



GSPM



The PEORIA Project

"The ECHO" is a publication of The George Washington University's [Graduate School of Political Management](#) (GSPM). This edition takes a step back from our weekly publication to review common themes and general findings from our first four months of research covering political activity on Twitter in the United States from August 31, 2017 through January 3, 2018. The ECHO will return in its regular format on Friday at [U.S. News & World Report](#) and on the GSPM PEORIA Project [website](#). Please subscribe to our [weekly email](#).

The ECHO Quarterly by Michael D. Cohen, Ph.D.

Why We Track and Study Twitter Volume

There is an obvious and important political context for choosing Twitter: Donald J. Trump is the first social media power-user to run for and become President of the United States and this is his preferred platform. His rationale, repeated during the campaign and [while in office](#), is that Twitter allows him to use a [modern day form of communication](#) to connect directly with the American people.

While relatively few Americans actually see the tweets in their feeds, "it's the mainstream media that covers what he says that gives him the reach," [says](#) Social Flow CEO Jim Anderson. One reason for the coverage? While most public officials have social media accounts, they are generally staffed. For example, President Obama [rarely tweeted himself](#), signified with "-BO" in the text. Trump's personal use of the @realDonaldTrump account, almost every day and generally multiple times per day, is virtually never in doubt. Trump averaged nearly six a day in 2017 with a surge to nine a day in Q4.

We partner with Crimson Hexagon, which pays for Twitter's full "firehose" of all tweets and provides us access to their [ForSight](#) data capture tool, where we can then produce The ECHO. We have access to a metric that makes sense to track: tweet volume. Crimson Hexagon gives us access to the total number of posts that include definable keyword terms. We can track all posts that not only refer to a certain account (like @realDonaldTrump) but combinations of words such as "President Trump" to get a sense of the *volume of conversation* around a person or a topic. While Crimson Hexagon and others are working to improve their hit rates for determining sentiment, emotion, geographic location, and demographics, whether or not a term is *in a tweet* is a clear and indisputable metric.

Twitter has about [69 million](#) monthly active users in the United States. A fair question to ask is why did we not use Facebook, which Crimson Hexagon provides access to as well, and which is a more robust social network and has close to [203 million](#) monthly users in

Publishing
Partner



Powered by  crimson hexagon

the United States? Moreover, Facebook's Instagram has surpassed Twitter and is growing faster, with an estimated [77.5 million](#) monthly active users as of 2017 in the United States. While the likely volume of conversation on Twitter pales in comparison to Facebook in the United States, the fact that it takes place out in the open, like a virtual shared soapbox is a primary reason to listen there. Most Twitter user accounts are open and, in fact, [the default setting is public](#). Most Facebook user accounts [default to sharing with friends](#). Even if we decided to focus on Facebook political conversation, we would be limited to posts on *public* pages, missing most of the genuine, interpersonal, posts and comments.

Based on our first four months of tracking and analyzing this data on a weekly basis in a systematic fashion here are three broad impressions of what this might tell us about the interaction of the volume of tweets and how United States political practitioners should monitor and react (or not) to what they're seeing. First, Twitter seems to be more of [a trap](#) than an opportunity for incumbent congressional candidates in toss-up races during in the fall and winter before an election year. Second, these campaigns should be wary of getting caught in the weekly Hot Topics vortex. Third, and perhaps most importantly, be very careful with the dominant platform user.

