



## Faculty Research Grant Proposal

Cover Sheet

**DUE: November 6, 2017**

<b>Name:</b>	Chad Murphy	<b>Funding Period:</b>	July 1, 2018- June 30, 2019
<b>Department:</b>	Political Science	<b>IRB Required</b> <input type="checkbox"/>	
<b>Project Title:</b>	Setting the Elite Agenda: Social Media, President Trump, and Racial Coding in Charlottesville		
<b>Abstract (250 words maximum)</b>			
<p>Leadership and opinion formation are at the core of any study of politics, and this has never been more evident than in the last year of world politics. Globally we have seen populist movements find a voice in Erdogan's reaction to the attempted coup in Turkey, through the surprising result of Brexit, and closer to home, we have seen this through the election of US President Donald Trump and the intense brand of populism practiced by many of his followers. Between his 40 million followers on Twitter and media coverage of his tweets his message clearly reaches far and wide. Most research on this topic has focused on campaign messaging and the ability to persuade the mass public or shape debates in the general population, but we have ignored whether politicians are able to influence each other through social media, whether through agenda-setting or establishing frames by which issues are discussed. I propose to fill this gap by asking the following question: are politicians able to use digital media to influence other elites to support excluding populist messages?</p> <p>To answer this question, I will look at tweets from members of Congress and prominent political figures. In the immediate aftermath, Democrats were more likely than Republicans to use language pointing out the racist nature of the attack. However, once President Trump spoke these differences increased significantly. This change, clearly attributable to President Trump's comments, shows the power of social media to influence not only the general public but elites as well.</p>			
Budget Request: <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Summer Stipend Only <input type="checkbox"/> Summer Stipend with expenses <input type="checkbox"/> Project Expenses Only <input type="checkbox"/> Fall Course Release <input type="checkbox"/> Spring Course Release			
Simultaneous Applications <input type="checkbox"/> Internal Grant <input type="checkbox"/> External Grant			
Previous FRG Awards (funding period): <input type="checkbox"/> 2015-16 <input type="checkbox"/> 2016-17 <input type="checkbox"/> 2017-18 if the funding period has ended.			
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> By checking here I indicate that I understand that my application will not be considered if the office of the dean cannot verify the receipt of a final report for a previously funded faculty development research grant.			
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> By checking here I indicate that I have followed the guidelines ( <a href="http://cas.umw.edu/dean/guidelines-for-faculty-research-grant-applications/">http://cas.umw.edu/dean/guidelines-for-faculty-research-grant-applications/</a> ) and that my application consists of the following eight elements: project description, project significance, timeline and logistics, results, documentation, budget, simultaneous applications, and supporting materials.			
<b>SIGNATURES:</b>			
Applicant:		Date:	
Department Chair:		Date:	

## *Project Description*

Leadership and opinion formation are at the core of any study of politics, and this has never been more evident than in the last year of world politics. Globally we have seen populist movements find a voice in Erdogan's reaction to the attempted coup in Turkey, through the surprising result of Brexit, and closer to home, we have seen this through the election of US President Donald Trump and the intense brand of populism practiced by many of his followers. Now that politicians can not only speak to their constituents through digital spaces but can also communicate to other elites, it has become crucial to further investigate these interactions and their effects on political discourse.

While the increase in excluding populism in digital spaces has been on the rise globally, no one has been more effective at spreading populism through social media than President Trump.<sup>1</sup> Between his 40 million followers on Twitter and media coverage of his tweets his message clearly reaches far and wide. Most research on this topic has focused on campaign messaging and the ability to persuade the mass public or shape debates in the general population, but we have ignored whether politicians are able to influence each other through social media, whether through agenda-setting or establishing frames by which issues are discussed. I propose to fill this gap by asking the following question: are politicians able to use digital media to influence other elites to support excluding populist messages?

Specifically, I look at President Trump as a critical case of elite persuasion because of his popularity and unique appeal on social media. Within his presidency, I look at his reaction to the neo-Nazi rally in Charlottesville, VA as a pivotal moment. President Trump was largely silent immediately after the rally and the murder of Heather Heyer but began to make public statements 3 days later including a press conference and multiple tweets defending his comments. This is a particularly useful case to test theories of elite leadership because we have demands for immediate response from politicians after a tragic event and then a party leader making polarizing statements a couple of days later. This quasi-experimental design allows me to make causal claims about the role of presidential leadership.

To answer this question, I will look at tweets from members of Congress and prominent political figures seeking out key words and phrases labeling Heyer's killer as "racist", "terrorist", "white supremacist", and a "bigot." In the immediate aftermath, Democrats were more likely than Republicans to use language pointing out the racist nature of the attack. However, once President Trump spoke these differences increased significantly, with the gap between the two parties increasing anywhere from 10-25%. This change, clearly attributable to President Trump's comments, shows the power of social media to influence not only the general public but political elites as well.

