Tweets from the Bully Pulpit: President Trump's Twitter habits and his Popularity

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Abstract

One way that a President can use their position to indirectly effect legislation is through the messaging they present to the public. This idea has been termed the Bully Pulpit by political scholars and we have seen multiple different strategies for using this power. President Trump has shown a disdain for traditional media environments, opting instead to use Twitter as his primary means of communicating with the public in combination with some traditional methods as well. Is Twitter an effective use of the presidential office and the Bully Pulpit? I examine the effectiveness of Trump's communication methods by comparing his Twitter habits, in number of tweets per day, with his approval ratings for that same period. There appeared to be little direct correlation between President Trump's tweets and any change in approval ratings. If a President wishes to improve their approval ratings, they will have to do more than tweet about issues. However, even a particularly prolific tweeter like President Trump will see little backlash from their Twitter habits alone.

Introduction

Technological communication advancements are always changing the way that people communicate. People's everyday lives, major news stories, and even major social or political movement are being catalogued and spread through the internet and different forms of social media today. Facebook, Reddit, and Twitter can be used to spread ideas and create a sense of unity and conflict between groups and individuals. So, it should not be surprising that political leaders are trying to find ways to use modern communication technology to help them govern (Straus, Glassman, Shogan, & Smelcer, 2013). Specifically, some leaders are using Twitter to help facilitate communication between them and their constituents, or to make short public

announcements, or in any other way they see fit. Twitter is like the Wild West of political communication.

The current sitting U.S. President, Donald J. Trump, has stated that Twitter is his favorite form of communicating with the public because it is unfiltered by critics and other media personalities. I examine Trump's use of Twitter compared to his political peers, with respect to traditional forms of presidential communication, and attempt to answer a fundamental question: Is Donald Trump's use of Twitter an effective use of his positional power and the Bully Pulpit?

Literature Review

Presidential Power

There are two different presidential powers that scholars have debated as the strongest power. One of those powers is called the Bully Pulpit, coined by Teddy Roosevelt, and refers to a position that allows someone to be heard and listened to on important matters, such as the President of the United States. This platform gives the president influence over the public and thus can be powerful. The presidential power to go to the people has been called going public in scholarly literature. Going public is simply stated as the president's ability to promote his policies by appealing to the American public for support. With this power, a president with huge public support has a bigger influence over congress (Kernell 1987). Presidents have increased the number of speeches and public appearances they make in recent years to gain more public support for them and their issues. Though this power is not only to add issues to the national agenda, but also to remove them as well (Miles 2014). Under this belief, the defining features of a president is their ability to influence and their success can vary depending on who they're trying to influence. This power can vary wildly depending on public perception and how the

President himself may want to be viewed by that public. The power of going public has balanced the other major power covered in presidential research, the power of persuasion. In his renowned work *Presidential Power*, Neustadt (1990) explains how the current government structure creates an environment where persuasion is necessary. Since the federal system requires different institutions to share delegated power, the president can use his executive power to persuade the legislature to use their legislative power in a way that both sides benefit. Presidents use this power to create coalitions or alliances to pass legislation that that group wants. Research by Eshbaugh-Soha and Rottinghaus (2013) attempted to find the different ways these powers are used and when they are used. Their findings support previous research on who presidents represent and when. Presidents are more receptive to their partisan demographics and members in congress, instead of the overall public. Unpopular presidents are less likely to take policy positions in line with the public, choosing instead to follow partisan example. They found that the political environment is one of the most important indicators of a president's policy positions, influencing when and where a president will use their political power of persuasion. One of the other indicators of the president's strength to persuade the public is the topic area. Presidents have more influence with domestic issues, while lacking influence when addressing international issues (Edwards & Wood 1999). Despite the increase in public speeches and appearances, some scholars suggest that presidents have little effect in the current political environment (Miles 2014).

Social Media in the Modern Political Environment

Many politicians have used social media as it grew and became more popular throughout the early 2000's. Many members of government use different forms of internet-based

communication beginning with email. Today they use forms like blogs, video sites, and social media sites like Facebook and Twitter. Specifically, social media platforms, like Facebook and Twitter, can help politicians frame their message, reach a national audience, or keep up to date with their constituents (Straus et al. 2013). While plenty of research has been done into the different social media sites, Twitter has been given special attention. Twitter is a social media platform that is free to use, giving politicians a low-cost method to reach the predominantly younger user base.

