators filter their attention on social media reveals those policy priorities that are most salient and suggest that policy plays a primary priority for constituent communication in a nationalized political environment—offering a limited platform for the local issues that still have outsized impact on constituents' experiences in and around government. Twitter is a multipurpose platform that allows as many posts on as many issues with very little cost, yet senators are still less likely to devote their strategic communications to state issues, town halls, or direct communication compared to policy problems. As the parties have become more internally homogenous, the prevalence and political purchase of localized politics for senators' public agendas relegates local issues to a secondary position.

Senators' communications on Twitter reflect the less localized nature of our political culture—less than half of a senators' daily Twitter agenda is talking with constituents about state issues. Additionally, the topics senators promote as part of their public persona is reflective of national, public attention to those same issues. There is a positive and significant correlation between the issue areas that senators advertise on Twitter and those issues the public views as most important.

This pattern of salient, national policy communications tells us something about how our lawmakers view representation and the relationship between elite and public priorities in public discourse. Despite what traditional media platforms might report about party politics and an out-of-touch Congress, senators are meeting their constituents where they are—online—and reinforcing those broad coalitions with a representational style that relies on national issues that form coalitions regardless if you live in Colorado or Maine. Senators' tweets not only reflect this national policy climate but the endogeneity between elite and public agendas means their social media correspondence also contributes to this political pattern. President Trump has shown us that there are plenty of other choices to make on Twitter beyond policy, but the choice to prioritize national policy sends a signal to constituents, media, and special interests that a lawmaker is engaged and relevant on issues that matter to their constituents and to the nation.

## Appendix: Senate Representation on Twitter

### *Policy Agendas Project Coding Guidelines*

**General Introduction.** Observations in Policy Agendas Project data sets are coded according to the guidelines and topic system described next. This codebook is an updated version of the original codebook created by Baumgartner and Jones.

Each entry is coded into 1 of 20 major topics and 200 plus subtopics. The full codebook can be accessed at ([www.comparativeagendas.com](http://www.comparativeagendas.com)). The topic codebook is used to assign major topic codes for general categories of public policy. A list of the major topics is listed as follows.

The major policy topic codes for the United States are

1. Macroeconomics
2. Civil Rights
3. Health

FIGURE A1

2013 Senate Policy Priorities on Twitter

Figure A4. 2013 Senate Policy Priorities on Twitter	(1) Model 1
Gender	-0.116 (0.119)
ComLeader	0.311*** (0.113)
YearsinOffice	0.00145 (0.00672)
Candidate	0.209** (0.103)
PartyLeader	0.0936 (0.130)
PartyID	0.139 (0.210)
Ideology	-0.0318 (0.351)
Age	0.00540 (0.00706)
PartyBalance	0.00532 (0.00378)
ElectoralPerformance	0.00257 (0.00335)
TotalOutput	0.000112 (9.30e-05)
Constant	0.113 (0.389)
Observations	68,395

Robust standard errors in parentheses

\*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1



TABLE A1  
Senators on Twitter in 2013

Name	Party	Gender	Age	Total Tweets
Alexander	Republican	Male	73	418
Ayotte	Republican	Female	45	1,812
Baldwin	Democrat	Female	51	992
Barrasso	Republican	Male	61	666
Baucus	Democrat	Male	72	150
Begich	Democrat	Male	51	188
Bennet	Democrat	Male	49	198
Blumenthal	Democrat	Male	67	569
Blunt	Republican	Male	64	1,269
Boozman	Republican	Male	63	328
Boxer	Democrat	Female	73	260
Burr	Republican	Male	58	328
Cantwell	Democrat	Female	55	520
Cardin	Democrat	Male	70	1,195
Carper	Democrat	Male	67	868
Casey	Democrat	Male	53	536
Chambliss	Republican	Male	70	309
Coats	Republican	Male	70	681
Coburn	Republican	Male	65	389
Cochran	Republican	Male	76	458
Collins	Republican	Female	61	271
Coons	Democrat	Male	50	543
Corker	Republican	Male	61	673
Cornyn	Republican	Male	62	2,272
Crapo	Republican	Male	62	2,094
Cruz	Republican	Male	43	1,826
Donnelly	Democrat	Male	58	511
Durbin	Democrat	Male	69	667
Enzi	Republican	Male	70	576
Feinstein	Democrat	Female	80	365
Fischer	Republican	Female	62	468
Flake	Republican	Male	51	269
Franken	Democrat	Male	62	196
Gillibrand	Democrat	Female	47	1,968
Graham	Republican	Male	58	1,075
Grassley	Republican	Male	80	563
Hagan	Democrat	Female	60	706
Harkin	Democrat	Male	74	51
Hatch	Republican	Male	79	51
Heinrich	Democrat	Male	42	466
Heitkamp	Democrat	Female	58	1,142
Heller	Republican	Male	53	1,098
Hirono	Democrat	Female	66	394
Hoeven	Republican	Male	56	244
Inhofe	Republican	Male	79	905
Isakson	Republican	Male	79	228
Johanns	Republican	Male	63	53
J. Chiesa	Democrat	Male	48	30
Johnson	Democrat	Male	67	266
Kaine	Democrat	Male	55	1,177
King	Democrat	Male	69	656
Kirk	Republican	Male	54	721

