

# Intercandidate Facebook Agenda-Building Effect Of Webb County Judge Election Campaigns On the US-Mexico Border

Efectos de la construcción de agendas en Facebook  
para las campañas electorales de los candidatos a jueces  
del Condado de Webb en la frontera México-Estados Unidos

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## ABSTRACT

Maxwell McCombs proposed a hypothesis that required testing in the digital media. McCombs predicted that the correlation between new media agendas would need to be greatly opposing rather than greatly redundant, like those typically found in traditional media agendas. This study tested McCombs' hypothesis and provides evidence that confirms it. The research examines the Facebook (FB) agenda-building effect between two Democratic candidates, Danny Valdez and Tano Tijerina, who ran for the Webb County judge seat during the 2014 Texas primary. The census sample included a total of 246 FB posts, 73 percent from Valdez and 27 percent from Tijerina. The FB agenda-building effect of election issues showed a slight positive correlation ( $\rho = + 0.286$ ) between the two Democratic candidates. Similar behavior was observed in the FB agenda-building effect of positive personal attributes, showing a slight positive correlation ( $\rho = + 0.386$ ). These results show that both FB agenda-building effects have a weak degree of interdependence, indicating that the Democratic candidates' agendas were independent of each other.

**Key words:** agenda-setting theory, agenda-building effect, Facebook, political communication, Webb County, U.S.-Mexico Border

## RESUMEN

Maxwell McCombs propuso una hipótesis que requiere ser probada en los medios digitales. McCombs predijo que la relación entre las agendas de los medios digitales tendría necesariamente que ser enormemente opuesta en lugar de enormemente redundante, como las que típicamente se encuentran en las agendas mediáticas de los medios tradicionales. El presente estudio pone

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a prueba la hipótesis de McCombs y aporta evidencia que la confirma. Esta investigación analiza el efecto del agenda-*building* en Facebook (FB) entre dos candidatos demócratas –Danny Valdez y Tano Tijerina– contendientes por la posición de juez del Condado de Webb durante las elecciones primarias del 2014 en Texas. La muestra tipo censo consta de un total de 246 FB posts, un 73 por ciento de Valdez y un 27 por ciento de Tijerina. El efecto del agenda-*building* en FB en relación con los temas de la campaña demostró en la correlación una ligera tendencia positiva ( $\rho = + 0.286$ ) entre los dos candidatos demócratas. Un similar comportamiento fue observado en el efecto de FB en relación con las características personales positivas de los candidatos que mostró una correlación ligeramente positiva ( $\rho = + 0.386$ ). Estos resultados mostraron que los efectos de agenda-*building* en FB son débiles en relación con su grado de interdependencia, indicando que las agendas de los candidatos demócratas fueron independientes una de la otra.

**Palabras clave:** comunicación política, condado de Webb, efecto de agenda-*building*, Facebook, frontera Estados Unidos-México y teoría del agenda-*setting*.

## INTRODUCTION

In 2008, Barack Obama’s presidential campaign team introduced the groundbreaking use of social media in politics. It functioned as a direct digital communication connection from the presidential candidate to U.S. American voters and vice versa. James Burnes, a member of Obama’s social media team, explained that Obama used social media for two main purposes: fundraising and grassroots outreach. He indicated that Obama’s team used three strategies during his 2008 campaign: first, to integrate the use of the Internet into the activities of the whole campaign; and second, to implement an innovative fundraising strategy. The team did fundraising online with the notion that there was no such thing as a small contribution. Obama supporters could donate online starting at US\$5; the campaign received 3 million online donations, generating US\$6.5 million. The third strategy was an innovative grassroots online movement keeping the individual perspective to make voters realize that their opinions mattered to Obama. The campaign concentrated on people, their stories, their problems, and their opinions, not on Obama’s. The social media strategy was not “candidate-centered,” but “voter-centered,” with the purpose of creating regular connections between the Obama campaign and its supporters to make voters feel part of the Obama team (Burnes, 2008).

Sam Graham-Felsen, a member of Obama’s Internet team, stated, “Social media gives ordinary people an extraordinary power. It gives you a megaphone to broadcast your views and opinions to thousands of people instantaneously. It gives you the ability to immediately find other people that share your values and reach out to them and see if they would like to organize with you for change” (2012: 1). That is,

social media is a two-way dynamic, not just one-way; the model is interactive with a constant exchange of ideas. Graham-Felsen remembers that about 100 individuals were devoted to producing social media in 2008.

Joe Rospars, Obama's main digital strategist, explained the type of social content that individuals favored, "People like more pictures, people like videos, and people will pass it around to demonstrate that there is a value proposition.... They like to see the behind the scenes of all this stuff happen" (2013: at 1 min., 30 sec.). In all, Obama had 2 319 102 friends on FB; 833 161 friends on My Space; 141 044 followers on Twitter; and a YouTube channel, known as "Barack Obama Channel," created in September 2006. The site had approximately 115 000 subscribers, accessing the 1 792 videos uploaded by the Obama campaign. Also, the campaign incorporated mobile devices into their strategy by creating an iPhone application, several cell-phone ring tones, and by sending mass text messages to voters (Burnes, 2008).