The service's character limit forces politicians to make statements that are readily distributable to other audiences and traditional media (Gross & Johnson 2016). Research by Spiering and Jacobs (2013) found that social media was crucial for politicians, but the benefits depended on the individual. As early as the 2008 presidential election, Twitter was being used by presidential candidates. The 2008 campaign for former president Barack Obama is an excellent example of the successful use of social media. Prior to this campaign, most digital campaigns were one way, attempting to introduce candidates to the public and gain votes. Obama's campaigns used social media differently, to start conversations and turned traditional digital campaigns into community events (Gupta-Carlson 2016). Twitter's ease of access and its constriction to 140 characters created a unique platform for communication. By the time of the 2012 US election season, Twitter was becoming more popular among all presidential candidates. Though many different candidates used Twitter, research by Conway, Kenski, and Wang (2013) found that candidates' use of Twitter varied considerably and few used it to post regular updates. They also found that a large volume of tweets did not translate into a large Twitter following. High volumes of tweets from politician also does not translate into direct political engagement, suggesting that Twitter use is more complex than previously thought (Park 2013). One-way

researchers suggest using Twitter would be to post short posts that attract the attention of major news organizations. This would improve the range of those tweets outside of Twitter alone, being amplified by news outlets. Another strategy suggested by research is that politicians should use the personal interactivity of social media sites like Twitter (Marco 2012). Direct involvement of constituents through social media has shown results by increasing political participation in younger people and could translate to the public (Park 2013).

Some politicians are already following this advice, such as those in Congress. Candidates farther apart on the political spectrum, the extreme left and right, were more likely to use Twitter during the 2012 election season. Members of congress are more likely to use Twitter to speak directly with their constituents, while still presenting a message to a national audience compared to other political leadership (Straus et Al., 2013). Though the exact reasons candidates used Twitter may vary, different demographics used the microblogging service more than others. Women, major party candidates, incumbents, and those in competitive races used Twitter more often than other candidates (Evans, Cordova, Sipole 2014). Following the 2016 election cycles, we got another look at how politicians are using the various social media platforms. Research by Gross and Johnson (2016) examined the unusually large pool of Republican presidential candidates during the 2016 election year and attempted to find any indicators of when and why candidates use negative Twitter tactics. They found that candidates went negative more often as the campaign dragged on and as the number of candidates fell. Most candidates attacked those who were doing better than them, except for then-candidate Trump. He went against the norm and even aimed attacks at low-polling candidates.

New Age Presidency.

Colleen Shogan (2012) explains a major aspect of modern American Politics that she calls Anti-intellectualism. Anti-intellectualism is a dominant feature in American politics since at least Ronald Reagan, typically found in Republican majority states but not exclusively. Though trying to place any politician as intellectual or anti-intellectual is overly simplistic, like most things in life it exists as a spectrum. To place any politician on this spectrum we must look at their considerations of advice from intellectuals and academics and their public engagement of intellectuals. The past 3 Republican presidents all fall somewhere near the anti-intellectual side of this spectrum, indeed Republican candidates have been exceptionally successful at capitalizing on anti-intellectual sentiment in the public and media. Anti-intellectual candidates successfully use spectacle and a hyper-masculine messaging to appeal to their audiences, the message that the president answers to no one. Today, intellectuals are often the victims of political attacks, but that is not the worst outcome of presidential anti-intellectualism. The worst effect of anti-intellectualism is the shift away from policy-oriented debate and the ever-increasing importance of an almost egalitarian connection between political leaders and the public, which only continues to compound Anti-intellectual rhetoric in future presidents. Shogan's descriptions of anti-intellectualism fits the reports of President Trump. For example, Trump's supposed aversion to reading and his administration's purge of academics from government institutions definitely fit. His campaign also excelled on spectacle in place of in depth policy discussion. This type of campaign continues to get stronger as the message from the campaign becomes one of the only important features. A president's message is an indicator of their priorities and values that can be intentional or not. A unified message is harder to project

