

Social Media & Agenda Melding: Understanding Trump's Proposed Border Wall*

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Abstract

This study explores how belief in social media outlets is an important aspect of agenda melding in an online environment. In this study, the researchers employ agenda melding as a theoretical lens to explore how belief in social media outlet can predict support for the proposed Border Wall. The researchers surveyed 232 people to find out how belief in media outlet contributes to building an online media agenda in the context of immigration. Social media networks continue to grow in influence when it comes to understanding important political issues and the way they manifest themselves in mainstream United States immigration policy.

Keywords: quantitative (survey) research, agenda melding, immigration, Border Wall, Mexico, social media, Facebook, political communication

1. Introduction

The 2020 United States Presidential Election featured a nation highly divided along ideological lines and social media posts. President Donald Trump had planned to campaign for re-election on a healthy economy. That was not possible because of the Coronavirus pandemic (Croucher, et. al., 2020). Instead, President Trump returned to campaigning less passionately, but still, to one of his 2016 issues, the U.S. Border Wall proposal, with only 3 miles of new border wall completed (Stokols, 2020). This was much less wall than previously promised by candidate Trump in 2016.

The 2016 U.S. Presidential Election carried with it implications of bias and/or discrimination based on gender, class, sexual orientation, and perhaps most of all, race (Bobo, 2017). Trump's supporters viewed the election as one to return America to greatness. Trump's opponents feared non-white non-majority groups would be further marginalized from the political process and even have their welfare placed in jeopardy.

Once President Trump took office, he made immigration a platform of his administration, just as he promised in the campaign. Trump restricted refugee numbers and banned certain groups from entering the U.S. His administration also cracked down on immigrants who did not have legal status in the country creating a sense of panic for many in the immigrant community (Rodriguez, 2018). The most dramatic of these crackdowns was seen in the form of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), raids on homes, workplaces, and community gathering spots. ICE raids at the workplace have made immigration a more visible issue in America's small and medium-sized cities in the 21st Century (Kivisto & Faist, 2010). Immigration in media coverage has steadily gained importance in the past decade (Pollock et al., 2014). Since the 2016 Presidential Election, media outlets have continued to devote more coverage to the issue of immigration and a potential wall on the southern U.S. border. The most dramatic statement was the proposed Border Wall between the U.S. and Mexico. Walker (2017) reminds us that walls are not just meant to block but represent interrelated systems. Ideas, people, and cultural products pass through national borders.

Traditional agenda setting models (McCombs, 2005; McCombs & Shaw, 1972) allow researchers to understand how a political agenda is set through established media outlets such as newspapers, radio programs, and television broadcasts. However, news dissemination has shifted more and more to digital media and even through interpersonal and group online

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connections. Also, President Trump often posts unfiltered information directly to his Twitter account. Due to this shift to digital media outlets, scholars (Feezell, 2018; McCombs, 2005) have found that a slightly different adaptation of the theory is often more appropriate to understand the complexities of agenda setting in today's social media world. This is where the adapted theory of agenda melding (Shaw, et. al., 1999) has become a valuable theoretical construction for social media research as it focuses on the salience of the individual social media user (Bantimaroudis, 2021), which is particularly helpful to understand online political communication (Delicote, 2020). In this study, the researchers employ agenda melding as a theoretical lens to explore how belief in social media outlet can predict support for the proposed Border Wall.

2. Immigration & Race

Long before Donald Trump was President Trump, he was a real estate mogul, entrepreneur, and most visibly a reality television star on *The Apprentice*. According to Kellner (2016) this experience in reality television helped Trump create his media persona and communication style. Kellner went on to explain that from the very beginning of his campaign there was a desire to make the U.S./Mexican border an issue in the campaign and Trump's subsequent Presidential administration. Trump stated in his presidential campaign kickoff speech:

The U.S. has become a dumping ground for everybody else's problems. [Applause] Thank you. It's true, and these are the best and the finest. When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best. They're not sending you. They're not sending you. They're sending people that have lots of problems, and they're bringing those problems with us. They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists. And some, I assume, are good people. (Kellner, 2016, p. 9-10)

