

Social Media – a tool to empower minorities in American politics?

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1. Introduction: Social Media development in the United States

a) Paper goal

If we consider the fact, that more and more minorities without big financial resources and without a supporting influential network become part of the American power structure, like the congress. Moreover, if we consider the fact, that these minorities use social media instead. Does that mean, that social media is an instrument for candidates without influential networks and large amounts of money to increase their prominence and thereby ultimately leads to their election? Can social media be a tool to become successful a part the American power structures?

This scientific evaluation will follow this thesis and try to find answers. During this work, I spoke with experts in the fields of social media, American politics and campaigning. Some are quoted anonymously here and many findings of this work are based on statements by these experts. In addition to that, a lot of studies were evaluated to work out a serious base for this paper. To compare the answers, the base for the conversations was a consistent questionnaire.

b) Social Media in the USA

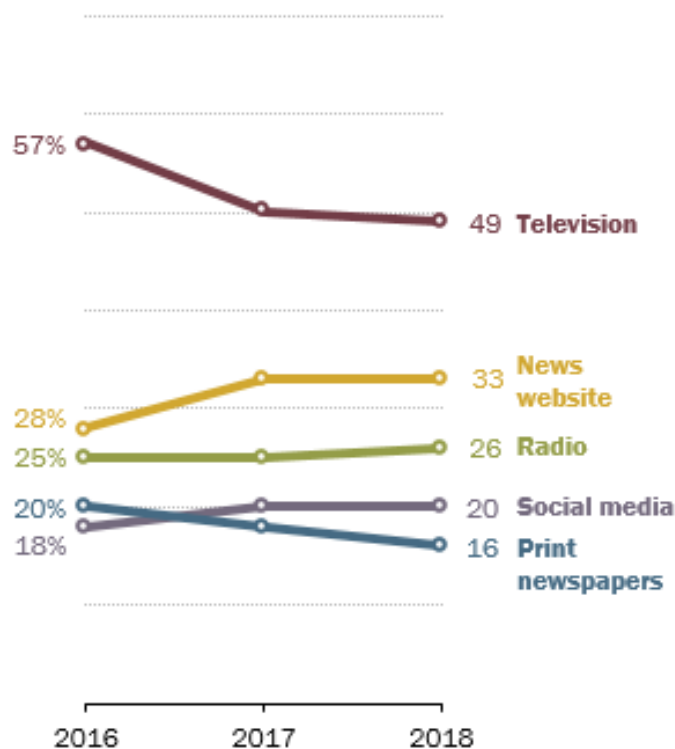
The shapes of our communication are changing all over the world and in the United States. So we see that social media has become a very important media channel, especially for young people. In the United States are 246.7 million social media users. Experts predict that number of social media users will be at 257.4 million in 2023.¹ Which would mean, that in 2023 nearly 80 percent of American citizens use social media. Already 90 percent of young people between the ages 18 and 29 use social media networks actively. Today Americans spend 1.14 hours per day on social media networks.² All experts I spoke with agree with it: "In the future, digital communication channels will play an increasingly important role".