today than it was years ago. Before there were only a few places that politicians needed to send their message. But today, with the advancement of the internet and decline of traditional media's ability to appeal to everyone, people's opinions on political candidates are harder to influence collectively (Silverstein & Lampent 2012). This is only compounded on by anti-intellectualism because it increased the need to simplify a president's message. The in-depth policy debates and administrative plans that defined previous presidential campaigns have been in decline, as they appeal to smaller and more fractured audiences. Instead the core message, or overall appeal of the campaign, have become the most important feature (Heith 2013). Today's anti-intellectual trend has affected all candidates' public messaging. Candidates from both sides have simplified their speech, choosing to entertain their audience in place of educating them. However, only Republican candidates are guilty of attacking "Intellectual elites" in an attempt to appeal to what they believe to be ordinary citizens (Mirrof 2009). Anti-intellectual rhetoric should work reasonably well on Twitter, where short and easily digestible messages can be circulated to a larger audience and scandals are spread quickly.

Analysis

As previously implied, President Trump not is a typical Republican president within the current political environment, despite his appeal as an outsider candidate and similar anti-intellectual message. Considering his loss in the popular vote but his victory in the Electoral College, Trump appeals more to his fellow partisans over the general public. This may be the influence behind his use of Twitter over traditional avenues for presidential messaging, though this is nearly impossible to say for certain. What we can determine is whether or not it has been a successful use of his power. As the previous research shows, sheer volume of tweets has little

effect on people political beliefs (Conway, Kenski, & Wang, 2013). However, because of Trump's current unpopularity, it can be assumed that his public policy positions will agree with his supporters' partisan opinion over the public's (Eshbaugh-Soha and Rottinghaus 2013). That, in combination with the ability for Trump's tweets to be amplified and dispersed to multiple different fragmented media outlets, will lead to a positive relationship between the number of Trump's tweets and his popularity. This would possibly occur because his approval among Republicans will outpace his disapproval with Democrats. If Trump Tweets more, his approval ratings should improve. That is the first hypothesis tested. We also compare the number of Trump's tweets compared to his approval among both political parties. Given that Trump is a Republican president, it can be assumed partisans on his side would support his tweets more and thus our second hypothesis. If Trump tweets more, his approval among Republicans should increase and decrease among democrats.

Methods

To find the number of time Trump tweeted, I used the Trump Twitter Archive[1] and I cross referenced that site with statistics collected by TwitterCounter[2]. The statistics listed cumulative totals by day, so I took the total number of tweets and subtracted the previous day from the total to find tweets per day. Then I collected daily approval percentages from FiveThirtyEight's[3] opinion poll aggregate. These figures were collected into an excel file under Tweets per Week and Approval percentage respectively. I also gathered partisan approval percentages from Gallup's[4] weekly opinion poll. To compare with the weekly approval percentages by party, I added up weekly tweets and average weekly approval as separate variables. Then I took every variable and put them through the standardization process[5]. To

standardize each variable, I took the number in each case (X) minus the variables mean (μ) and divided by the variables standard deviation (σ). This found each variable's standardized value (Z) and allows us to compare the variables given their different measurement metrics. Standardizing each variable gives them all a mean of zero and a standard deviation of 1. After standardizing I created timeline of figures to compare each variable.

(Figure 1 in Appendix)

Figure 1 was made just by plotting both the tweets per day and daily approval percentage variables. It's hard to interpret this as the variables don't follow the same numerical ranges. We can see the greater variance in the number of tweets per day to the steady rise and fall of Trump's approval percentage. Trump's Tweets per day was anything but consistent. One particularly low period in approval follows an extra-long dip in tweets around 8/22/18, but it's impossible to tell a relationship from a single point in time. To better assess these variables, we turn to their standardized versions in Figure 2.

(Figure 2 in Appendix)

Figure 2 helps us overlay these two variables, making them easier to read. Both variables seem to follow a similar line around the middle of the chart. If we assume a short amount of time required for a shift in approval, the middle of the chart could indicate a correlation. However, that assumption does nothing to explain the very beginning and last third of the chart. The last third shows a huge dip in approval despite a similar pattern of tweets. This could indicate that some other factor has a stronger influence on approval. To get a better sense of what all is influencing these variables, we must look at the content of the tweets and contemporary events.

