Tweeting in defeat: How candidates concede and claim victory in 140 characters

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Abstract
The concession and victory speech is a ritual in American politics, described by Corcoran as a “rite of capitulation,” in which both candidates at the end of an election sanction the legitimacy of the process, agree on the outcome, and start the political transition. Concession and victory speeches emerged as a distinct convention in the television era, but as web services like Twitter take on a larger role in electoral politics, traditions like the concession are being adapted to new formats. The literature has identified a series of substantive and procedural conventions for conceding and claiming victory, but it is unclear how these conventions hold up as technology evolves. An examination of 200 Twitter feeds from congressional, senatorial, and gubernatorial candidates during the 2010 midterm elections shows that while candidates touch some of the traditional concession themes, the procedural rules to concession have not migrated unchanged to the online world.

Keywords
Concession speeches, online politics, political rituals, political self-presentation, social media, Twitter

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American elections unfold in a series of rituals. From town halls to convention speeches to televised debates, the media and voters evaluate candidates, at least in part, by how they meet expectations at significant moments. The final ritual may be the speeches candidates make on Election Night, after the votes have been counted and the winners separated from the losers. Concessions represent a democratically important moment, when participants in the election sanction the result and start to bridge the divides created during the campaign (Corcoran, 1994). For politicians, these moments also represent a first opportunity to shape the interpretation of the election as they chart a course forward, or start to rebuild an image tarnished by defeat.

The presence of the media remains an indispensable element of the ritual of concession and acceptance. Communication between politicians and the public has always been mediated by the news media (Bimber and Davis, 2003). Advances in media technology tend to cause the ways politicians deliver messages to evolve (Murphy, 2008). The rise of the internet marked a transformational moment in media technology, with implications for the practice of politics. Politicians have been active on the internet since it gained wide adoption in the 1990s (Davy, 2010) and followed users onto social network sites such as Twitter and Facebook (TweetCongress, n.d.). These shifts in media carry implications for the practice of politics in the internet era.

This project grapples with the question of evolving and emerging norms using the case of post-election speeches, a lightly studied political ritual. Specifically, we examine how the conventions of political concession, norms developed in large part for television, translate to the social media context. We find that only a few of the consistent themes identified in the concession speech literature migrated to social media, while many of the procedural conventions such as speaking order have been discarded almost entirely. These findings have implications for the practice of politics online, and especially in the social media environment.

**Literature review**

**Norms of the concession ritual**

Ruth Ann Weaver’s analysis of Election Night concession and victory speeches in presidential races (1982) remains the basis for scholarship on victory and concession speeches. Starting from 1952, she traces the evolution of what she terms the “reciprocal ritual” that brings elections to their symbolic conclusions. This ritual includes both procedural conventions (for instance, the defeated candidate concedes before the winning candidate claims victory), and substantive conventions (the consistent themes candidates sound in these speeches, such as thanking supporters and calling for unity). Table 1 lists the ways candidates fulfill the conventions of concession as identified by Weaver. Welch (1999) found the use of specific substantive expressions by candidates varied with the circumstances of the election. Thematic differences emerged based on margin of defeat, with losing incumbents and challengers defeated by small margins stressing unity, and those who lose by large margins promising to continue fighting for the issues raised in the campaign.

Contemporary studies of concessions (since 2000) find many of Weaver’s themes in the texts of speeches, despite unusual circumstances. For instance, when Al Gore
delivered his concession speech five weeks after Election Day, he devoted more time than any other candidate to unity and tributes to American democracy (Ritter and Howell, 2001). Lakoff (2001) said that George W. Bush’s victory speech hit many of the same themes as well, emphasizing the reestablishment of consensus and healing. The close 2004 presidential election saw the inclusion of vice presidential candidates in the concession/acceptance speech process for the first time (Willyard and Ritter, 2005). Defeated Democratic vice presidential candidate John Edwards vowed to continue to fight as he introduced John Kerry, who gave a traditional concession, perhaps reflecting their own future ambitions. Despite the historic nature of the 2008 election, speeches by Barack Obama and John McCain stuck to the same traditional themes (Howell, 2011).