¹ „United States: number of social network users 2017-2023“, statista.com, 2019

² „Social Media Use in 2018“, PEW Research Center, 2018

More Americans get news often from social media than print newspapers

% of U.S. adults who get news often on each platform

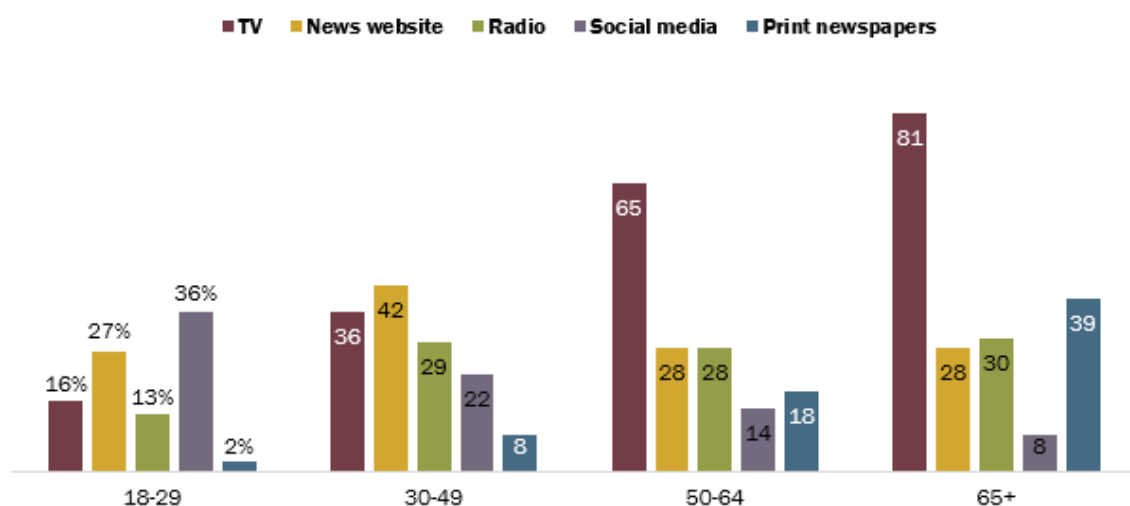


We also can see a big impact on the news landscape in America. For a long time television and newspapers were the general source of news. Daily newspapers and local TV were the common media in the early 2000s. 42 percent of the Americans got their news from newspaper and 59 percent watched local TV news.³ These numbers dropped sharply. In 2018, just 16 percent of Americans reported in a survey of the PEW Research Center, that they use newspapers as a source for news; in 2016 this value was 20 percent. For the first time since Pew Research Center began asking these questions. In 2017, the portion who got news via social media was about equal to the portion who got news from print newspapers. In 2018, social media networks finally overtook newspaper as a news source.

In addition, News diets differ drastically for younger and older Americans. A majority of young people between the ages of 18 and 29 use Social Media as their primary news source with 36 percent in 2018, followed by News Websites with 27 percent. Media channels such as television and newspaper are falling behind. Just 2 percent of young people between 18 and 29 are reading print newspapers anymore. After all television is remaining on the third place with 16 percent.

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³ „Where Americans Go for News“, PEW Research Center, 2019

c) Social Media in American politics

“Social Media is a megaphone, and you have to use it!” one of the experts told me. Therefore, we can see that social media networks become an important part of American ways of communication. Social media have also become ubiquitous communication channels for politicians. The numbers listed above make that clear. Especially for candidates during election campaigns. Platforms like Facebook and Twitter enable candidates to directly reach out to voters, mobilize supporters, and influence the public agenda. Social Media has become meanwhile an alternative channel to classical channels like newspapers, television or radio.

Already the campaign of Barack Obama in 2007 used social Media very intensive „ [...] as an integral part of its strategy, to raise money, and, more importantly, to develop a groundswell of empowered volunteers who felt they could make a difference. “⁴ We can certainly say that in 2007 with the Obama campaign social media has arrived as a tool in American politics. The Obama campaign „changed the way elections were run and would be run in the future. He and his team showed the power of social media and technology and more importantly, that individuals could make a difference if given the right tools and encouragement. “⁵

Social media Networks can bring certain possibilities in American politics: In contrast to most countries, election processes in the United States cost billions of Dollar. Not just becoming President is an expansive project. As an example: The election for President in 2016 cost about 2.7 Billion euro. In France, the election for President in 2012 cost 66 million euro and the election for parliament in Germany in 2013 just 65 million euro in total. Even to become a member of Congress or Senate it is necessary to exhaust a mass of resources. A study of MapLight shows, running for Congress in 2012 cost about 1.7 million dollar. Running for Senate costs even more, about 10,5 million dollar in 2012.⁶ Compared to Germany candidates for the Bundestag sometimes spend up to 70.000 euro.⁷ Moreover, not just financial resources are necessary to become a part of the American political power structure. There is also a supporting and influential network required, which helps either to collect money or to support candidates within the party. „It is more like trying to be inducted into a fraternity,” Brenda Carter, director of the Reflective Democracy Campaign, told The Washington Post. “I think the No. 1 problem is the political parties and other gatekeepers who choose candidates.”⁸ A study from 2013, published in the Journal of Economic Perspectives shows that the superrich, getting richer every day, have a increased willingness to spend large sums on election⁹. 66 percent of American people think that wealthy people have more influence on the election process. „If you want to have influence in the American political process“, Michelle Obama in 2014 advised an audience, „there's only one thing to do: Write a big, fat check...Write the biggest, fattest check that you can possibly write.” That means, if candidates does not have a network with rich and influential supporters, they are not able to run through a successful campaign.