(Figure 3 in Appendix)

I selected five different points in time to examine. The first was during the protests in Charlottesville and following President Trump's response. During this time, we saw a large drop in the number of Trump's tweets, but we didn't see a large drop in his approval. A week later, Trump's approval plummeted while his tweeting stayed relatively normal. Late September saw both a high approval and a relatively high volume of tweets, but also marks the beginning of a steady decline in the President's approval. This decline happens despite a normal variation in the President's tweets. Around the time that President Trump took a trip to Asia, his approval stabilized a little and even looked to rise again, until the tax bills hit. During the debate over the tax bills President Trump's approval continued to drop, but after it passed began to rise again. Again, this all happens without any significant variation in Trump's tweets. This evidence gives more credibility to the assumption that Trump's tweets have little effect on his approval ratings in general. Perhaps the little effect observed is a symptom of larger variations in partisan approval ratings because of Trump's tweets.

(Figure 4 in Appendix)

To gauge the effect Trump's tweets could have on his partisan approval ratings, we must turn to the weekly set of variables. With the raw data, we have the same problems we had with Figure 1. Some points do stand out, such as week 18's drop in Republican approval during a high in Trump's tweets. The scale of the changes in each variable are difficult to see with this figure, but the following figure paints a clearer picture.

(Figure 5 in Appendix)

This figure shows both Republican and Democratic approval percentages compared with Trump's tweets per week. The lines on this figure are all over the chart. There is a point, week 18 and 19, where one could reasonably assume that Trump's popularity among Republicans was

following his tweets with a one-week delay. How there are more weeks that indicate the opposite: week 3, week 11 and week 20. There are even more weeks that indicate little relationship. The same can be said for Democratic approval and its relationship with Trump's tweets. Some weeks could be singled out to show a relationship in either direction. Something interesting happened during week 18-19, otherwise every other week leads me to believe that something other than Trump's tweets affected his approval more.

(Figure 6 in Appendix)

Once we look to current event, some of these data points make more sense. Looking at week 18/19, we can see that that was during the heated debate over the Republican tax plan. It would make sense for the Republican and Democratic approval to respond the way we see in Figure 6. There was a drop in his approval with both parties following the Charlottesville protests and President Trump's response, even though his tweets per week changed very little. There appears to be a large drop in Democrat approval and an increase in Republic approval after Trump renewed his calls for a travel ban and responded to the NFL protests. We would expect to see this given each sides opinion on the issue. After we controlled for other event in modern politics, it becomes much clearer that there is little relationship between Trump's tweets and his approval ratings.

Discussion

As we have seen Trump's tweets per day varies wildly while his approval rating is a lot steadier. There appears to be little to no relationship between the number of time Trump tweets and his approval. These finding support previous research that found high tweet volume doesn't translate into more followers or direct political involvement from their followers. Trump doesn't appear to be negatively hurt by his Twitter habits as well. This could mean other politicians

could adopt a similar strategy without hurting themselves, but Trump could be a unique case. This would echo research that implies that success or failure on social media sites varied between individuals (Park, 2013). There appears to be a little relationship between his partisan approval and his tweets, but neither were found to be statistically significant, as seen in Table 1.

This analysis had plenty of limitations however. The individual content of Trump's daily tweets was not considered. Nor did I assess out if there was a lag period on the effect of Trump's tweets on his approval. Future research will need to be done to investigate this lag to determine how long it would take for Trump's tweets to have an effect.