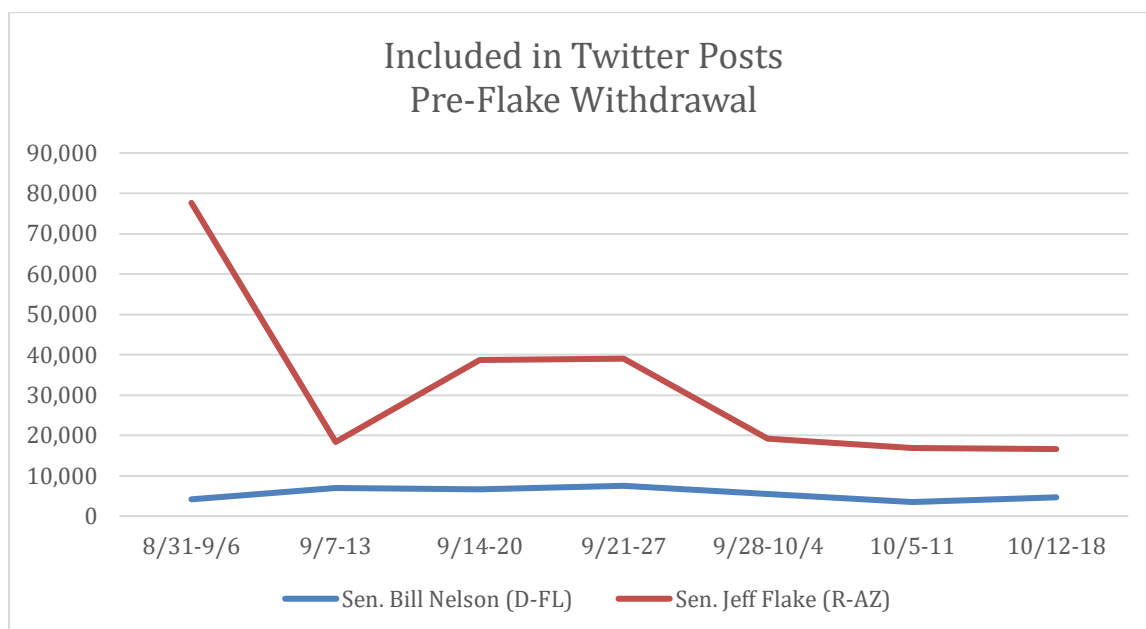
Toss-Up Incumbents Should Avoid Twitter's Glare

Not all that Twitters is gold. In the wake of Donald Trump's successful use of Twitter, candidates and campaigns are wondering how they should engage on the platform. Each week, The ECHO reports out the top five U.S. Senate and House incumbents per tweet volume and shows how it compares to the previous week. Based on what we've learned so far, I would urge caution. Particularly in Republican incumbent toss-up races, high Twitter volume looks a lot more problematic than opportunistic, which is why these campaigns should monitor mentions of the candidates very closely.

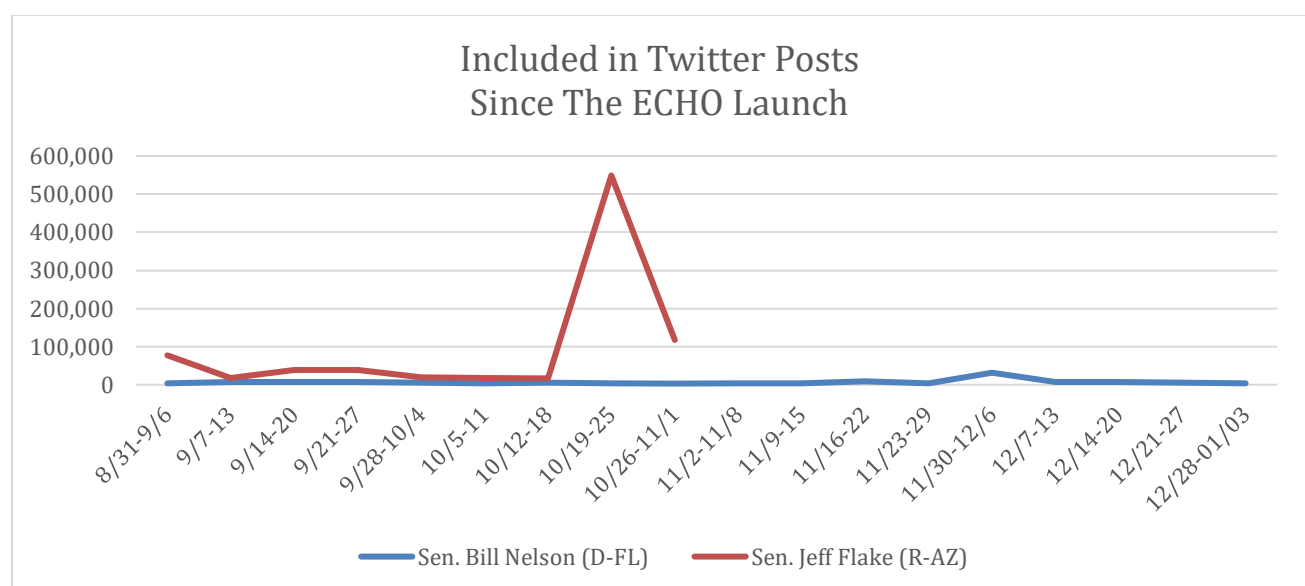
The clearest example of this is Sen. Jeff Flake (R-AZ) who was consistently the most-tweeted about federal incumbent in a toss-up race this cycle. While most of his colleagues in toss-up races were named, on average, in less than 7,000 Twitter posts weekly, Sen. Flake averaged close to 100,000. This was a clear sign of trouble and reflective of polling showing Flake near the [bottom in job approval](#) and [likely to lose in a GOP primary](#). The week that posts about him "peaked" was October 19-25 (The ECHO week's data runs from Thursday to the following Wednesday) we found 548,816 posts to Flake, most reacting to his [floor speech](#) explaining his decision not to run for re-election in 2018.