Several candidates made history with their victories in the midterm elections 2018. Several minority candidates were voted into congress, such as Alexandria Ocasio Cortez, Ilhan Omar or Jahana Hayes. Most of these candidates were not able to summon up resources like their opponents. That is why it is even more remarkable, that since 2017 the number of minorities in Congress is rising. In 2015 just 15 percent of the new members of Congress were also members of a minority in 2017 already 34 percent of new members of Congress were also members of a minority.

⁴ „Obama and the power of social media and technology“, Victoria Chang, The business Review, 2010

⁵ „Obama and the power of social media and technology“, Victoria Chang, The business Review, 2010

⁶ „What's the Cost of a Seat in Congress?“, Jay Costa, maplight.org, 2013

⁷ „Wenn Wahlkampf eine Frage des Geldes ist“, Miguel Helm, Süddeutsche Zeitung, 2017

⁸ „Despite Diverse Demographics, Most Politicians Are Still White Men“, Alexa Lardieri, usnews.com, 2017

⁹ „Why Hasn't Democracy Slowed Rising Inequality?“, Bonica, McCarty, T. Poole, Rosenthal, 2013

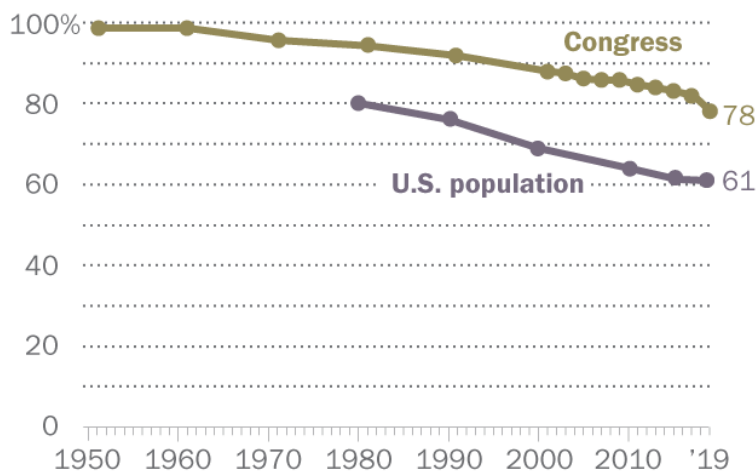
Social media networks were already important in the US presidential election 2007. In the presidential election 2017, especially Twitter was of a great importance. It can be assumed, that social media was of a great importance in the elections for Senate and Congress too. In the future social media will become more and more important in elections all over the world.

In the Democratic Party the proportion of minorities is significant higher than in the Republican Party. Additionally, the PEW Research center has discovered that Liberal Democrats are more likely than other groups to be politically active on social media.¹⁰ Democrats running for House, Senate and governor's seats in the midterm elections 2018 received a combined 15.1 million interactions on Facebook in the 30-day period, roughly three times the 5.4 million interactions received by Republican candidates.¹¹ Especially young members of minorities, such as Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez know how to use social media in their advantage.

2. Minorities in American politics

Even though the 116th Congress is the most racially and ethnically diverse ever, many nonwhite groups in the House are somewhat less represented relative to their share of the population. While Member of the Congress who are black now on par with their share of Americans who are black, the share in the U.S. population of Hispanics is twice as high as it is in the House, 18 percent to 9 percent. Asians account for 6 percent of the national population but 3 percent of Congress members. There are just nine nonwhite Senators, unchanged from the 115th Congress.¹²

% white of ...