*Continued*

TABLE A1

Continued

Name	Party	Gender	Age	Total Tweets
Klobuchar	Democrat	Female	53	484
Landrieu	Democrat	Female	58	708
Lautenberg	Democrat	Male	89	375
Leahy	Democrat	Male	73	1,348
Lee	Republican	Male	42	644
Levin	Democrat	Male	79	198
Manchin	Democrat	Male	63	999
Markey	Democrat	Male	67	596
McCain	Republican	Male	73	1,562
McCaskill	Democrat	Female	60	403
McConnell	Republican	Male	71	1,999
Menendez	Democrat	Male	59	1,035
Merkley	Democrat	Male	57	449
Mikulski	Democrat	Female	77	1,077
Mo Cowan	Democrat	Male	44	243
Moran	Republican	Male	59	781
Murkowski	Republican	Female	56	316
Murphy	Democrat	Male	40	1,348
Murray	Democrat	Female	63	1,846
Nelson	Democrat	Male	71	74
Paul	Republican	Male	50	1,057
Portman	Republican	Male	58	758
Pryor	Democrat	Male	50	663
Reed	Democrat	Male	64	862
Reid	Democrat	Male	74	623
Risch	Republican	Male	70	118
Roberts	Republican	Male	77	319
Rockefeller	Democrat	Male	76	865
Ron Johnson	Republican	Male	58	161
Rubio	Republican	Male	42	285
Sanders	Democrat	Male	72	2,121
Schatz	Democrat	Male	41	174
Schumer	Democrat	Male	63	940
Scott	Republican	Male	48	487
Sessions	Republican	Male	67	230
Shaheen	Democrat	Female	66	882
Shelby	Republican	Male	79	23
Stabenow	Democrat	Female	63	248
Tester	Democrat	Male	57	61
Thune	Republican	Male	52	580
Tom Udall	Democrat	Male	65	470
Toomey	Republican	Male	52	896
Udall	Democrat	Male	63	904
Vitter	Republican	Male	52	834
Warner	Democrat	Male	59	1,071
Warren	Democrat	Female	64	179
Whitehouse	Democrat	Male	58	578
Wicker	Republican	Male	62	429
Wyden	Democrat	Male	64	433

TABLE A2  
U.S. Senators on Twitter in 2015

Name	Party	Gender	Age	Total Tweets
Alexander	Republican	Male	74	912
Ayotte	Republican	Female	46	2,223
Baldwin	Democrat	Female	52	3,328
Barrasso	Republican	Male	62	671
Bennet	Democrat	Male	50	280
Blumenthal	Democrat	Male	68	1,739
Blunt	Republican	Male	64	1,352
Booker	Democrat	Male	45	4,428
Boozman	Republican	Male	64	479
Boxer	Democrat	Female	74	392
Brown	Democrat	Male	62	414
Burr	Republican	Male	59	606
Cantwell	Democrat	Female	56	619
Cardin	Democrat	Male	71	1,695
Carper	Democrat	Male	67	882
Casey	Democrat	Male	54	1,040
Cassidy	Republican	Male	57	611
Coats	Republican	Male	71	1,392
Cochran	Republican	Male	77	413
Collins	Republican	Female	62	314
Coons	Democrat	Male	51	1,348
Corker	Republican	Male	62	634
Cornyn	Republican	Male	62	3,308
Cotton	Republican	Male	37	1,421
Crapo	Republican	Male	63	288
Cruz	Republican	Male	44	778
Daines	Republican	Male	52	1,328
Donnelly	Democrat	Male	59	1,086
Durbin	Democrat	Male	70	2,217
Enzi	Republican	Male	70	928
Ernst	Republican	Male	44	584
Feinstein	Democrat	Female	81	1,085
Fischer	Republican	Female	63	924
Flake	Republican	Male	52	363
Franken	Democrat	Male	63	231
Gardner	Republican	Male	40	1,046
Gillibrand	Democrat	Female	48	2,613
Graham	Republican	Male	59	612
Grassley	Republican	Male	81	835
Heinrich	Democrat	Male	43	780
Heitkamp	Democrat	Female	59	2,472
Heller	Republican	Male	54	1,470
Hirono	Democrat	Female	67	430
Hoeven	Republican	Male	57	561
Inhofe	Republican	Male	80	404
Isakson	Republican	Male	70	1,034
Johnson	Republican	Male	59	895
Kaine	Democrat	Male	56	1,478
King	Democrat	Male	70	677
Kirk	Republican	Male	55	1,375
Klobuchar	Democrat	Female	54	1,281
Lankford	Republican	Male	46	756