Outside general elections at the presidential level, similar rules appear to apply. Without using Weaver’s typology, Devlin (1982) identified many of the same themes as well, emphasizing the reestablishment of consensus and healing. The close 2004 presidential election saw the inclusion of vice presidential candidates in the concession/acceptance speech process for the first time (Willyard and Ritter, 2005). Defeated Democratic vice presidential candidate John Edwards vowed to continue to fight as he introduced John Kerry, who gave a traditional concession, perhaps reflecting their own future ambitions. Despite the historic nature of the 2008 election, speeches by Barack Obama and John McCain stuck to the same traditional themes (Howell, 2011).

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Table 1. Conventions of concession.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Convention</th>
<th>Expressions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Substantive themes | • Declares result formally  
                              • Calls for unity  
                              • Tribute to democracy  
                              • Affirmation of campaign  
                              • Acknowledgement of role transformation  
                              • Thanking supporters |
| Procedural steps   | • Loser concedes first  
                              • Candidates acknowledge concession publicly  
                              • Loser waits until after polls have closed to concede\(^a\) |

Adapted from Weaver (1982).
\(^a\)Weaver identified waiting until the polls closed on the West Coast as an emerging norm of concession, noting that Jimmy Carter had been roundly criticized for conceding defeat to Ronald Reagan at 9:50 Eastern Time, while the polls were still open on the West Coast. By 1992, the candidates had committed to waiting until 11 p.m. Eastern to acknowledge a result (Knickerbocker, 1992).

While evidence at the congressional level is scarce, scholars and casual observers of politics seem to agree that similar rituals and norms apply. Scott Farris, who wrote a book on the topic of losing candidates, suggests that “the ritual is followed to the degree that the losing candidate believes they have media attention and therefore are on their best behavior” (personal correspondence, 2013). For that reason, “remarks mimic” those at the presidential level. Losing candidates in particular
tend to legitimize the result with some expression of support for the winning candidate and
an acceptance of the result… [and] most also do talk about what they believe their candidacy
was about and express pride in bringing new people into the process or forging a unique
coopilation.

In addition, we reviewed video and transcripts of concessions and acceptance in
downticket races, finding the presence of these conventions in those addresses. Local
news accounts from Election Night 2010 obtained through Lexis-Nexis – for races rang-
ing from statewide to local – also quoted candidates employing the conventions identi-
ified in the literature. Many news accounts also noted contact between the candidates,
suggesting candidates also follow the procedural rules laid out by Weaver.

**Concession as media ritual**

Corcoran’s 1994 examination of the rhetoric of defeat extends Weaver’s work by exam-
ing the role the mass media play in the process. Election Night is primarily a media
ritual (Kellner, 2009), and still largely mediated through the television production pro-
cess. Corcoran argues that the progression of results through the night leads to what he
calls a “rite of capitulation”. The news media enforce the concession ritual, which is “an
integral, legitimating feature of a presidential election. It must be performed at a requi-
site time and invoke key themes, and it must be gracious”. As Corcoran notes, the theme
of grace in defeat is often reinforced by media commentators when they analyze the
speech and the winning candidates, who often describe the defeated candidate’s phone
call as “gracious”. Corcoran’s examination of Australian elections suggests that the
country’s press has imported the American media’s demand for closure and emphasis on
grace.

At the same time, Corcoran identifies the way media advances shape the way mes-
gages are delivered. Weaver’s study of the concession ritual begins with the 1952 elec-
tion, the first race in which television achieved wide adoption. This may also be seen in
other contexts. Murphy (2008) writes that State of the Union addresses became more
accessible to a general audience once the speech started being regularly broadcast on
radio during the Franklin Roosevelt administration.

The literature appears to be limited to presidential concession, both because of the
importance of the office and the considerable media attention that accompanies the end
of a presidential election. Yet, as described above, there is no reason this framework
should not extend to other downticket races. Because media rarely cover such races in
depth (see, for example, Gulati et al., 2004; Warren, 2008), many concession speeches
will be unavailable to the public (or at least to the national public), and those that are
available may be systematically different from those that are not. This study thus extends
the framework in two important ways – by considering non-presidential races, and by
examining the move to social media concession rituals. However, given our strong
expectations that concession rituals at all levels should be relatively similar, the major
contribution is considering the move to social media and its effect on concession
rituals.
Politics moving online

No less a person than Karl Rove, in an editorial in the Wall Street Journal, remarked, “campaigns are only starting to understand how to use the web and social-networking tools to make video and other data go viral—moving not just to those on a campaign’s email list but to the broader public” (Rove, 2011). Understanding how political elites are adjusting to the new media environment is increasingly important as a greater percentage of candidates and campaigns adopt new tools and strategies online (Williams and Gulati, 2010).