Generally, few voters had the opportunity to get to know candidates first-hand, mainly through grassroots activities specifically designed to reach out to them, such as rallies, block-walking, knocking on doors, fundraiser luncheons and dinners, speeches at important organizations, school visits, and attending public debates, among others. Nevertheless, social media allows voters to directly participate in the candidate's campaign, a constant first-hand experience, and to create a digital community. In 2008, for the first time, voters had access to a technological platform that allowed them to voice their concerns directly to politicians, to comment and participate in discussions, as well as to have access to a political candidate at any time of the day or night. This innovative Web 2.0 digital tool is free, easy to access, massive, interactive, and non-stop 24/7.

Social networking sites (SNS) are a technological tool that gives voice to the voiceless. Another important factor is that SNS are an innovative way to disseminate political information. Anyone in the world can have access to social media; the candidate's interaction with audiences is not limited to voters, but a global link to people, an instant internationalization of the candidate's reach. Several election officials running for office at the federal, state, county, and local levels rapidly adopted SNS in their campaigns to reach out to voters. The political communication dynamic has changed with the integration of SNS, which include features such as massive instant information delivery, direct interactivity between candidates and voters, as well as the ability to merge across several platforms.

However, in traditional forms of political communication like face-to-face speeches at town hall meetings and campaign events, among others, candidates depended on journalists to massively deliver their message to voters. With SNS, journalists have no role in this innovative flow of communication. As of March 2014, FB reported having

1.28 billion active users per month worldwide. As the literature review below illustrates, several national studies have examined the use of FB as a campaign tool. However, only a limited number of research projects have observed this dynamic in the local political arena.

The purpose of this study is to test the hypothesis of one of the founding fathers of agenda setting theory, Maxwell McCombs, regarding the digital media. McCombs stated that the correlation between new (Internet-based) media agendas would need to be negative, showing a weak correlation between agendas, and suggesting that the agendas are independent of each other. In other words, McCombs hypothesizes that the new media agendas would not be redundant like those typically found in traditional media agendas (newspapers, TV, and radio), and which typically present a strong positive correlation between agendas, implying an interdependence between them (McCombs, 2004).

This research examines the utilization of social media in a U.S.-Mexico border-county judgeship political race by analyzing the public image that two Texas political candidates presented to voters on FB.<sup>1</sup> Two Democratic candidates were running in their party's primary election and no Republican candidate registered for this position. They were Daniel "Danny" Valdez, 61, and Cayetano "Tano" Tijerina, 40. For the first time in his political career, Valdez hired an out-of-town political consultant who encouraged him to use social media. However, 2014 was the second time that Valdez used social media for campaigning purposes. To him, social media is more about gossip and can injure a candidate more than assist him as a communication resource. As he recently explained, "I learned [during the 2010 campaign] that social media does not get the vote out" (Valdez, 2014). In addition, Valdez's son, a graduate student at Texas A&M University in College Station, advised him that social media does not work in Webb County. Traditionally, the method of campaign operation that Valdez had liked was grassroots activity, such as block-walking, door-knocking, and dances, among others.

In 2010, Tijerina was the first candidate in Webb County to incorporate social media into his campaign.<sup>2</sup> He believed that his county was ready for political communication through social media. In an interview, Tijerina stated that social media worked for his campaign and that it was fun for him. He strongly believed that FB

<sup>1</sup> The Constitution of the State of Texas declares that the governing body for each county is the Commissioners' Court, which, in the case of Webb County, consists of a county judge and four commissioners representing each of the four precincts, the county's political administration subdivision representatives. The Commissioners' Court is responsible for the county's administrative and judicial affairs.

<sup>2</sup> Webb County is located in the southern United States, in Southeast Texas on the U.S.-Mexico border. The state government is divided into 254 counties; a county is a local political administration geographically larger than a city or town. The city of Laredo, Texas, is the county seat, and Webb County is the largest in South Texas, with a territory of 3 375.6 square miles. It was created on January 28, 1848 by the Second Texas Legislature.

can get the vote out (Tijerina, 2014). On Election Day, Tijerina encouraged his FB followers and friends to get out and vote. He also encouraged them to motivate their friends and relatives who did not have a FB account to vote as well.

This study examined Valdez's and Tijerina's agenda-building processes by identifying a set of issues and the candidates' personal attributes as presented to their FB friends and followers. This article examines the role that FB had in the 2014 Webb County judgeship primary election. In light of agenda-setting theory, I document the FB agenda-building effect of Democratic candidates in a local election. The distinguishing factor in the use of SNS in this border community is the requirement that political messages disseminated on FB must satisfy the demands of a bicultural and bilingual (English and Spanish) voter base.<sup>3</sup>

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Agenda-setting theory explains relationships among the mass media, the public, and policymakers, providing an understanding of the degree of similarities or differences in their interconnection (McCombs and Shaw, 1972). Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee (1954) note that political behavior emerges from how political events are covered by the media, which have the potential to impact electoral results. To them, the news media influences voters by focusing on coverage of a particular list of issues over others and by providing more exposure in the news of certain policy domains but not others. Likewise, B. C. Cohen stated that the mass media "may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about" (1963: 13).