Continued

TABLE A2  
(Continued)

Name	Party	Gender	Age	Total Tweets
Leahy	Democrat	Male	74	2,387
Lee	Republican	Male	43	1,060
Manchin	Democrat	Male	67	1,809
Markey	Democrat	Male	68	2,510
McCain	Republican	Male	78	440
McCaskill	Democrat	Female	64	1,784
McConnell	Republican	Male	72	557
Menendez	Democrat	Male	61	762
Merkley	Democrat	Male	68	532
Mikulski	Democrat	Female	78	733
Moore Capito	Republican	Female	61	1,350
Moran	Republican	Male	60	391
Murkowski	Republican	Female	57	1,066
Murphy	Democrat	Male	41	3,438
Murray	Democrat	Female	64	1,914
Nelson	Democrat	Male	72	36
Paul	Republican	Male	51	4,071
Perdue	Republican	Male	65	1,001
Peters	Democrat	Male	56	1,057
Portman	Republican	Male	59	1,262
Reed	Democrat	Male	65	869
Reid	Democrat	Male	75	561
Risch	Republican	Male	71	90
Roberts	Republican	Male	78	1,581
Rounds	Republican	Male	60	716
Rubio	Republican	Male	43	2,382
Sanders	Democrat	Male	73	2,793
Sasse	Republican	Male	42	466
Schatz	Democrat	Male	42	331
Schumer	Democrat	Male	64	2,339
Scott	Republican	Male	49	1,687
Sessions	Republican	Male	68	237
Shaheen	Democrat	Female	67	955
Shelby	Republican	Male	80	390
Stabenow	Democrat	Female	64	247
Sullivan	Republican	Male	50	686
Tester	Democrat	Male	58	990
Thune	Republican	Male	54	851
Tillis	Republican	Male	54	801
Toomey	Republican	Male	53	435
Udall	Democrat	Male	67	639
Vitter	Republican	Male	53	2,203
Warner	Democrat	Male	60	639
Warren	Democrat	Female	65	416
Whitehouse	Democrat	Male	59	949
Wicker	Republican	Male	63	599
Wyden	Democrat	Male	65	1,068

FIGURE A2

2015 Senate Policy Priorities on Twitter

Figure A5. 2015 Senate Policy Priorities on Twitter	(1) Model 1
Gender	-0.161 (0.172)
ComLeader	0.000755 (0.180)
YearsinOffice	0.00266 (0.0106)
Candidate	0.0436 (0.208)
PartyLeader	0.0546 (0.259)
PartyID	-0.111 (0.191)
Ideology	-0.889** (0.371)
Age	0.00937 (0.00724)
PartyBalance	-0.00293 (0.00403)
ElectoralPerformance	0.000189** (7.64e-05)
TotalOutput	-0.000155 (0.000107)
Constant	0.803* (0.449)
Observations	113,112

Robust standard errors in parentheses  
 \*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1

4. Agriculture
5. Labor and Employment
6. Education
7. Environment
8. Energy
9. Immigration
10. Transportation
11. Law, Crime, and Family Issues
12. Social Welfare
13. Community Development, Planning and Housing Issues
14. Banking and Finance
15. Defense
16. Space, Science, Technology
17. Foreign Trade
18. International Affairs and Foreign Aid
19. Government Operations

FIGURE A3

## 2015 Senate Policy Priorities on Twitter with MIP

Figure A9. 2015 Senate Policy Priorities on Twitter w/ MIP	(1) Model 1
MIP	0.947*** (0.235)
Gender	-0.113 (0.202)
ComLeader	0.295 (0.261)
Age	0.00765 (0.00631)
Candidate	-0.0558 (0.199)
PartyLeader	-0.315 (0.305)
PartyID	-0.429*** (0.136)
YearsinOffice	0.0160* (0.00852)
PartyBalance	-0.000582 (0.00297)
ElectoralPerformance	0.000177** (7.73e-05)
StateGDP	1.42e-05* (7.27e-06)
TotalOutput	-0.000121 (0.000104)
Constant	-0.322 (0.629)
Observations	113,112

## 20. Public Lands Management

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