Increased usage of new media technologies by the electorate at large puts greater pressure on lawmakers and candidates for public office to likewise include new media in their electoral strategies. While only 6 percent of the United States population used Twitter in 2010, those users tended to be well educated and relatively well-off in terms of household income, suggesting they are more likely to turn out to vote (Smith and Rainie, 2010). This is thus a particularly attractive sub-population for candidates for public office to target.

Moreover, mainstream media outlets have begun to regularly report on Twitter messages posted by political elites. Such coverage is sometimes quite visible, particularly when public officials make controversial statements via Twitter (Wallsten, 2011). Mainstream media coverage of tweets thus increases the visibility, audience, and importance of Twitter use by public officials seeking publicity.

Twitter and new media adoption by members of Congress

Scholarship has now begun to consider what predicts adoption and frequency of use of Twitter as a political communication tool. In December 2010, 251 members of Congress and the Senate had established Twitter accounts (Tweetcongress.org, n.d.) with varying degrees of activity and interactivity. Members of Congress are more likely to adopt Twitter as a communication tool if their party leaders urge them to, if they are young, or if they serve in the Senate (Lassen and Brown, 2010), and are likely to pattern their own adoption on the perceived success or failure of others like them (Chi and Yang, 2010a). Republicans currently are more likely than their Democratic counterparts to adopt Twitter, and campaign resources also play a role in adoption (Gulati and Williams, 2010). There is evidence that members of Congress may use Twitter in order to reach out to constituents (Chi and Yang, 2010b). However, very little work has yet examined how members of Congress actually employ Twitter, let alone how they and their challengers use it specifically in the context of an election. We hope to fill that gap, especially as it becomes increasingly clear that “It will have huge implications on how campaigns are run, who we elect, and what kind of country we become” (Rove, 2011).

We therefore propose to analyze the Twitter feeds of 200 candidates for Senator, Congress or Governor, applying the framework of concession and victory rituals suggested by the literature. This analysis will reflect Weaver’s dichotomy between substantive and procedural conventions of concession and victory messages, and thus pose the following questions:
RQ1: Do victorious and defeated candidates adhere to the substantive conventions of concession and defeat messages within Twitter? Specifically, do they address the following: formal declaration of victory or defeat; call for unity; tribute to democracy; affirming the campaign; acknowledging the transformed roles for the candidates; and thanking supporters?

RQ2: Are the procedural conventions of concession and victory messages observed on Twitter? Specifically, does the losing candidate speak (tweet) first and do the candidates mention contact with each other to formally conclude the election? Do candidates use Twitter’s technological functionality to communicate with followers?

Methods

In order to analyze the tweeting conventions of Election Night, we first had to identify such tweets. To begin, we created a universe of nearly all political candidates for national office in the 2010 midterm elections (all those running for Senate (75 candidates) or Governor (76 candidates) and a sample of candidates for the House of Representatives (404 candidates)), generating a list of over 500 candidates. We then restricted this sample to only those candidates for national political office who had active Twitter accounts that we could identify from some objective source (usually the candidate’s own website; we also considered publicly available lists such as http://govtwit.com/list/all/tags/the-hill). This resulted in a final sample of 73 candidates for Senate, 74 candidates for Governor, and 249 candidates for the House of Representatives. Over the course of the 2010 election, we archived over 6 million tweets from these candidates and their followers.

This project focused on a subsample of 613 tweets, posted to campaign Twitter feeds of each of those candidates at the conclusion of the 2010 midterm elections. All candidates were either members of the two major parties, or else Independent or third-party candidates with credible candidacies. The sample incorporated 83 losing candidates and 117 winning candidates. There were 75 Democrats, 121 Republicans, and four Independent or write-in candidates. The 200-candidate sample included 147 challengers (current officeholders seeking higher office were classified as challengers). For each candidate, the collection period began at the time the first polls closed in their state on 2 November 2010 (election day) and continued through 7 p.m. Eastern Time on 4 November 2010 (in order to capture the full range of candidate reactions after the election had concluded). Each tweet was then coded for its adherence to the procedure described above, as well as for the substantive content of the tweet (See Appendix 1 for details).