In contrast, consider Sen. Bill Nelson (D-FL), who has maintained a relatively low profile on Twitter, currently has no existing primary opponent as John Morgan [declared](#) he would not run as a Democrat. However, Nelson is running steadily within the margin of error with Republican Governor Rick Scott, hence the toss-up. In a late August 2017 [Florida Atlantic University poll](#), Nelson had a narrow two-point lead, which was done to only one-point in mid-October's [poll from the University of North Florida](#). By any measure, it's a toss-up with a state electorate known for toss-ups. Nelson has done virtually nothing to tip the scales ahead of his 2018 campaign for re-election. This is wise.

As you can see in the next graph, Flake was always running significantly ahead of Nelson in related posts, even when he was not [in the Twitter crosshairs of the President of the United States](#). In fact, you can argue that Flake's higher baseline represents the level of warning that an incumbent Senator should monitor: somewhere between an average of 15-20,000 related tweets per week. The Twitter buzz around Nelson never cracked 10,000 despite his [relatively high-profile](#) during the response to Hurricane Irma and even his four-month apex during tax reform, which [he said](#) would "send another hurricane to Puerto Rico."

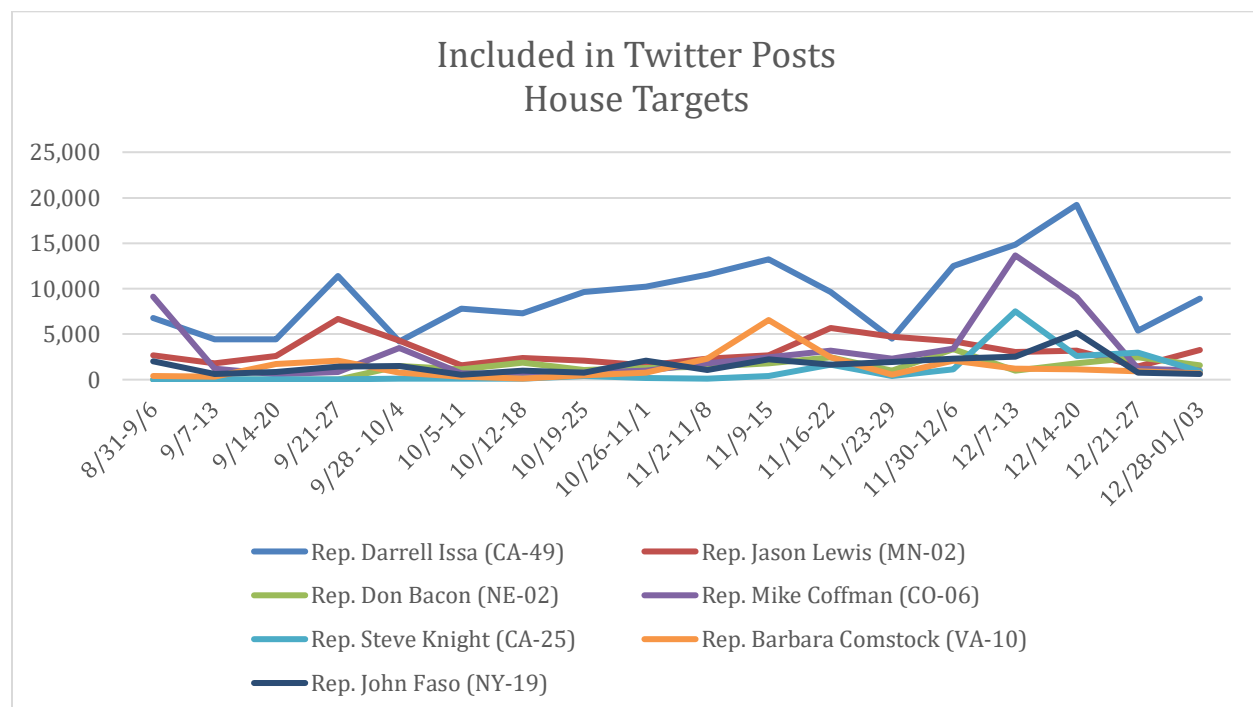


Here's the whole trend, ending with a week after Flake's announcement (October 25) that he was withdrawing from the race for reelection. As you can see, Nelson keeps the buzz low, helping to not exacerbate a close reelection ahead of the 2018 start of the campaign.



Looking at the House of Representatives for a moment, let's take a look at the prospects for Rep. Barbara Comstock's reelection in 2018. Comstock is a relatively unknown two-term Republican who represents a sprawling purple congressional district in Virginia's Tenth District, which has been trending Democratic over the past several elections, becoming [even more so](#) after the 2017 blowout of Ralph Northam over Ed Gillespie (prompting a temporary bump in Twitter chatter her 2018 vulnerability). Comstock, who won with 57 percent in 2014 but 53 percent in 2016 is a [top target](#) of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee. A [mid-October survey](#) of the district conducted by Public Policy Polling for national Democratic leaders, showed Comstock with just a 32 percent approval rating and a generic Democrat beating her 48 percent to 39 percent. Still, the field attempting to challenge Comstock is diverse, with at least nine opponents [so far](#), making it difficult to consolidate money and staff ahead of a tough general election to unseat an incumbent, even in a winnable toss-up race.