¹⁰ "Liberal Democrats more likely than other groups to be politically active on social media", PEW Research Center, Anderson, Jiang, 2018

¹¹ "Who's Winning the Social Media Midterms?", The New York Times, Roose, Collins, 2018

¹² "For the fifth time in a row, the new Congress is the most racially and ethnically diverse ever", PEW Research Center, 2019

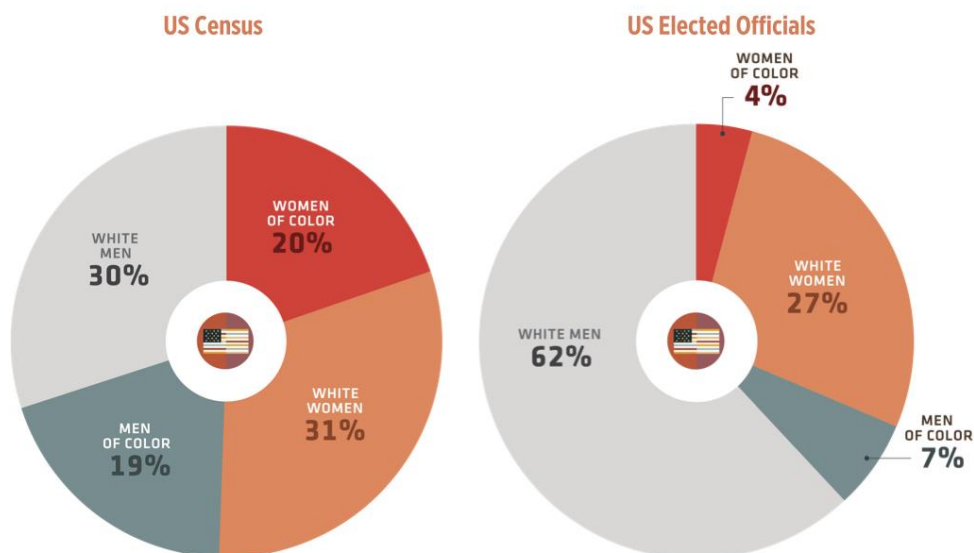
In contrast to that, Non-Hispanic whites make up 78 percent of voting members in the 116th Congress, considerably larger than their 61 percent shares of the U.S. population overall. An interesting observation is also the fact, that the overwhelming majority of racial and ethnic nonwhite members are Democrats with 90 percent, while just 10 percent are Republicans. In addition, women are less represented in the Congress relative to their shares in the American population. While 50,8 percent of the Americans are women, just 24,2 percent of the member of Congress are women. This value is even lower than the OECD average with 27,79 percent. In the German Bundestag the share of women is 30,9 percent in Mexico it is even at 42,6 percent.

„It is a common observation that political representatives tend to be drawn from the elite stratum of society. Even where representatives are chosen through fair and democratic elections, it is often said that legislative assemblies remain “unrepresentative,” and, in particular, that they are under-representative of women, ethnic minorities, and the poorer and less educated social classes.”¹³ There are many reasons, why women and ethnic minorities are underrepresented in American politics. However, especially two reasons have a big influence.

a) Money

It is not a talent gap, it is a financial gap. The final costs for the 2016 election were about 6.5 billion dollar, according to OpenSecrets.org. About 2.4 billion dollar were spent on the presidential contest and about 4 billion dollar went to congressional races. Candidate for Senate Beto O'Rourke collected 38 million dollar in three months for his campaign. In 2016 an average winning Senate candidate had to spend 10.4 million dollar in one election cycle. In addition, factoring in outside spending nearly doubles the average cost of winning a Senate seat to 19.4 million dollar. Even an average winning House candidate had to spend 1.3 million dollar in 2016. That is just the average. The biggest spending winner of a House bid with actual competition was Rep. Martha McSally, who spent 6.7 million dollar