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Appendix

1. http://www.trumptwitterarchive.com/archive

2. https://twittercounter.com/pages/buy-stats/realDonaldTrump

3. https://projects.fivethirtyeight.com/trump-approval-ratings/

4. http://news.gallup.com/interactives/185273/r.aspx?g_source=WWWV7HP&g_medium=topic&g_campaign=tiles

5. Standardization formula: $Z = (X - \mu)/ \sigma$

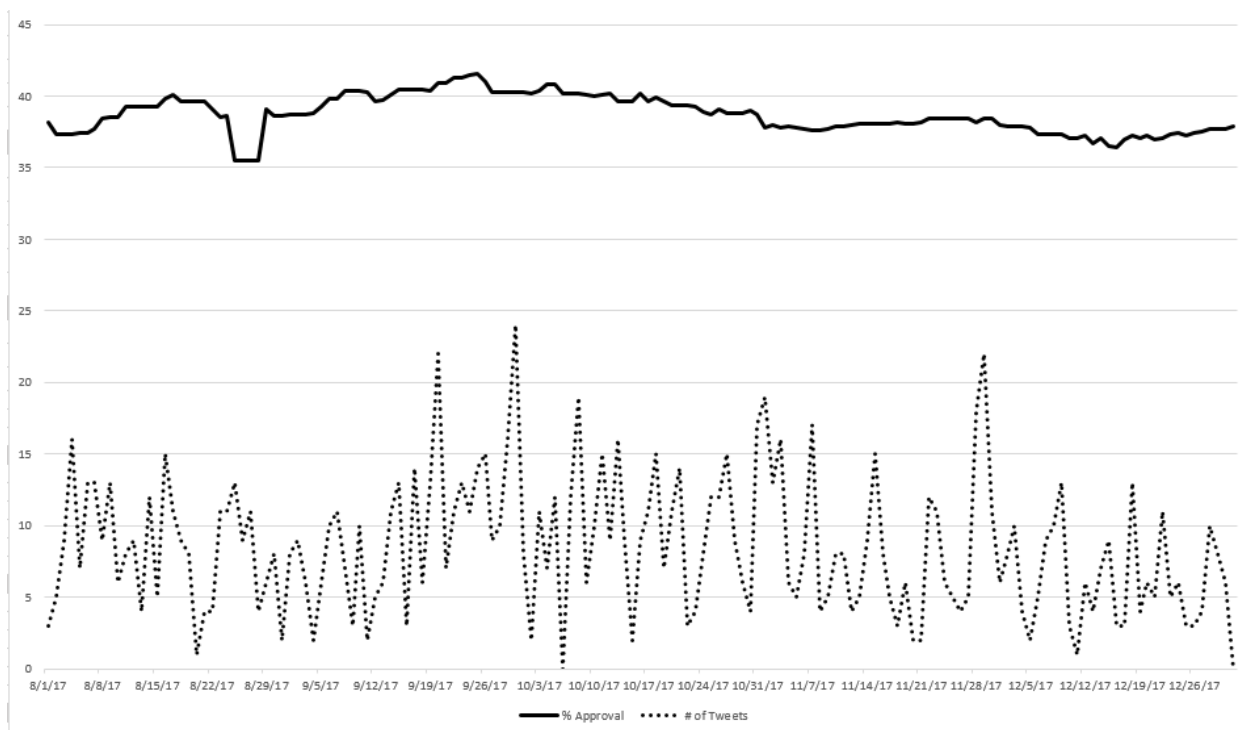**Figure 1 – Relationship Between Trump's Tweets and his Approval Percentage**
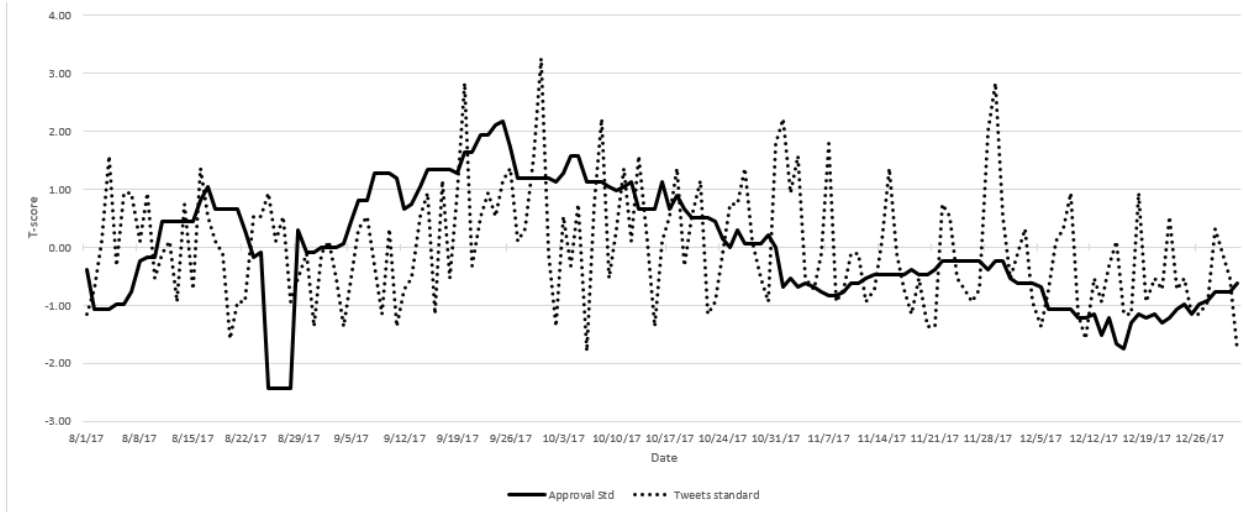
Figure 2 – Standardized Relationship Between Approval and Tweets