The statements Trump made about Mexican immigrants, Mexican citizens, and Latinos in general helped polarize the issues of immigration and race very early as part of his political and cultural agendas. Sussman (2017) noted that President Trump was elected on the platform of immigration, primarily a crackdown on undocumented immigrants, while before the year 2000 immigration was a less important issue in the public agenda for presidential elections. Race became an important and visible issue in the Presidential Election in 2008 (Spencer et al., 2012) when President Barak Obama was elected as the first Black U.S. President.

Bobo (2017) noted race has always been present, and racism has been a part of politics, but it became more evident during Trump's Presidency. However, the rhetoric of the 2016 election was not one of inclusiveness but of creating an "us versus them" mentality in terms of immigration by pointing to the supposed dangers immigrants pose to U.S. citizens (Smith, 2019). Hispanics and Latinos were clearly the object of Trump's media agenda as he focused on immigration from Mexico with the Border Wall proposal. Trump even used the term "Bad Hombres" during his 2016 campaign when referring to criminals coming across the Mexican Border. Gonzalez O'Brien et al. (2019) argued that media stories focusing on crimes and partisanship issues surrounding immigration have steadily increased in recent years. Chawla (2018) asserted President Trump's immigration policies unfairly target Latino men. It is also important to note that Mexico is strategically located in the North to South immigration trajectory. Mexico has traditionally been a country of emigrants traveling to the U.S. as well as a transit country for Central American immigrants en route to the U.S. However, Mexico has become a final destination for many Central American immigrants in the past couple of decades who previously might have gone to the more prosperous nations of Panama (Masferrer et al., 2019) and Costa Rica (Spencer, 2018), which are often the preferred Global South destination countries in the region. While the media usually depict immigration as a one-way flow from Mexico to the U.S., it is really a much more complex movement of peoples in Central and North America.

The U.S. government is not new to racially marked immigration policies (Kivisto & Faist, 2010); however, the wall proposal specifically has focused on Latino immigrants from Mexico and Central America. Smith (2018) explained that the border wall plan proposes a wall that would be 1800-miles long and 30-feet high over very difficult terrain. Smith argued that if successfully built this wall would also go against the image of the U.S. as a leader in pro-human rights initiatives since WWII. The wall, while having many supporters, also has many detractors. Environmental activists and scientists have expressed concerns about ecological issues including destroying the habitats of endangered animal species (Lallensack, 2017). The construction could be very invasive to certain parts of the U.S./Mexican borderlands. In the 2020 Presidential Campaign, President Trump alluded to a Border Wall success, however, the amount of new wall constructed by Trump was only 3 miles (Stokols, 2020). The limited progress of building has not stopped the topic from becoming a salient political issue that pops up from time to time in both border states and on the national level.

3. Social Media

The social media landscape continues to evolve rapidly making technology more portable and personal. The lines continue to blur between public and private (McQuail, 2010). Just by scrolling through a news feed on Facebook or Twitter one can find news stories, lifestyle information, and personal tweets from family and friends. While Bullock and Hubner (2020) found that informal social media communication can hurt a political candidate's credibility, Facebook and Twitter have become very important in how Americans create their social online groups and how they consume political news.

Not all consumers find news in a determined and systematic way. According to de Zúñiga, Weeks, and Ardèvol-Abreu (2017) many news consumers are part of a “news finds me” phenomenon in today’s digital world. Under this “news finds me” concept, users literally stumble upon news events and stories on social media. It is important to note that different social media outlets serve different functions for users. Dobkiewicz (2019) found that President Trump tended to make positive Instagram posts in contrast to his perceived negative Twitter persona. The very medium itself might influence the ways that elected officials use social media. Of all the available social media options, Facebook was the dominant source for news in the months of 2016 leading up to the election (Gottfried & Shearer, 2016).