Part of Comstock's district runs through Loudoun County, where most of the world's internet [runs through its data centers](#). Residents of Loudoun and neighboring Fairfax County are no stranger to the internet or social media so one might imagine that its U.S. Representative would be active on a platform like Twitter. Wrong. In our tracking of House toss-up races, Comstock was consistently one of the least tweeted about targeted incumbents.



The one with the most to worry about? Republican Rep. Darrell Issa (CA-49), who won by just half a percentage point in 2016. While he voted [“no” on tax reform](#), [he has supported most of the Trump agenda](#). Still, he tried to find ways to [separate](#) himself from the president after [campaigning](#) with him in 2016. From our data, the Twitter buzz around

Issa remained significantly louder than the pack of toss-up incumbents and, a reflection of the interest in the race and the potential strength of its opposition. Update (1/10/18): [he's retiring](#).

Don't Get Caught in the Hot Topics Vortex

Based on this introductory research, it's much more important for incumbent toss-up campaigns to monitor Twitter than to attempt to draw attention through their own tweets. Does this advice apply to hot or "trending" topics in the news? What about hot topics that coincide with what public officials are trying to focus our attention on or are reacting to in real-time?

These strategic questions beg the questions of what were the leading topics of this period, and how quickly did Twitter users move on to other events or controversies? The short answers are "several" and "usually pretty quickly."

In reviewing the data, no single issue stayed within our top five Hot Topics section throughout the four months from August 31, 2017 to January 3, 2018. To be fair, part of this was by design because our editorial team was reacting to events during the week but it is also a reflection of how chaotic any part of the national agenda has moved through the political news system.

The two mainstays were tax cuts/tax reform, featured 14 times, through its passage in late December and which [both parties](#) will highlight in the 2018 mid-term elections, and the #MeToo movement, which was featured ten times and appears to be [gaining momentum](#) in early 2018. The one election which captured our attention, and Twitter's, was the Alabama Senate race, which we featured six times, once in the Republican primary, and five times through the [general election upset](#) and certification. No other issue was repeated more than three times and most we covered only once because they dropped off the national agenda, and the Twitter platform, that quickly.