To examine substantive content, we analyzed each tweet in the sample for the presence of the six substantive themes of post-election messages identified in the literature: formal declaration of the result, message of unity, tribute to democracy, affirming the campaign, thanking supporters, and role transformation following the election. Coders also identified sub-themes. For result tweets, coders noted whether candidates simply declared victory, or whether they cited a media outlet’s projection of the result. In addition to general thanking of supporters, coders also measured direct interactions between the candidate Twitter account and individual constituent accounts. Additionally, we identified statements within tweets about the status of a candidate’s specific race, updates on
the national picture, and references to either political party. Further, the presence of links in each tweet was noted, and coders followed those links to determine whether they linked to longer statements, photo galleries, or news articles. All references to an election party, or election-gathering of supporters, were noted.

Two coders each analyzed slightly more than half the data for the presence of these conventions. To test agreement, each coder’s dataset contained an overlapping set of 48 tweets (roughly 8 percent of the total sample), which were analyzed across 19 characteristics. In the overlapping set, intercoder agreement surpassed 96 percent (878 agreements in 912 decisions, Cohen’s kappa = .81). In the overlapping set, the coders met regarding disagreements and reached consensus about the classification of those tweets.

For the procedural tweets, a trained coder examined the Twitter chronology of the 47 races in which multiple candidates’ feeds were collected. In each, the coder was asked to note if the losing candidate conceded before the winning candidate claimed victory, and whether either candidate mentioned his or her opponent, either by referring to a conversation or by using the @username Twitter convention. Four of the races were analyzed initially and then excluded for the project; three because the outcome was still in doubt at the time data collection ceased – the Alaska and Washington Senate races and the election in Arizona’s 8th congressional district – and a fourth – the Florida Senate race – because while two feeds in a three-way were race were collected, the winner’s was not.

**Results**

**Substantive tweets**

**RQ1: Substantive conventions of concession speeches.** In the aftermath of the 2010 election, candidates did not generally use Twitter to discuss the election results (Table 2). In our sample, less than a third of the losing candidates formally acknowledged defeat (27 of 83). Among winners, who might seem more likely to talk about the result on social media, 70 of 117 (60 percent) made explicit reference to victory on Twitter. Challengers and incumbents were equally likely to explicitly acknowledge the results of their races (47 percent by challengers, 45 percent by incumbents). When candidates tweeted specifically about victory and defeat, they did not rely on media reports about the election but rather claimed victory without a source. Almost 85 percent of claims (82 of 97 declarations) were personal, including 26 of the 27 declarations of defeat.

The most common use of Twitter in the post-election period was to thank supporters and volunteers for their work. In this study, 153 out of 200 (77 percent) candidates tweeted at least one message of thanks to their supporters. Out of 153 thankers, nearly a third (45) sent multiple messages formally thanking supporters, led by the nine messages of thanks sent by victorious congressional candidate Sandy Adams, a candidate in Florida’s 24th congressional district. Among those who did not thank their supporters, no clear pattern emerged along the lines of election results (24 winners, 23 losers declined to thank their supporters), party (27 Republicans and 19 Democrats), or electoral margin (Thankers $M = 2.93$, Non-thankers $M = 1.86$, $p = .73$).
Further, nearly a quarter of defeated candidates in the sample used the post-election period to affirm the work of the campaign, as in “A big thanks to all the supporters and volunteers! We put up a good fight!” from Utah gubernatorial candidate Peter Corroon (emphasis ours). We observed significant differences in victory margin among those who affirmed the campaign (Affirmed $M = -5.74$, Non-affirmers $M = 4.16$, $p = .006$). This reflects the traditions of the offline concession. Welch (1999) argued that candidates who have been soundly defeated tend to focus on affirming the work of the campaign in their concessions. Given the assumed audience of supporters reflected in the impulse to thank observed earlier, this makes sense.

Winning candidates very quickly turned their attention to the challenges ahead. For instance, after winning the race for Indiana’s ninth congressional district, Todd Young tweeted, “THANKS! It will be my honor and privilege to represent the people of the Ninth District.” Of the 58 role transformation tweets coded, 49 came from winning candidates, although some defeated candidates also made use of the convention. New York Senate challenger Joe DioGuardi wrote after his loss to Kirstin Gillibrand, “I will continue my mission in the private sector... – Joe”. Challengers were especially likely to tweet about their change of role, as 37 of 81 of non-incumbent winners (46 percent) began to speak about their new jobs and goals. This may be a sign that they are eager for their followers to view them in a new light.

