Tweeting for Votes: Campaigning in the Social Media Era

Project by Chris Lu for Professor Franz

Social media has become a powerful means of communication, so it is of no surprise that politicians have also turned to major media devices like Twitter to react to event, touch base with their supporters, and coordinate action. However, its influence on voters, how information spreads throughout the network, and deviation from previous campaign media tools, namely television ads, have not been thoroughly documented. Professor Franz of the Government Department intends to analyze how Twitter usage by Senate candidates, from content to the tone of the ads, compares to their utilization of more traditional campaign media tools. Thus, my contribution towards the overall project was to create a running program that collected the tweets of the Senate candidates for this November’s Senate elections.

Collecting tweets is achieved in two processes. First, one must retrieve these tweets, which is accomplished by connecting to Twitter’s API, which stands for Application Programming Interface. This essentially is a way for any person to access to the massive database of tweets and information of Twitter. There are many open source libraries that have already been created to access the API in different ways, so I simply used one of them as a backbone for my program to retrieve tweets. Regardless of the libraries’ variations, though, they all return a tweet in a format called JSON. This specific format is used, because it stores information in a compact and organize manner, which is great when you’re trying to pull information from the web, because you to be able to do so quickly. The second part of the code is to translate the tweet in JSON form into english and then organize the parts of the tweets that are wanted into some table. In this project, I used a MYSQL database, which is a locally created database in which I could easily retrieve information through the web and store it into the table. This allows for me to store the Tweets somewhere and ultimately download the data into an excel spreadsheet when I desire because it is locally created on my computer.

The final step would be to get the twitter user ID of every candidate campaign account. So once I execute the program though the command line, I simply keep the computer on and connected to the internet and whenever a candidate posts a tweet, the program will receive it and transfer it to the MYSQL table. There were some restrictions and specifications required when retrieving tweets from candidates. When requesting tweets with a user ID, the API will return all tweets related to that ID, including mentions of the user and retweets of his/her tweets. These, in their essence, are not directly words from the candidate or the campaign team, so we had to filter those out. Also, a number of primaries do not finish until September, and waiting for those races to finish would mean weeks of lost data, so in exchange for some superfluous data, we decided to track all active candidates. Finally, the program only retrieved tweets from the Republican and Democratic candidates.