Hot Topic	Number of Times Featured
Tax Reform	14 times
#MeToo / Sexual Harassment / Time's Up	10 times
Alabama Senate Race	6 times
Jerusalem, Net Neutrality, North Korea, Puerto Rico, Russia	3 times each
Climate Change, DACA, Gun Control, Hurricane Harvey, Iran, Repeal/Replace Obamacare, Single Payer/Medicare for All, Virginia Governor's Race	2 times each
Birth Control, California Fires, California Shooting, Election Day, Fake News, Graham-Cassidy Compromise, Hurricane Irma, Iran	1 time each

Protests, ISIS, Las Vegas Shooting, NFL and the Flag, Niger, Opioids, Tech Hearings, Terrorist Attack in London, Texas Church Massacre, United Nations, Uranium One	1 time each
---	-------------

Our short attention spans aside, which political “Hot Topics” resonated the most on Twitter and why? By far, the broadest tweeted about topics were the hurricanes, which while not political by definition were so in how public officials responded. Twitter users responded in the *millions*. In our first issue of The ECHO in late August, we covered Hurricane Harvey, which pulled in 1.9 million related tweets, down 65 percent from the previous week of 5.4 million related tweets. This was followed up by 1.8 million and 4.6 million tweets Hurricane Irma through mid-September. As attention shifted to Puerto Rico’s (lack of) recovery, we identified 3.9 million tweets about it and Hurricane Maria, growing to 4.8 million in late September/early October until tailing off, in relative terms, down to 1.5 million (October 5-11) and 1.2 million (October 12-18) tweets.

Beyond the number of times or the sheer total volume of tweets, another way to look at these issues is their relative peaks. Since we did not track all of these topics throughout the four months, the best we can offer at this point, without additional analysis, is a table of how many related tweets each attracted at their peak. The data below represent the most pervasive “boom” moments for each issue. As you can see, the most *covered* topics by The ECHO did not go the most viral, in a week’s span, on Twitter.

Hot Topic	Number of Related Tweets	Peak Week
NFL/Flag	10,768,172	9/14 to 9/20
Las Vegas	7,305,195	9/28 to 10/4
DACA	5,248,913	8/31 to 9/6
Puerto Rico	4,829,676	9/28 to 10/4
Net Neutrality	4,799,710	12/14 to 12/20
Hurricane Irma	4,641,783	9/7 to 9/13
<i>Tax Reform/Cuts/Bill</i>	3,018,566	11/30 to 12/6
Gun Control/Safety	2,759,685	9/28 to 10/4
United Nations	2,635,306	9/14 to 9/20
Graham-Cassidy	2,427,783	9/14 to 9/20
Hurricane Harvey	1,911,635	9/7 to 9/13
NRA	1,206,791	9/28 to 10/4
<i>#MeToo / Sexual Harassment / Time’s Up</i>	907,697	10/12 to 10/18

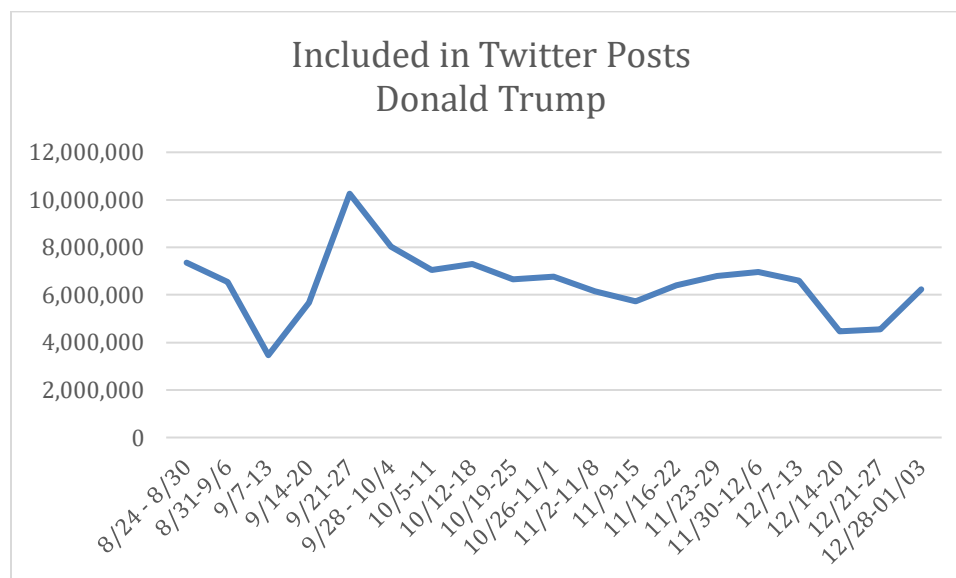
What does it say that the most important legislative achievement in the first year of the Trump administration and the strongest social movement since Black Lives Matter didn’t register even Top 5 mentions in our four-month sweep of political Twitter? Campaigns and organizations that watch for the “boom” moments are missing the larger picture of what is going on in politics, and on Twitter. The more important metric, which we will be tracking

this year, is tweets over time and a recognition that natural disasters and mass violence will tend to capture Twitter's attention more widely than political issues or social movements which build over time. In short, it's duration, not volume.

