#WeCouldHaveSeenThemComing

Trump, Sanders, and the undervalued metrics of Twitter followers and engagement
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  1. A Twitter following is a campaign asset from day one
  2. Growth rates in Twitter followings provide actionable evidence of campaign strength and weakness
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  4. The potential power of Twitter lives on past the end of campaigns.
  5. A hashtag is not the equivalent to a following or engagement activities.

• **Conclusion**
Key Takeaways

• Twitter followers were an early asset for both presumptive nominees, providing lessons for future candidates and observers.

• Donald Trump’s opening lead in Twitter followers previewed his quick rise in the polls over the Jeb Bush and the field.

• Bernie Sanders’ edge in engagement helped narrow the gap with Hillary Clinton.

• The number of followers continues to grow after campaigns suspend, foreshadowing potential strength in future races.

• Hashtags are moments, not campaigns.
Two Puzzles

How did Trump win?
How did Sanders get so close?

• Trump announced on June 16, one day after Jeb Bush, who led the field with only 10.8% while Trump was a non-factor. By July 20, Trump had taken a small lead over Bush (16.8% to 14.8%), which he held except for three days in November when he was tied with Ben Carson.

• Though never overtaking Clinton, Sanders narrowed the gap to within 1% on April 13 before it began to widen again after the Brooklyn debate the next night.
A Narrowing Race

Democratic Nomination Polling Averages: Candidate Announcements – Indiana Primaries

- Clinton’s early lead in followers, which she maintained through the Indiana primary, is not reflected in the polling.
- Though never overtaking Clinton, Sanders narrowed the gap to within 1% on April 13 before it began to widen again after the Brooklyn debate the next night.
- Growth in Twitter followers alone, therefore, is not sufficient to explain the narrowing race between Clinton and Sanders.
Opening Followers
From Candidate Announcements

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NAME</th>
<th>ANNOUNCEMENT</th>
<th>FOLLOWERS THAT DAY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ted Cruz</td>
<td>3/23/15</td>
<td>371,742</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hillary Clinton</td>
<td>4/12/15</td>
<td>3,208,701</td>
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<td>Marco Rubio</td>
<td>4/13/15</td>
<td>706,910</td>
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<td>Ben Carson</td>
<td>5/4/15</td>
<td>330,441</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bernie Sanders</td>
<td>5/26/15</td>
<td>41,732</td>
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<td>Jeb Bush</td>
<td>6/15/15</td>
<td>198,340</td>
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<tr>
<td>Donald Trump</td>
<td>6/16/15</td>
<td>2,997,242</td>
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<tr>
<td>John Kasich</td>
<td>7/21/15</td>
<td>75,445</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Both Clinton and Trump had significant early advantages over their respective fields, leading to higher name ID and potential support.

- Bernie Sanders opened with little more than half the followers of John Kasich but vaulted to third overall during the campaign.
From the beginning of their campaigns, both Clinton and Trump had millions more followers than other candidates, an indication of early strength that foretold the challenge rivals faced.

While both were well-known, Trump began the campaign well behind Clinton in followers but passed her in mid-October, growing at a much faster rate.

The only other candidate to become a threat to this dominance was Sanders but he grew at the same rate as Clinton, never able to close the gap. Cruz and Kasich never gained more followers than Carson and Rubio.

Valuable Asset
Twitter Follower Growth: Candidate Announcements – Indiana Primaries
Highly Engaged
Total Engagement Share: Candidate Announcements – Indiana Primaries

- Trump dominated his rivals in total engagement, defined by Crimson Hexagon as a combination of retweets, replies and mentions.
- Clinton and Sanders were closer in terms of total engagement, which varied on who was ahead during the campaign.
Powerful Echoes
Number of Twitter Retweets:
Candidate Announcements – Indiana Primaries

- One possible reason for the polls is the stronger echo of Sanders’ messaging on Twitter. Retweets are copies of what a candidate’s account posted, which can be viewed as a measure of engagement or enthusiasm.

- Sanders consistently outperformed Clinton on retweets, which are copies of what a candidate’s account posted. It is the clearest measure of candidate engagement on the platform – a direct echo.

- Moreover, Sanders earned more peaks in retweets than Clinton, suggesting he was able to negate his followers deficit with more engagement and enthusiasm, perhaps narrowing the polls.
Staying Power
Suspensions, Followers, and Engagement: Candidate Announcements – Indiana Primaries

- Marco Rubio, Ben Carson, and Jeb Bush gained followers after suspending their campaigns.
- While suspended campaigns lose total engagement (retweets + mentions + replies), we believe followers could reactivate it with a new candidacy.
Donald Trump’s run to the nomination was widely underestimated by other candidates, observers, and many voters. The strongest effort to stop him was reflected in the #NeverTrump Twitter hashtag, but it was too late.

Reaction to Trump’s victory in the South Carolina primary and the Michigan debate helped fuel the #NeverTrump hashtag which was included in well over 500k posts.

The #NeverTrump hashtag never became a campaign due to lack of a candidate to own it; it had one more moment at the end of the campaign with 141,659 posts on the day of the Indiana primary, a last gasp.
Recommendations

• **Never underestimate an opponent’s Twitter followers.** They should be viewed in terms of name identification and potential audience.

• **Engaging followers can help drive public support.** While the number of followers matters, high engagement can narrow a gap in polls.

• **Twitter can be an asset for future candidacies.** Even post-suspension, presidential candidate accounts still gain followers while engagement goes dormant.

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As for future in politics, well it’s nearly impossible for someone not in office to ever become a successful candidate for President. Right?
Future Research

• **Impact of partisan engagement:** Not all followers are supporters and not all retweets, replies, and mentions are endorsements. We will conduct further analysis on the partisan leanings of followers and tweets to determine if the mix is related to polling movement.

• **Analysis of Twitter content:** While volume matters, what is said may matter even more. We will be looking at which words and phrases drove the conversation on Twitter with an eye to recall, echoing, and campaign impact.