The syndicated news service Associated Press (AP) holds high prestige in the dissemination of information to the media outlets who in turn set the media agenda (Whitney & Becker, 1982). This is particularly interesting in a digital environment as consumers share news stories from media outlets and at times even from the AP itself. Both Twitter and Facebook users can share information directly from the AP and other credible news outlets, as well as non-credible websites. The onus is usually on the consumer to determine the source and credibility of the news that is being shared.

4. Facebook

Facebook is arguably the most important social media outlet in the world. We connect with friends, interact in specialized groups, and most importantly for this study share news with one another in our personal timeline (Gerlich et. al., 2012) which is controlled by the user. At the time this study was conducted in 2016, Facebook reached more than 60 percent of US adults (Gottfried & Shearer, 2016). Companies, politicians, and journalists often depend on Facebook to draw in audiences as well as have those consumers share posts. It was also at the time of the 2016 US Presidential Election that Google and Facebook began to acknowledge and investigate “fake news” posts (Wingfield et. al., 2016). Due to the pressure of fake news on social media some journalists have begun to untangle the relationships between news outlets, consumers, and those outlets, particularly Facebook (Meese & Hurcombe, 2021). In the age of likes and emoticons, there is also an emotional component when sharing or reacting to political news on Facebook (de León & Trilling, 2021). Also, media consumers find news on Facebook to be less credible than if they had encountered it on its original site (Karlsen & Aalberg, 2021). The medium impacts the perceived emotions and credibility of the news shared and consumed on Facebook.

5. Twitter

Twitter has become a very influential platform in terms of political communication. According to Park (2013), Twitter increases political engagement. It is also a medium that allows for candidates and political leaders to self-express. Lancendorfer and Lee (2010) explored the ways political candidates use Twitter to distinguish themselves in an election. Conway, Kenski, and Wang (2015) examined the ways in which Twitter users influence newspapers during election cycles and found that politicians can use social media to shape the agenda of the mainstream media. Media producers, social media sites and news consumers all work together to create unique agendas in a mediated world.

Vergeer (2015) noted that Twitter allows a personalization of messages between the politician and the voter. Twitter is a particularly interesting medium for politicians, strategic communication professionals, and voters who inhabit the same virtual spaces. Politicians can communicate in particularly short “Twitter bites” (Johnson, 2012), which can be linked to videos, audio snippets, photos, and texts. Twitter essentially bridges the gap between the media consumer and media outlet. President Trump effectively utilized Twitter to speak to his supporters as well as his opponents before he was banned from the platform. Kettle (2018) pointed out that Trump would often use Twitter to bypass mainstream media outlets in both his campaign and later in his administration.

6. Agenda Setting

It has been well documented, primarily through agenda-setting research, that media outlets impact the public’s perception of which issues are important political topics (Behr & Igengar, 1985; Dearing, 1989; Kimsey & Hantz, 1978; McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Tong et al., 2020). The media essentially tell the public which key policy issues to think about and to some degree how they should form opinions about those issues (McCombs et al., 1997). Media consumers only have knowledge of important political and social issues through media exposure if they do not have access to direct experience with an issue or political leaders (Noelle-Neumann, 1984) and must form their opinions on the subject through the frames set by the media (Wanta, Golan, & Lee, 2004).

Most people do not have direct exposure to policymakers, thus rely on media outlets to convey the most accurate and up-to-date information on political and other salient issues around the world. The agenda-setting theory is one of the most widely used theories in the field of mass communication research. In the past 5 years scholars have utilized this theory in Asia (Zhou, Kim, Luo, & Qiao, 2016), Latin America (López-López & Vásquez-González, 2018), Africa (Lemke, 2018), and Europe (Brändle, Eisle, & Trenz, 2019; Cushion et al., 2018). Agenda-setting work is vibrant and robust in the 21st century. Salwen (1987) stated agenda setting should not be conceptualized just through mass media outlets. There are other elements that impact the agenda. One of those important political issues is immigration. Agenda setting research

has provided valuable information on the role that U.S. media outlets play for Mexican expatriates voting in Mexican elections (Johnson, Davis, & Cronin, 2009). The media outlets project political and cultural agendas on both sides of the border. However, there is more to this political issue than merely the agenda that media outlets or political leaders set. The agenda is one aspect but must be seen within contexts of interpersonal and social media groups.