Figure 3 – Standardized Relationship between Approval and Tweets
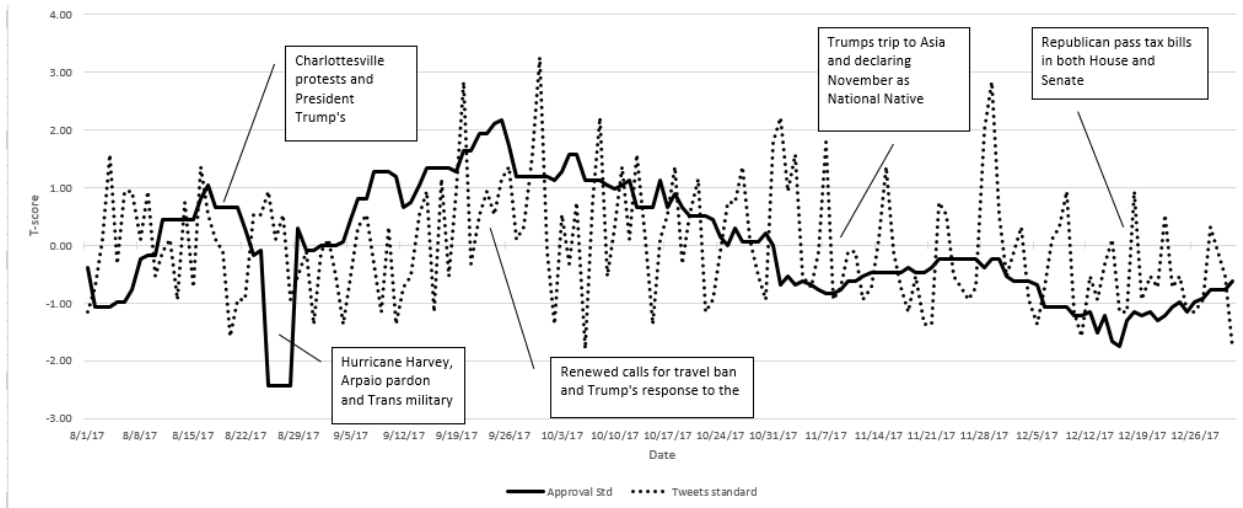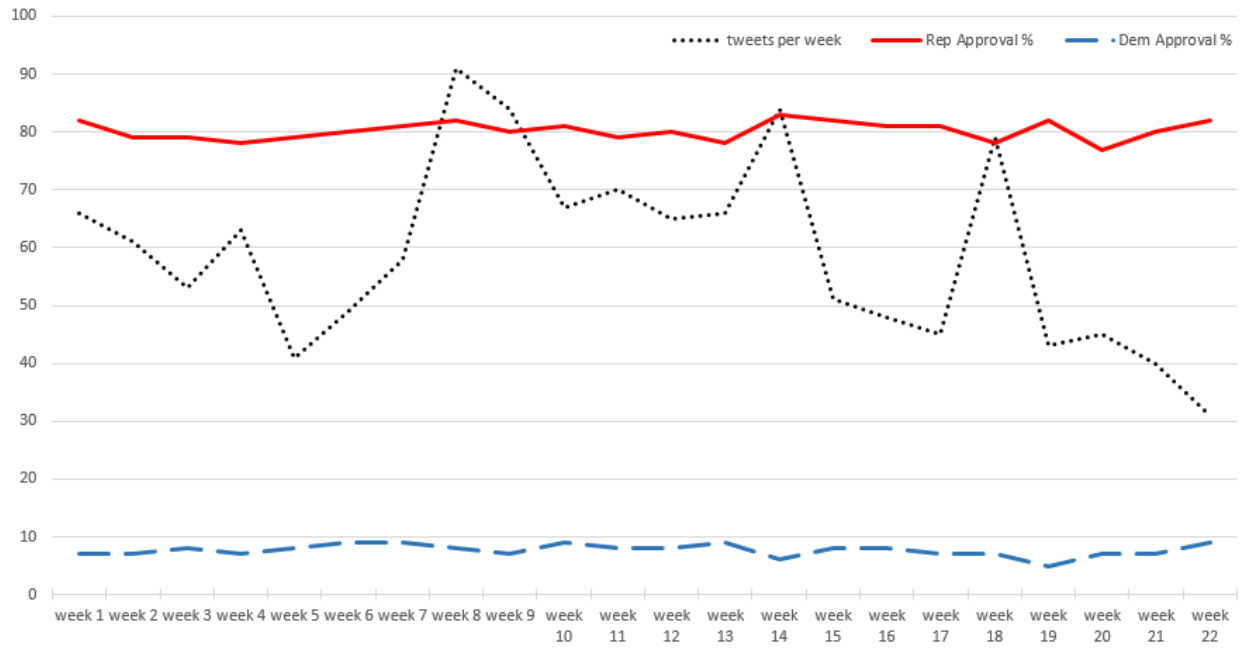
Figure 4 – Partisan Approval in relation to Tweets