2019: Demographics of Political Power



to secure her seat. Her Democratic opponent Matt Heinz just spent 1.3 million dollar in his unsuccessful campaign.¹⁴ The conclusion of that is: It costs a lot of money to win a seat on the table in American political power structures. Moreover, often minorities do not have that much money. The median household income in the United States in 2017 was 61.372 dollar. However, especially nonwhite Americans have a lower income in America. Hispanic Americans have a median household income of 50.486 dollar a year and black Americans 40.258 dollar. In contrast to that, white Americans have a

¹³ „The Political Representation of Women and Ethnic Minorities in Established Democracies”, Department of Political Science McMaster University, Karen Bird, 2003

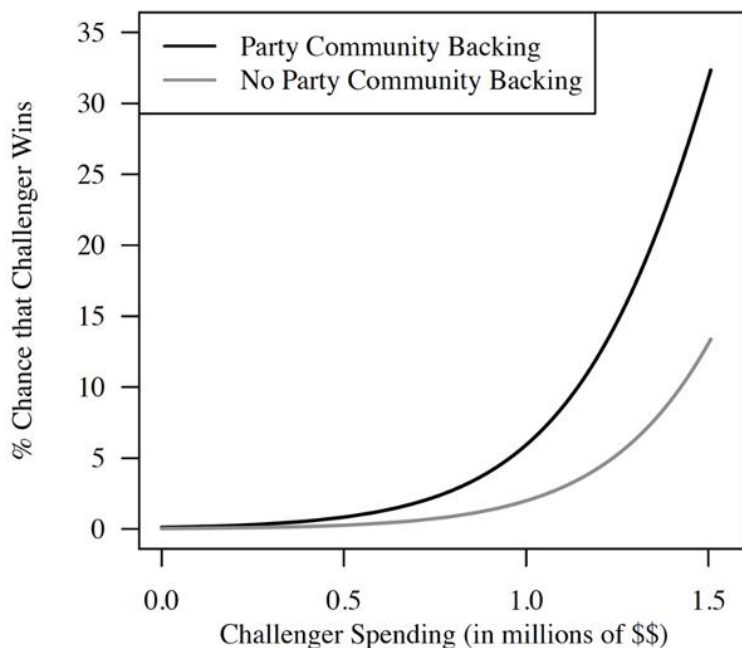
¹⁴ <https://www.opensecrets.org/news/2016/11/the-price-of-winning-just-got-higher-especially-in-the-senate/>

median household income of 68.145 dollar a year¹⁵, which is noticeably more then the average. Also according to Statista.com 76 percent of American millionaires, are white and just 8 percent of them are African American, followed by Hispanics with 7 percent.

b) Network

However, there is a second factor next to money. Even if many of the wealthier white candidates do not have that much money to run a campaign, they do have influential networks, which provide them with large sums of money. Until the year 2000 candidates for presidential elections applied for public funds to finance their election campaigns. Since then no candidate applied for public funds anymore, because the spending limit is rigorous and the sums are too small. They are able to collect much more money from private sources and networks. The majority of lawmakers enter politics through either law or business, careers that confer money, status networks and psychological benefits on individuals. Quentin James, co-founder of the Collective PAC, which recruits and supports progressive black candidates, reported in the Washington Post that it is difficult to compete with the fundraising networks of white candidates. "Politics is not the kind of open, competitive playing field we'd like to think of it as. It's more like trying to be inducted into a fraternity," Brenda Carter, director of the Reflective Democracy Campaign reminds us. A study of the Reflective Democracy Campaign in 2019, which looked at 33,854 candidates in the 2018 election, as well as 44,900 current elected officials showed, that both major parties, acting as gatekeeper, fall far short of fielding candidates who reflect the American society. In the general election in 2018, over half of all contest had just one candidate and they were overwhelmingly white and male. 26 percent of these uncontested races were on a state legislature level.