This paper makes two important contributions to our understanding of populism, elite communication, and the spread of ideas through digital spaces. Previous research on this topic has focused on how politicians tweet (e.g. Grant, Moon, and Busby Grant 2010; Larsson and Kalsnes 2014), which politicians are most likely to adopt social media in campaigns (e.g. Williams and Gulati 2013), how they use it (e.g. West 2013), how members of the public use social media to make their decisions (e.g. Kushin and Yamamoto 2010) or use it to organize mass protests (e.g. Tufekci and Wilson 2012). Scholars have ignored whether it can be used to signal other elites and create new frames through which issues should be discussed. This paper fills a crucial role in our understanding of elite persuasion and the spread of populism.

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<sup>1</sup> Excluding populism is a specific style of populism which focuses on appeals to the people and exclusion of outgroups.

The second contribution comes in terms of understanding elite persuasion and the spread of populist frames. In the US context, scholars originally noted that presidential power is situated in the power to persuade and noted that cabinet officials would regularly look to media coverage of Reagan's speeches to learn about his policy preferences (Neustadt 1991). However, recent scholarship on the topic has cast doubt on the president's ability to persuade, arguing that his words often fall "on deaf ears" (Edwards 2006). This shows under certain conditions elites are in fact able to spread messages to others, improving our understanding of elite communication and the role of leadership in politics.

### *Project Significance*

This project will make an important contribution to political science because it speaks to multiple controversies in the discipline, and more importantly it updates our understanding of what presidential rhetoric is. Typically scholars have focused on major addresses given in a formal setting like the State of the Union Address or President Obama speaking about the death of Osama Bin Laden from the East Room, but President Trump has signified a major change in how politicians communicate with the people. Our understanding of presidential rhetoric is incomplete if we continue to ignore these types of communications, and my research will contribute to filling this lacuna in the discipline.

This project fits into a larger pattern of professional development, allowing me to expand my research agenda on elite communication strategies. As of now, I have published two high quality papers on this research agenda in top peer reviewed journals, one of which was awarded the "Best Article of the Year" award in *Communication Methods and Measures*. I have two other working papers that I intend to finish up this year, and this will fit into that research agenda nicely.

Publishing on digital communication and intersections with race fits well with UMW's strategic goals as well. Building on the university's strengths in this area, and leading to potential collaborations with DTLT's Kris Shaffer on "disinformation bots" and how people process information off of Twitter will emphasize the university's strength in this area across disciplines. Funding my work in this area is important to my personal professional development and will serve the university's strategic goals well, making this project worthy of summer funding.

### *Timeline and Logistics*

I have already collected the data for this project, but what remains is to properly analyze the data and then write up the paper. To accomplish this, I propose the following timeline:

July 2018 – August 2018: Finish analysis and write a literature review and discussion section to complete a draft of the paper.

September 2018 – December 2018: Revise the draft and submit the final version to a peer-reviewed journal.

January 2019 - May 2019: Work on revisions after receiving a verdict from the peer review process.

Most the work will be completed during the summer funding period, and receiving this grant will allow me to reduce my teaching schedule and allow me time to focus on writing throughout the summer.

### *Results*

I anticipate multiple deliverables coming from this paper – the a conference paper presented at a major political science conference and a submission of the full research paper to a peer-reviewed journal. Both of these will comfortably be completed during the funding period.

### *Documentation*

Full data for the project are available upon request – I have multiple spreadsheets of tweets that have been coded by date and the type of language used.

### *Preliminary Works Cited*

Edwards, G. C. (2006). *On deaf ears: The limits of the bully pulpit*. Yale University Press.

Grant, W. J., Moon, B., & Busby Grant, J. (2010). Digital dialogue? Australian politicians' use of the social network tool Twitter. *Australian Journal of Political Science*, 45(4), 579-604.

Kushin, M. J., & Yamamoto, M. (2010). Did social media really matter? College students' use of online media and political decision making in the 2008 election. *Mass Communication and Society*, 13(5), 608-630.

Larsson, A. O., & Kalsnes, B. (2014). 'Of course we are on Facebook': Use and non-use of social media among Swedish and Norwegian politicians. *European Journal of Communication*, 29(6), 653-667.

Neustadt, R. E. (1991). *Presidential power and the modern presidents: The politics of leadership from Roosevelt to Reagan*. Simon and Schuster.

Tufekci, Z., & Wilson, C. (2012). Social media and the decision to participate in political protest: Observations from Tahrir Square. *Journal of Communication*, 62(2), 363-379.

West, D. M. (2013). *Air wars: Television advertising and social media in election campaigns, 1952-2012*. Sage.

Williams, C. B., & Gulati, G. J. J. (2013). Social networks in political campaigns: Facebook and the congressional elections of 2006 and 2008. *New Media & Society*, 15(1), 52-71.

### *Budget*

I am requesting \$4000 of summer funding to replace income from teaching a summer course so I can have more time to work on the project.

### *Simultaneous Applications*

None.

### *Previous Awards*

I earned a sabbatical during spring 2017 to work with the EWRG on Get-Out-The-Vote (GOTV) efforts. We were successful in finding new strategies and presented our work at a major industry conference. We expanded this work into work on whether automatic voter registration helps increase turnout and are working on presenting this to practitioners and preparing it for an academic audience.

*Supporting Materials*

None.