7. Agenda Melding

Agenda melding developed from decades of agenda-setting media studies research as scholars found that evolving media technologies allowed users to be more active and seek out information as opposed to being merely passive media consumers (Shaw et al., 1999). Agenda melding explains how media users blend agendas and seek out information from those agendas. Whereas in agenda setting the primary focus is on the power of the media outlet to set an agenda; in agenda melding the focal point is on how the user seeks out information from the various agendas (Shaw & Colistra, 2008) and combines that with online interpersonal networks. According to McCombs, Shaw, and Weaver (2014), there are three basic components to the agenda melding model; they are “1) information about the civic community, 2) information about personal communities, and 3) our personal interests, experience and beliefs.” (2014, p. 795). They go on to explain the importance of the aspect of community in agenda melding as the “authority” of traditional media outlets is less important. It is the complexity and fluidity of agenda melding that makes it an effective theoretical choice for this study.

Even though the impact of salient political issues in traditional media outlets might be less important than before, the mainstream news coverage is still important and impacts the perceptions media consumers form on those issues (Besova, & Cooley, 2009). Over the past 20 years, media scholars (Shaw et al., 1999) have explored the connections between news consumers and social groups, particularly in the context of politically salient issues. McCombs et al. (2014) noted that the authority moves toward these sites and groups they form. Ragas and Roberts (2009) noted that people rather than the media outlets are the ones who drive the agenda in agenda melding. This move away from a centralized media source and to social networking groups is proof that belief in those social media sites is paramount.

McWhorter (2020) noted that an important element to agenda melding is the dialogue about political issues on social media sites. The process of agenda melding evolved as a way to understand and investigate the relationships between and among these social groups and information. Over the past two decades social media outlets such as Facebook then later Twitter formed, reordered, and ultimately created social groups in a mediated landscape. It is important to note that these social networking sites have very different functions and often lead to the formation of groups that are very different from one another. Feezell (2018) noted that media fragmentation has created more specific media audiences for traditional media when they use social media. Domínguez and Dornateche (2013) have applied agenda melding to podcasting in politics as the medium allows listeners to contribute to a political agenda. The future of user-generated and social media content allows for active users who produce and/or share some type of news content.

The researchers in this project aim to add to both the contextual knowledge of political communication while also nuancing the theory of agenda melding by exploring the relationship between belief in social media and support for a salient political issue. Researchers have previously asked participants about media usage and its relation to political opinions (Kaid, Hale, & Williams, 1977). As our society becomes more entrenched in a digital landscape it is vital to better understand how belief in a social media outlet influences political issues. In this project the focus is on belief in social media outlet and the support for Trump’s Border Wall proposal. Thus, considering the influence of social media outlets on political and public opinions, the following research question is proposed:

RQ: To what extent does belief in social media outlet predict support for the proposed Border Wall?

8. Method

Participants

Participants were 232 registered voters in the U.S. (99 men and 133 women). Participants were recruited via a post shared on Facebook, Twitter, and through social networks. Participants’ ages ranged from 18 to 72 years ($M = 34.09$, $SD = 3.87$). Fifty-one participants identified as Republican (22%), 96 identified as Democratic (41.4%), 67 identified as Independent (28.9%), and 18 (7.8%) preferred not to answer. Thirteen participants (5.6%) voted for a third-party candidate, 48 (20.7%) did not vote in the 2016 election, 52 (22.4%) voted for Donald Trump, and 119 (51.3%) voted for Hillary Clinton. The sample was not ethnically diverse: 195 (84.1%) self-identified as Caucasians/Whites, 20 (8.6%) as Latino/a, and 17 (7.3%) came from other ethnic groups. Participant educational background varied: 7 (3%) had completed high school, 9 (3.9%) had completed 1 year of college, 14 (6%) had completed 2 years of college, 22 (9.5%) had completed 3 years of college, 54 (23.3%) had a college degree, 15 (6.5%) had some graduate education, and 111 (47.8%) had completed graduate education. Participants overwhelmingly chose Facebook as their most used social media on a daily basis ($n = 162$, 69.8%), followed by Twitter ($n = 25$, 10.8%), Instagram ($n = 19$, 8.2%), Other/Miscellaneous ($n = 17$, 1.3%), and no social media ($n = 9$, 3.9%).