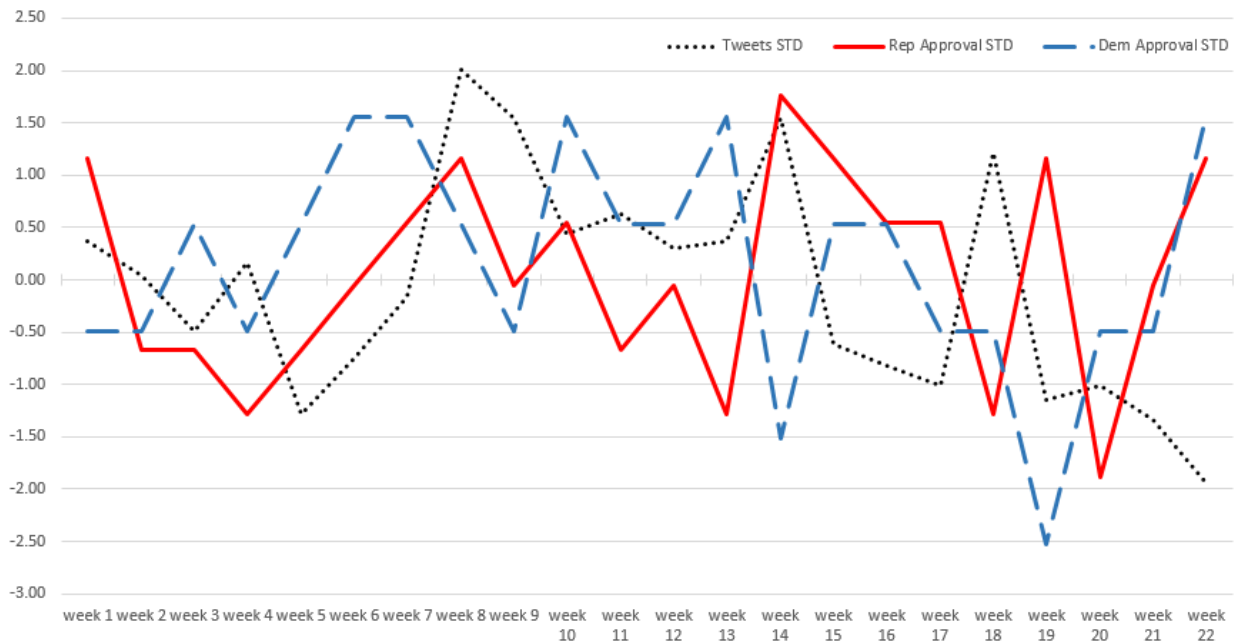**Figure 5 – Tweets in Relation to Partisan Approval Standardized**