Virtually absent are the themes of “Tribute to Democracy” and “Unity”. Only one of the 200 candidates sampled – Hawaii congressional candidate Charles Djou – made reference to democracy. Djou wrote, “Mahalo to everyone who volunteered, voted and sacrificed so much over the past year. Hawaii is better for it, and our democracy is stronger”. To be fair, this may be a difficult concept to translate into a mere 140 characters. Similarly, we identified only three unity messages out of 613 tweets in the sample,

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2. Substantive conventions by office sought and result.</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Average Tweets</th>
<th>Result stated</th>
<th>Unity Call</th>
<th>Tribute to Democracy</th>
<th>Affirm Campaign</th>
<th>New Role</th>
<th>Thank Supporters</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All Losers</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>2.13</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Congress Losers</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>2.05</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Governor Losers</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>2.79</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senate Losers</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>1.79</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Winners</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>3.73</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Congress winners</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>2.95</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Governor winners</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>5.48</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senate winners</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>3.67</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Numbers in the table represent the number of candidates that employed a specific convention.
one by Djou and two others from gubernatorial races, including Oregon’s John Kitzhaber, who tweeted before the results were known “Thank you, Oregon. Polls are closed. Our future is wide open and we’ll work together to solve our toughest problems”. Kitzhaber beat his opponent, Chris Dudley, by just one point in what was one of the closest elections in the state’s history. Both of these conventions tend to be connected to the close elections (Welch, 1999). On Election Night 2010, they barely registered on Twitter.

In terms of margin of victory, Table 3 demonstrates that the conventions only partially translated to Twitter. Losers were more likely than winners to affirm the campaign, which is predicted by the literature. We found no clear difference between the practices of close losers (those who lost by five or fewer percentage points) and those who lost by six or more (25 and 28 percent, respectively). Meanwhile, winners focused more on role transformation, a tendency more pronounced in the bigger winners (Close winners: 34 percent, Big winners: 45 percent). The emphasis on thanking supporters occurred across groups, although only 64 percent of candidates who lost by five points or fewer thanked their supporters while the number was about 75 percent in the other groups.

**Procedural tweets**

**RQ2: Procedural conventions of Twitter.** As discussed during the findings related to RQ1, actual acknowledgements of defeat are relatively rare by candidates on Twitter. It follows then that adherence to the procedural conventions of concession and victory identified by Weaver would not apply regularly on Twitter. These conventions include formal concession by the defeated candidate, followed by the winner speaking, with both acknowledging contact between the two. Only four out of 43 races saw both requirements of the procedural conventions – loser speaking first, candidates referring to contact with each other – observed on Twitter. Of those four races, three were gubernatorial elections (in Georgia, Idaho, and Wisconsin). This is too small a number to draw any formal conclusions, but the possibility of concordance between presidential and gubernatorial races (particularly since they are both contests for executive office) is intriguing.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Average Tweets</th>
<th>Result Stated</th>
<th>Unity Call</th>
<th>Tribute to Democracy</th>
<th>Affirm Campaign</th>
<th>New Role</th>
<th>Thank Supporters</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Loss by &gt;5 (58)</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loss by &lt;5 (25)</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Win by &lt;5 (29)</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Win by &gt;5 (88)</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>40</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Numbers in the table represent the number of candidates that employed a specific convention.
Only 13 of the 43 races included formal concession, in which defeat was explicitly confirmed. In these cases, the concession occurred on average about 11.7 hours after the polls closed, with a range from 3 hours to 22 hours. Candidates tweeted a mention of the opposing candidate in 11 of the 43 races, which either took the form of using the person’s given name or their Twitter username.

Another theme from the literature, which is that losing candidates speak briefly, did hold true on Twitter. Losing candidates averaged 2.1 tweets over the course of the observation period (the mean was the same for Republicans and Democrats), while winning candidates averaged 3.7 tweets per candidate \((p = .004)\). Winning gubernatorial candidates were the most active, with 5.5 tweets on average. Defeated incumbents posted an average of 1.7 messages, while victorious challengers posted 3.9 times on average.