Procedures and Instrumentation

Participants completed a questionnaire in reference to the extent to which they would be willing to voice their opinions about Trump's proposed border wall. The questionnaire contained the Social Media Use Measure (Spencer & Croucher, 2008), and six semantic differential items that measured perceptions of the proposed border wall.

Social media use was measured using nine Likert-type questions from Spencer and Croucher (2008). The nine items make up two factors: Belief in Social Media and Share Opinion. The items were modified to measure a participant's perception of their most used daily social media in terms of how much they believe it, think it is accurate, think it is fair, think it presents the facts, think it is concerned about the public, and represents their opinion on Trump's proposed wall. Reliabilities have ranged from .70 to .93 (Spencer & Croucher, 2008).

Support for the proposed border wall was measured using six semantic differential items. Participants were asked "To what degree do you believe Trump's proposal for a wall on the U.S./Mexican border is:" negative/positive, unfair/fair, unwise/wise, bad/good, wrong/ right, and unacceptable/acceptable. The scale was measured on a 7-point scale, with 1 being the negative end and 7 being the positive end of the continuum. See Table 1 for the means, standard deviations, correlations, and alphas associated with the study variables.

Table 1. Means, standard deviations, reliability coefficients and correlations

Variable	M	SD	α	(1)	(2)	(3)
(1) Belief in Social Media	2.71	1.50	.86	-	-	-
(2) Share Opinion	3.28	1.41	.90	.23*	-	-
(3) Support for Border Wall	2.81	2.23	.91	.48*	-.16	-

Note: * $p < .01$.

9. Results

The research question asked to what extent does belief in social media predict support for Trump's proposed border wall. To answer this question, a multiple regression was conducted. The dependent variable was support for the border wall. In Model 1, sex, educational level, age, and who the participant voted for in the 2016 Presidential election were entered as variables. Who the participant voted for was dummy coded with Donald Trump serving as the reference candidate. In Model 2, most used social media outlet, level of belief in social media outlet, and extent to which social media outlet shares a participant's opinion were entered as variables. Most used social media outlet was dummy coded with Facebook as the reference group. Regression results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Regression predicting support for proposed border wall

Regressor	Model 1	Model 2
Intercept	5.00	3.81
Sex	-.06	-.05
Educational Level	.05	.06
Age	.04	-.01
Third Party Candidate	-.35**	-.32**
Clinton	-.97**	-.81**
Didn't Vote	-.57**	-.52**
Twitter		-.03
Instagram		.01
No Social Media Use		.20**
Other/Miscellaneous Social Media		.03
Belief in Social Media		.23**
Share Opinion with Social Media		-.08
F	63.43**	38.41**
ΔF		7.75**
R^2	.58	.66
R^2_{adj}	.58	.64

Note: * $p < .01$, ** $p < .001$.