However, looking at the data, it is also an indication that we ought to be tracking some issues more often than we were. For example, it is well worth a look back at the weekly volumes of tweets related to the Deferred Actions for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) issue as well as Net Neutrality, which is likely being covered more by the Twitterati than, perhaps, other non-internet media due to the specific implications of the policy on platform use and cost. Moreover, this suggests that President Trump's biggest win of the year may not have been his tax plan but the attention he reoriented Twitter users to on the issue of taking a knee (or not) when the National Anthem is being played. It speaks to his unique power on the platform to move users to engage on his issues.

Avoid/Engage on the Bully's Pulpit

This leads us to my final observation of the first four months: no single voice or entity dominates Twitter like Donald J. Trump does but it does vary week-to-week. Set aside in all of this analysis is the simple fact that the President of the United States' platform on Twitter is consistently the loudest each week, and in most weeks even louder than the hottest of the Hot Topics we tracked. On the one hand, it is a given that whomever is POTUS would have the largest single media voice of any politician in America. But on the other hand, the sheer volume of Trump's footprint on Twitter is staggering. Remember, top Senators were ranging just over 10,000 tweets and House members at over 5,000. Trump averaged close to 6.5 million per week.



If tweet volume is a measure of the bully pulpit on Twitter, then it would be wise for public figures to remember that being the target of Donald J. Trump is perilous. Again, using Jeff Flake as an example, being on Trump's wrong side can be politically fatal for a Republican

in a toss-up race, particularly one with a tough primary opponent. Over the past few months, Trump has also taken aim at Sen. Dean Heller (R-NV), who was [trailing his primary opponent](#) in late October, pushing him closer to the abyss. Trump jibed at Heller about his [weak support](#) for repealing/replacing Obamacare. Heller's "apex" was the week of November 30 to December 6 where he was up close to 700% over the previous week because he [staked out a bipartisan position](#) against Trump on the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP).

But for Democrats, engaging the bully may be a wise strategy, if pulled off well. Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand (D-NY) successfully took on Trump via her support of the #MeToo movement, [drawing the president's ire](#) on the platform and [raising her profile](#) from junior senator to [possible 2020 contender](#). Gillibrand extended that with her [tweet-sparking takedown](#) of fellow Senator Al Franken. This test case, covered in our December 7-13 issue, showed tweet volume about Gillibrand spiking 844 percent from the previous week to over 744,000 tweets.

Conclusions

#NeverTweet? Maybe not that far. But #AvoidTwitter during that quiet time before the primary season? Perhaps. From the first four months of research for The ECHO it is clear that staying out of the trending lists for Senators and House endangered incumbents is a smart move ahead of the turn of the calendar. The hottest of topics each week are not necessarily the most important to the mid-terms or long-term evaluations of the Trump administration or his majorities in Congress. Finally, it is just as clear that Republicans in toss-up races ought to avoid the ire of President Trump while it might just be a smart, brand-building move to take him on if you are a Democrat.

In future research for The ECHO we are going to be more mindful of "boom" issues and track them longer even if we do not report them out week-to-week. The long view of public policy does not seem to generate moments, other than final passage, that capture the politically-minded Twitter user's attention in the United States. What we will begin to track is the overall volume, over time, to get a better sense of what solidifies and what fizzles on the Twitter platform and offline.

Finally, we seek to broaden the scope of our monitoring, focusing in more on whom Trump has attacked. The New York Times has [tracked](#) who Trump has insulted on Twitter and it is a helpful starting point. One way proceed is to group certain kinds of targets such as media organizations, corporations, celebrities, and foreign leaders. With that kind of information, we can better answer questions like "Who should engage or avoid Trump on Twitter?" With additional support, we will also be able to broaden our inquiry within the realm of electoral politics to look at crowded congressional primary races, such as who will challenge Comstock in Virginia's 10th District, and post-primary match-ups during the fall general election campaigns.