A study published in the American Journal of Political Science, using network analysis with campaign finance data, did find out, that candidates who find themselves in a selective network do substantially better in elections than other candidates even controlling for the overall amount of campaign money they spend. The researcher argue, that when a party coalition converges on a candidate the coalition's support sends a strong signal to attentive voters that the challenger supports the party agenda and stands a good chance of winning. These voters may have ties with such groups and comprise a significant portion of the electorate, particularly in primaries and low turnout general elections. Another benefit of a network support is that candidates derive electoral resources – beyond campaign



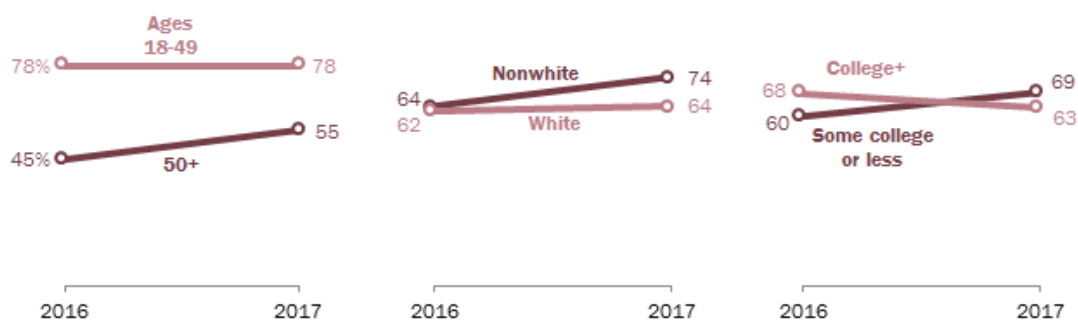
¹⁵ "INCOME AND WEALTH IN THE UNITED STATES: AN OVERVIEW OF RECENT DATA", Peter G. Peterson Foundation, 2019

contributions and group endorsements — in coordination with other groups in the coalition that boost candidate prospects.¹⁶ Therefore, we can see, that a influential network is almost necessary to be successful in American politics today.

3. Social Media and minorities

We have already seen in chapter one, that Social Media is growing in the United States and is getting more and more important for the communication. But Social Media is also changing within demographic groups in America. A study of the Youth Participatory Politics Research Network shows, that young people of color are the biggest consumers of new online forms of political media. African Americans, Latinos and Asian Americans were also the most the active users of social media for political information.¹⁷ And numbers of the PEW research center in fact verify that evidence. There are some differences in usage of Social Media between white Americans and nonwhite Americans. In 2016 about 62 percent of the white Americans used Social Media as a news channel, while this value was 64 percent for nonwhite Americans, just a difference of 2 percent. According to the PEW Research Center this changed in the following year. In 2017 statistics show, that now 74 percent of nonwhite Americans use Social Media as a news channel, while just 62 percent of white Americans in 2017 do so.¹⁸ Especially Instagram is a network which is used by minorities in the USA. According to the PEW research Center 57 percent of minorities in the United States use Instagram. This means that nonwhites are now more likely than white Americans (64 percent) to get news on social media. Social media news use also increased to 69 percent in 2017 among those with less than a bachelor’s degree, surpassing

% of U.S. adults who get news from social media sites ...



those with a college degree or higher (63 percent).

These numbers show that the Internet has opened up virtual spaces that bypass traditional gatekeepers. Historically marginalized groups, such as African American and Hispanics, can now discuss and get information about issues that affect their lives.¹⁹ Especially Instagram but also Twitter are networks, which are used by high number of adult Americans with a minority background. Studies from 2014 show, that 27 percent of black Americans among internet users use Twitter, 25 percent of Hispanic do so too and just 21 percent of white Americans.²⁰ A new study from 2019 shows that 40 percent of black Americans and 51 percent of Hispanics use the network Instagram. But just 33 percent of white Americans do so.²¹ As we can see from the facts at the top, social media is present in minority communities. And that suggest the assumption, that social media can be a powerful tool for minority communities.