In Model 1, sex, educational level, age, and who a respondent voted for in the 2016 Presidential election were entered as predictors ($R^2_{adj} = .57$). In model 2, most used social media outlet, level of belief in social media outlet, and extent to which social media outlet shares a participant's opinion were entered as variables ($R^2_{adj} = .64$). Model 2 was also a significant improvement over Model 1, ($\Delta F = 7.75$, $p < .001$). As Table 2 reveals, there are significant main effects on support for the border wall. First, those participants who voted for a third-party candidate ($b = -.35$, $p < .001$), didn't vote ($b = -.58$, $p < .001$), and who voted for Hillary Clinton ($b = -.97$, $p < .001$) were significantly less likely to support the wall proposal than those participants who voted for Trump. Individuals who did not use social media on a daily basis were more likely to support the wall ($b = .20$, $p < .001$) than those who used Facebook the most on a daily basis. Finally, belief

in one's social media outlet had a positive effect on support for the wall ($b = .23, p < .001$). Essentially, those who believe their most used social media are more likely to support the wall proposal.

10. Discussion

The results of this study help us better understand agenda melding by exploring the connection between belief in social media and support for an important political issue. Social media outlets provide a space where journalists, politicians, and news consumers all inhabit and possibly interact. Lasorsa, Lewis, and Holton (2012) noted that Twitter was a space for mainstream journalists to often give personal opinions or editorialize on salient issues. While many users consider Twitter to be the primary social media outlet for digital news, Facebook still has the most reach. Both social media platforms played an important role in the 2016 US Presidential Election. Trump's social media style used in the 2016 campaign created an emotional response with social media users (Johnson, 2021). Thus, the need to evaluate belief in the social media outlet is fundamental to understanding the agenda melding impact.

This study has contributed to the knowledge of agenda melding by examining the importance of social media belief toward support for a political issue. The importance of belief in social media is fundamental to understanding how people create social media agenda groups. The most dominant social media outlet used by respondents was overwhelmingly Facebook. The results from this study also hint at the importance of social media in general but also Facebook in particular when it comes to understanding the relationship between timely political issues and the groups that we form in the agenda-melding process.

McCombs (2005) explained that the agenda-setting theory has become so rich and alive because of the diverse ways in which researchers have applied its constructs. By extension we can make the same claim about the possibilities for agenda melding research. McCombs et al. (2014) noted that it is not merely changing technology that provides potentials for agenda melding research, but how we meld our communities online and create our social connections through technology. Future scholarship should continue to examine the ways in which belief in social media outlets influence how we seek out and construct social groups online.

This project has also added contextual knowledge to literature about immigration in the US. Romero and Mercado (2018) explained that undocumented or irregular immigrants often seek to be invisible as they live and work in precarious spaces. It is the obligation of scholars to find ways that promote understanding of the issues faced by irregular immigrants without forcing them to self-identify. They have been thrust in the spotlight by the former President's calls for a Border Wall. This research project has examined support for such a proposal. The goal of current political communication and social media scholarship is to better understand the ways politics and social media sites work together to create the digital media agenda (Conway, Kenski, & Wang, 2015).

Chow and Knowles (2015) argued that some dominant group members engage in agenda setting to maintain racial hierarchies. These hierarchies can be shared over social media outlets. For many White Americans the wall would be just that, a political division to curb the flow of illegal immigrants. For many Americans of Color, especially Latino/Latinx Americans, it is nearly impossible to separate the issue of immigration from race and possibly their own identity. This research has also explored how political attitudes toward the Border Wall are influenced by online social networks.

All studies have strengths and weaknesses. This study has two weaknesses. First, while the sample was large enough for statistical analysis, a larger sample size would enhance generalizability arguments. A larger sample would allow researchers to include a more diverse pool of respondents. It was particularly difficult to obtain participants for this study due to the sensitive and polarizing issue of the topic and because of the divided political nature of the United States. The study also could have benefited from a qualitative component. This project explains how belief in social media functions as a predictor of political support for an issue; however, an open-ended addition to the questionnaire would have allowed for an understanding of why respondents believed in their chosen media outlet.

This study illustrates a clear and interesting connection between social media outlets and the media agenda. The context of the Border Wall is both politically salient and culturally important to the 2020 Presidential Election. This research also sheds light on how social media users feel about current and future U.S. immigration policy. Agenda melding can help us better understand how social media connections influence feelings toward political issues. Social media sites will continue to play important roles in political issues and future elections.

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