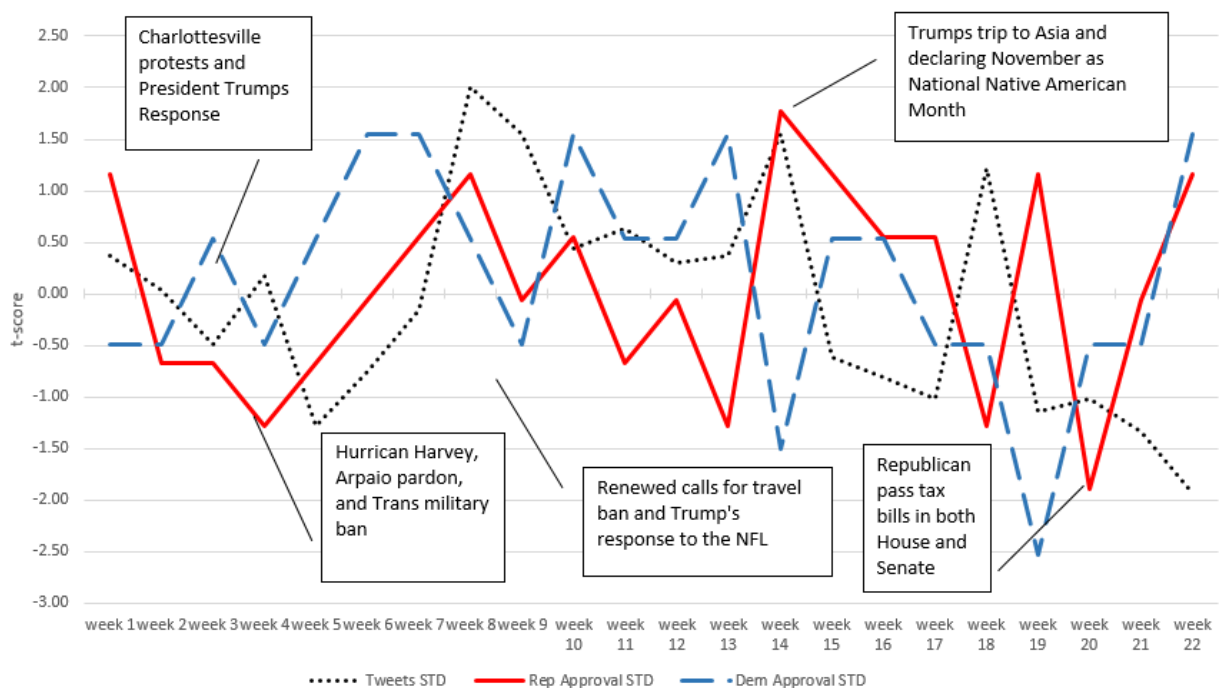**Figure 6 – Tweets in Relation to Partisan Approval Standardized**

Table 1

Correlations

		Rep Approval STD	Dem Approval STD	Approval STD	Tweets STD
Rep Approval STD	Pearson Correlation	1	-.097	.077	.039
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.666	.734	.864
	N	22	22	22	22
Dem Approval STD	Pearson Correlation	-.097	1	.523[*]	-.102
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.666		.012	.651
	N	22	22	22	22
Approval STD	Pearson Correlation	.077	.523[*]	1	.485[*]
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.734	.012		.022
	N	22	22	22	22
Tweets STD	Pearson Correlation	.039	-.102	.485[*]	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.864	.651	.022	
	N	22	22	22	22

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).