We also looked at the other information posted on their Twitter feeds (Table 4). The literature suggests that the procedural conventions developed at the presidential level, in part to suit the needs of television programmers. Candidates and their staffs serve as programmers in Twitter, potentially developing a new set of norms. More than one in six tweets in this sample was a status update on the candidate’s own race. For instance, Connecticut gubernatorial candidate Dan Malloy used Twitter to point out the cities where polls would be held open late: “Polling stations in Bridgeport are open until 10 pm tonight due to earlier problems. Please go back to your poll and vote”. California Senate candidate Carly Fiorina tweeted, “To be clear there are no election results yet in CA. Anything else reported is false”, right after polls closed in California. Write-in candidate Lisa Murkowski gave a running total of the election returns and then used Twitter early on to claim victory in advance of the court challenges. In these cases, Twitter acted as a dedicated channel of information for users who had opted in to these updates.

**Table 4.** Other uses of Twitter by candidates in post-election period.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Status update</th>
<th>Mention opponent</th>
<th>Election party</th>
<th>Links</th>
<th>Link to statement</th>
<th>Link to media report</th>
<th>Link to photos</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All Losers</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Congress</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Governor</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senate</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Winners</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>11</td>
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<tr>
<td>Congress</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>13</td>
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<td>6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Governor</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senate</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Numbers in the table represent the number of candidates that employed a specific convention.
Some candidates spent much of Election Night talking about other races around the country. South Carolina Senator Jim DeMint won his election by 35 points, but made no mention of that on his Twitter feed. Rather, he sent five Election Night tweets, individually congratulating newly elected Senators Rand Paul, Marco Rubio, Ron Johnson, Mike Lee, and Pat Toomey on their victories and touting their conservative credentials – “Congrats to Mike Lee. He knows the Constitution is the road map for changing the course of our country”.

Ed Martin, a narrowly defeated Republican candidate in Missouri’s 3rd congressional district, used his post-election tweets to link to stories about the magnitude of the Republican landslide victory.

In the aftermath of elections, politicians generally seemed eager to share information with their followers. During the post-election period, 135 of 200 candidates (67.5 percent) posted links on their Twitter feeds (Table 3), with 290 of the 613 tweets coded overall containing hyperlinks. Although winners and losers were equally likely to post links, they tended to send users to different places. Losers generally sent people to more detailed statements on their personal web spaces (either Facebook or the official campaign website). Winners also engaged in this activity, although they were more likely to send their followers to articles from newspaper or television websites or photo galleries. In addition, 33 candidates tweeted about their Election Night watch parties. In these tweets they both invited supporters to attend the parties and gave them a window into the festivities.

Discussion

Corcoran defines the mass media as an active participant in the performance of Election Night rituals, focusing on the interplay between the media and the candidates. The concession literature suggests that specific ritual practices developed to meet the needs of television. A set speaking order ensures that candidates do not speak at the same time, so television news can give multiple candidates the opportunity to speak uninterrupted. Magnanimity in defeat and victory acknowledges that a significant portion of the audience (for either a concession or a victory speech) did not support the speaker. The rise of social media in politics, however, turns these assumptions on their head. Table 5 shows the conventions that have migrated from traditional media to social media.

Politicians have used sites like Twitter and Facebook as channels to reach potential voters beyond traditional journalistic outlets. The trade-off for this increased control over messages is a smaller and less ideologically diverse audience. We find that this change in medium, including the assumptions about the audience, alters the way the concession/acceptance ritual plays out on Twitter. Specifically, the emphasis on thanking supporters above all else in the post-election period may be a sign that politicians view their Twitter followings as primarily supportive. This assumption has been supported in studies of audience during this period in both the United States and the United Kingdom. Golbeck and Hansen (2011) found that Twitter followings for members of Congress tend to match that politician ideologically. Boutet et al. (2013) found that supporters of different parties behaved markedly differently on Twitter. The partisan nature of this form of information exchange carries implications for the practice of politics in the social media environment.
On Twitter, followings are fragmented and self-selecting, comprised of those who opt in to receiving a specific politician’s messages. Therefore, politicians are not worried about using Twitter to attempt to heal the divides that naturally crop up during elections. The choices made by Twitter users about which politicians to follow may, in fact, be a symbol of the divide. Speaking through media can carry messages to broader audiences. The politicians in this study tweeted at distinct groups of followers that may overlap with their opponents’ followings only partially, if at all. This is especially apparent when looking at the procedural tweeting results.

