Political Polarization and Platform Migration: A Study of Parler and Twitter Use By United States Congress Members

Jacqueline Otala, Gillian Kurtic, Isabella Grasso, Jeanna Matthews, Yu Liu, Golshan Madraki

Clarkson University, FATES 2021
Introduction

- Growing dissatisfaction with platform governance decisions on major platforms
- This has led to increasingly more attempts at mass migration from these major platforms
- One of the largest mass migration movements belong to the political right and conservative America towards Parler.
- Parler is a self-proclaimed free speech and saw a massive spike in June 2020 and November 2020
- Our study is focused on how Parler was used by U.S. Congress members before, during, and after January 6
The Goal

Study the large-scale movement from Twitter to Parler and its impact on US political polarization and political processes in the real world.

535 Members of United States Congress

December 10, 2020 to January 9th 2021
Updating our approach to misleading information

By Yoel Roth and Nick Pickles
Monday, 11 May 2020

New labels and warnings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Misleading Information</th>
<th>Label</th>
<th>Removal</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Disputed Claim</td>
<td>Label</td>
<td>Warning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unverified Claim</td>
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<td>No action*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>Severe</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Propensity for Harm
The Complexity of Content Moderation

- Not one-size-fits-all
- Algorithms often incorporates bias

Moderation is still needed to protect users from harmful content!
Conservatives grumbling about censorship say they’re flocking to Parler. They told us so on Twitter.

The pro-Trump Internet can’t stop talking about their exodus from Big Tech. But very few of them have actually abandoned their long time social media homes.

Fact-Checked on Facebook and Twitter, Conservatives Switch Their Apps

Since the election, millions have migrated to alternative social media and media sites like Parler, Rumble and Newsmax.

Mass Migration of Users to Parler Prompts Concerns Over Security and Disinformation

During the weekend after Election Day in the United States, over 4 million social media users pivoted to conservative social platforms such as Parler, MeWe, Rumble, and Gab, citing concerns over censorship on
Context on Parler

Community Guidelines:

- Heavy focus on free speech; “Create a social platform in the spirit of the First Amendment to the United States Constitution”
- 1. Do not use the platform for unlawful purposes 2. Do not spam

Concerns:

- Recommendations skewed politically conservative
- Features for identity protection exist (badges), MANY parody accounts exist
- Search engine is slow (glitchy), “suggested” hashtags are not dynamic or representative of currently popular hashtags being used
Young platform with little community guidelines that is overloaded with users of one political ideology.
Both are very similar in their functions. Twitter reshares are called “retweets” and Parler reshares are called “echos” same with “liking” by Twitter and “voting” by Parler.

- Biggest differences:
  - Community guidelines
  - Age of platform
  - Range of users on each platform

A notable section is the synthetic and manipulated media section.

Parler’s guidelines lack depth and nuance compared to Twitter.
On January 6, 2021 a mob of Trump supporters stormed the Capitol building in an attempt to overturn the defeat of President Donald Trump.

Five people were killed and dozens were arrested.

Many referred to this as an act of domestic terrorism.

Parler was accused of serving hate groups that used the platform to organize and strategize for this event.

Many demanded a change in moderation of illegal and violent activities on Parler.

By Sunday January 10 at 11:59 PM PST Amazon pulled their web services leaving Parler shutdown.
As such, our determination is that the two Tweets above are likely to inspire others to replicate the violent acts that took place on January 6, 2021, and that there are multiple indicators that they are being received and understood as encouragement to do so.

Amazon, Apple and Google Cut Off Parler, an App That Drew Trump Supporters

The companies pulled support for the “free speech” social network, all but killing the service just as many conservatives are seeking alternatives to Facebook and Twitter.
US Politicians on Parler vs. Twitter

104/535 US Representatives had both Parler and Twitter accounts.

18/104 active US Representatives, meaning that they had posted within the past week.
Of the 18 active US Representatives...

100% are Republicans.

83% objected to the Electoral College Vote on Jan. 6th.

Compared to the ≅ 24% of total representatives who objected.
Increase Rate of Followers and Following of US Politicians on Parler
Larger Takeaways

<50% Even among active Parler users, the majority of their posts were still on Twitter.

Politicians’ posts weren’t as extreme as they could have been.

Still clear evidence of underlying polarization and Congress members presence served to legitimate.
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For more questions, feel free to email gmadraki@clarkson.edu