¹⁶ “Being backed by extended party networks can mean a greater chance of electoral success for a Congressional challenger”, LSE USCentre Desmarais, La Raja, Kowal, 2014

¹⁷ “How social media helps young people”, Washington Post, 2016

¹⁸ “Key trends in social and digital news media” PEW Research Center, Bialik, Matsa, 2017

¹⁹ “How social media helps young people”, Washington Post, 2016

²⁰ “Social Media Update 2014”, PEW Research Center, Duggan, Ellison, Lampe, Lenhart, Madden, 2015

²¹ “Social Media Fact Sheet”, PEW Research Center, 2019

4. Social Media: A chance for minorities in US politics

a) Mobilization and Fundraising

The Internet has the potential to mobilize million of people. We could watch that with the Arab Spring revolution in 2011. Facebook, Twitter, Youtube and several blogs were used as tools for mobilization.²² As scholars have noted, partly due to its “public sphere” nature, social media creates participation opportunities—such as boosting protest turnout or supporting fundraising campaigns—that broaden mobilization, thus helping scale movement endeavors. The Black Lives Matter movement is maybe the most famous example in the United States, were Social Media was of great importance. A participant in a study, which deals with the aspect of social media as a tool for mobilization said:

„[Social media] also allows us to be able to network, it allows people in another region to be like, “Okay, I send solidarity,” to say, “I feel you.” That gives you the extra push and rejuvenation that you need sometimes in this organizing field. And also, you are doing all this work but a lot of folks are not doing the work with you, right? But then a lot of people are having similar problems and doing similar work around the world and so it allows you to be like, ‘Okay, I see what you are doing. How did you get through that? Alright, okay. I’m gonna do that over here.’And it allows us to be a whole network without being right in front of each other’s faces.”²³

The experts with whom I spoke also support this statement: “Social media is one of the most important tools for fundraising and mobilization”. Researches indicate that digital spaces create new opportunities for the development of collective movement identity. The Black Lives Matter movement started as a hashtag in the digital space and became the banner under which dozens of disparate organizations, new and old, and millions of individuals, loosely and tightly related, press for change in the real world. „You can get 10,000 people together in hours.“ a participant in the study said.

Especially the Black Lives Matter movement shows, how strong social networks can mobilize. In addition, as we can see from previous studies, social media can have a certain influence on mobilizing in politics. We saw that with the Arab Spring in the Middle East regions, the Black Lives Matter movement in the United States and with the Fridays for Future movement in Germany, which fights for better climate protection. One important reason so many people went on the streets was and are social networks. All three organizations use social media extensively to mobilize the people.

5. Result

If we look at the numbers of users, studies on the topic and the statements of the experts, it becomes clear that social media will play an increasingly important role in politics in the future. Especially young people almost exclusively use only social media to inform themselves. Especially politicians have to use it to reach these people. “There is no way around it” one expert told me. However, is Social Media a tool to empower minorities in American politics? Are Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and all the other channels able to compensate for disadvantages that minorities have in American politics? One of the most important factors to answer that is authenticity. Candidates who do not feel comfortable with these channels of communication will presumably not be successful.

²² “The Role of Social Media in Political Mobilisation: a Case Study of the January 2011 Egyptian Uprising”, Madeline Storck, 2011

²³“Scaling Social Movements Through Social Media: The Case of Black Lives Matter”, Mundt, Ross, Burnett, 2018

The rise of congresswomen Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez is one the most famous examples how it can work. In comparison to their counterparties, she did not have a lot money to spend for her campaign and she certainly did not have the prominence. Nevertheless, she won. But it has to be said that: “She was a social media Candidate”. In summary, one can say yes it can work, if there is the right candidate. Social media can be “the voice of the voiceless”.

But Social Media is not just a tool for minority candidates. Some experts are sure: “Donald Trump won because of social media, because he just fit.” Social media is therefore a tool for all political candidates, but it can certainly compensate many disadvantages with the right application. “If you have a social media candidate, you can win by using it,” a campaigner told me. However, there is a restriction. There are no valid studies and numbers yet, to prove that social media can make a difference in winning political campaigns. “Did social media help her win? Probably, but that is not certain.” An expert told me in relation to the victory of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. The circumstantial, however, suggest it.