The speaking order conventions may be a nod to television’s requirements that only one candidate speaks at a time. Yet implicit in turn-taking is an understanding that supporters of one candidate care about what the other candidate has to say. The feeds analyzed in this project reinforce this understanding about distinct audiences; ignoring the procedural niceties on Twitter suggests that this is not a medium through which candidates expect to interact. Rather, winners tend to share their good news right away, expressing what Corcoran referred to as “the gambler’s delirium” that comes with winning. The lack of urgency in concession may suggest an avoidance of a painful and unpleasant reality, which is potentially avoidable when one does not necessarily have to stand before the cameras and concede. The nature of Twitter allows defeated candidates to address the public in their own timeframe; there are no requirements to speak just after primetime in downticket races. Only 31 out of 200 candidates sampled here made any reference to their opponents in the aftermath of the election. Very few of them did so using the @username conventions, which means that politicians are not directing their followers to their opponents.

In the relatively rare instances when opponents did refer to each other on Twitter, the messages were generally gracious in tone. Some defeated candidates issued short congratulatory tweets, such as Idaho gubernatorial candidate Keith Allred, who tweeted simply, “Allred congratulates Otter (link removed)”. Victorious candidates tended to refer to conversations with their opponents. For instance, Kansas senatorial winner Jerry Moran tweeted, “Thank you, @lisaforkansas for the gracious phone call. I admire your passion for public service and willingness to serve Kansas”. Scott Tipton, the winner in Colorado’s third congressional district tweeted, “Just spoke w/Congressman Salazar

Table 5. Conventions of concession expressed on Twitter.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Convention</th>
<th>Expressions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Substantive themes</td>
<td>• Declares result formally</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Calls for unity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Tribute to democracy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Affirmation of campaign</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Acknowledgement of role transformation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Thanking supporters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Procedural steps</td>
<td>• Loser concedes first</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Candidates acknowledge concession publicly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Loser waits until after polls have closed to concede</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Bolded conventions are those that appeared regularly on Twitter during the 2010 cycle.
who wished me well & expressed confidence in my ability to represent the 3rd CD in Washington Thank you all”.

On the substantive side we see a very similar phenomenon. The most common use of Twitter in this sample, more common than even acknowledging the outcome of the race, is the thanking of supporters. This suggests that politicians understand their Twitter audiences as supporters and partisans. For intuitive reasons, thanking supporters is an important message from both winners and losers. The concept of a generally supportive Twitter audience is further reinforced by the lack of messages about political unity or tributes to democracy. High-minded statements about the political system and its virtues allow losing politicians to garner praise from media observers. Such stagecraft, however, is unnecessary on Twitter, and the number of neutral observers watching likely is small. It may also reflect the distinction between legislative and executive in office, which carry differing expectations of reaching out to the other side. Similarly, for the defeated candidate, the next most common substantive convention is affirming the campaign. For the victor, it is the discussion of role transformation, assuming the new role and allowing supporters to observe them adopting this new mantle. Both results are consistent with the idea that candidates tend to speak to discrete audiences via Twitter.

The presence of discrete audiences points to a changing media landscape. One challenge on the theory side of this study is the virtual absence of Election Night studies on races below the presidential level. The closest we could find was Corcoran’s study of Election Night speeches by winning and losing party leaders in Australia, which has a version of the Westminster system. The elections are legislative, although the outcome determines who will take over as prime minister. The paucity of studies mirrors the paucity of real-time news coverage of races below the presidential level. In a midterm election cycle, there are about 500 distinct federal- and state-level races. Individual races may draw national media attention, but generally are locally situated, and coverage may vary from market to market (Gulati et al., 2004). It may be that, in general, Twitter may be a place to look for information about specific House races. Adding to their importance is the fact that these messages are controlled by the campaigns themselves, and lack the traditional gatekeeping and analysis we have come to expect from election coverage. This makes this subject especially worthy of continued study, especially as platforms like Twitter and Facebook take on a more central role in politics and political organizing.

The presidential focus of the literature does raise legitimate questions about whether Weaver’s schematics are the proper lens through which to analyze the Twitter feeds of House, Senate, and gubernatorial elections. Voters have different expectations of their congressperson and their president. In the aftermath of an election, each would be expected to sound different notes about the meaning of the election and their visions of the future. Yet when seeking to describe evolving media norms, it makes sense to start with the current expectations. The concession speeches from the presidential level provide that basis, as it is the only situation in which voters tend to encounter this genre of speech. That said, the idea of public concession may be largely new to downticket races. Finding a partial translation of the genre from one medium to another may be expected, especially early in Twitter’s career as a campaign tool. The emphasis on thanking supporters may say more about the media platform employed than the democratic necessities of healing following an election. The absence of themes like unity and tributes to democracy may reflect the
relative paucity of competitive congressional districts. Further studies of downticket concession speeches are needed in order to explore these factors further.

Social media also open avenues for studying the reception of concession messages. In traditional media, the end-of-election ritual is seen as bestowing legitimacy on an election. Given the assumption of partisan audience in the content found here and findings about audience from other research, it would be important to determine whether adaption of the victory/concession ritual to social media may lead to narratives of contestation rather than acceptance of the result as a fair outcome.

We also find it noteworthy that declarations about the results of the race tended to be in personal statements rather than links to media reports. Pew has found that sharing links is the third most common use of Twitter, with 55 percent of users linking and 12 percent saying they do so daily (Smith and Rainie, 2010). Indeed, we found that close to half the tweets in our sample contained a link. It is interesting that for this particular type of tweet, links are not generally employed. Certainly a study focusing on the linking practices of candidates and elected officials on Twitter would fill in our understanding of this idea.

**Conclusion**

This study examined a very new medium of communication; 2010 marked the first election cycle in which Twitter was in wide adoption, particularly by candidates. In describing use of the service around Election Night 2010, we have established a baseline for understanding changes in this medium over time. As candidates become more familiar and comfortable with the medium, we are likely to see changes in the way in which they use microblogging within the context of elections.

We also believe we have illustrated the theme of evolving communication practices in politics. As the campaign environment becomes increasingly virtual, familiar practices will be conducted differently. Currently, the rituals of American politics that translate best to the online environment are those that see the candidate as a solitary voice. This reflects our conception of Twitter as a venue for politicians to speak to distinct audiences of potential voters or donors. A question for future election cycles will be how that conception evolves, as Twitter grows and political use of social media becomes more sophisticated.

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**Notes**

1. The sample included four third-party or Independent candidates with credible candidacies – Tom Tancredo (Colorado Governor), Lisa Murkowski (Alaska Senator Write-in), Charlie Crist (Florida Senate, Independent), and Lincoln Chaffee (Rhode Island Governor, Independent).
2. Across 19 variables.
3. This tweet would have been coded as both thanking supporters and affirming the campaign. The bolded section was the key to coding as affirming the campaign. The convention of bolding key passages will be continued throughout the paper.
4. Lee won election to the Senate in Utah.
5. Incidentally, Martin would go on to seek the 2012 Republican nomination for the Missouri Senate seat, Todd Akin’s vacated congressional seat, and finally Missouri attorney general and so was perhaps positioning himself for support in future candidacies by tweeting favorably about the Republican Party. He dropped out of the first two races, lost the third, and went on to be elected Chairman of the Missouri Republican Party.

References


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Appendix I

Codebook

Substantive

- Formal declaration of victory or defeat
  - Tweet must make reference to victory or defeat explicitly
- Call for unity
- Tribute to democracy
- Affirming the candidate’s campaign
  - Any mention of the work of the campaign or issue specific to the campaign
- Transformed roles for the candidates
  - Any reference to governing by winners, or future plans for losers
- Thanking supporters
  - Thanking as a collective
  - Thanking individuals through Twitter replies
- Other uses of Twitter
  - Status updates on race
  - References to opponent
  - References to either political party
  - Reference to an Election Party
  - Links out of Twitter
    - To a longer statement in a webspace controlled by the candidate or campaign
    - To a newspaper article to television website
    - To photo galleries
- Note any non-electoral tweets

Procedure tweets. Tweets are sorted by race and time.

- Did the conceder concede before the winner claimed victory?
  - For these purposes, a claim of victory includes a personal claim or the retweeting of results from a different source.
- Did the conceder mention speaking with the winner?
- Did the winner mention speaking with the conceder?
- Did either candidate use the @username convention about his/her opponent