Agenda-setting theory lays out three major areas of research: the media, the public, and policymakers (Rogers and Dearing, 1988). Usually, agenda-setting research consists of a comparison between the issues that the media most frequently presents to voters (the media's agenda) and the issues that those voters consider important to them (the public's agenda). Soroka, Farnsworth, Lawlor, and Young (2015) argue that the media matters throughout the whole policy process, because it can help to set an agenda that can be recognized by politicians, policymakers, and other actors. They suggest that media can create by their very nature a sense of urgency, drawing

<sup>3</sup> According to the 2010 Census, the county's total population was 250 340, the great majority (162 146) over 18 years of age, and more females (128 816) than males (121 488); the median age is 28 (Agnew, 2012; U.S. Census Bureau, 2010b). The vast majority of the population (95.4 percent) consider themselves Hispanic or Latino, while the breakdown of the rest is Asian, 0.7 percent; Native American, 0.6 percent; African-American, 0.6 percent; and white, 3.6 percent. The 2010 census cited the median income for households at US\$37,868 and the poverty rate at 30.6 percent (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010a).

attention to key players, using them as sources as well as stressing their role in the conversation. They further argue that the media can focus its attention on the consequences of policies and on the different types of policy solutions, functioning as a communications bridge between government officials and the public. "Indeed, mass media are in the unique position of having a regular, marked impact on policy, but from outside the formal political sphere, often without even being recognized as a policy player" (Soroka et al., 2015: 1).

However, media effects are limited by politicians' media consumption patterns. For instance, Walgrave, Soroka, and Nuytemans conducted a longitudinal study of media, Parliament, and the Belgium government from 1993 to 2000, in which they examined whether the media determines or codetermines the political agenda, focusing on political institutional agendas, media outlets, and issues. The researchers defined political agenda as a list of issues to which political actors pay attention. The results indicated that media effects vary depending on the type of political agenda analyzed, the type of media examined, and the types of issues covered in a particular given time: "Newspapers exert more influence than does television, Parliament is somewhat more likely to follow media than government, and media effects are larger for certain issues (law and order, environment) than for others (foreign policy, economic issues)" (2008: 814). The researchers documented that Belgium has a closed political system and that politicians have diverse forms of media consumption.

Furthermore, agenda-setting theory has developed in other areas such as the inter-media agenda-setting effect, focusing on the comparison of how journalists from different news organizations cover the same election/event/topic/issue. Aruguete (2015) argues that the media is not neutral or independent of the political arena. She believes that the media is a political actor in and of itself with special interests and a particular set of goals that narrates events from its own perspectives, seeking that the public and politicians mirror their points of view. She suggests that the media's editorial process, in which a few issues are selected for journalistic coverage, as well as the degree of importance that those particular issues will receive when distributed to audiences, marks a particular political position that the media takes. This part of the process is known as "agenda sender," where the media highlights some issues and hides others. To Aruguete, the agenda process centers on the construction of news and the elements that influence this news-gathering process.

For example, Flores and McCombs (2008) investigated the inter-media, agenda-setting effect between two Spanish-language television network national newscasts regarding their coverage of the 2004 U.S. presidential election. The results indicated that Univision generated 139 election news items, 55 percent of which concentrated on general election coverage such as voting procedures, polls, debate, and voter edu-

cation, while 45 percent of its news stories covered issues such as terrorism, immigration, education, and taxes, among others. Telemundo produced 57 news stories; 79 percent were general election coverage and 21 percent were about issues. The inter-media, agenda-setting effect between Univision and Telemundo was strong with a correlation of  $\rho = + 0.750$ , indicating that the topics presented on both newscasts were very similar, creating an interdependency with one another. Flores and McCombs also examined the agenda-setting effect between both Spanish TV newscasts and Latino voters, finding a strong correlation of  $\rho = + 0.720$  between them. This indicated that the information presented in the news stories was very similar to the election information that Latino voters considered significant.

Another area of agenda-setting theory is the policymaker's agenda-setting effect, also known as the agenda-building effect, which focuses on the study of how the public creates a social movement to attract politicians' attention in order to get them to introduce a topic into their legislative agendas. Agenda-building effects also allow for the study of how politicians build their own public images by having complete control of the information they release to voters. The process of the agenda-building effect can be examined from two perspectives: the public-generated agenda and the politically-generated agenda.

The public's agenda is described in the following statement: "The process by which demands of various groups in the population are translated into items vying for the serious attention of public officials can appropriately be called agenda building" (Cobb, Ross, and Ross, 1976). The agenda-building process consists of the study of social and grassroots movements, such as protests, marches, boycotts, and speeches by social leaders to observe how a group of people raises awareness in their community about a particular issue or politician. When the public generates awareness about an issue, three steps in the agenda-building process can be observed: issue creation (a triggering event), issue expansion (public support), and agenda entrance (attention from policymakers). Once an issue makes it to the policymakers' agenda, several characteristics can be noticed: the degree of specificity, complexity, categorical precedence, temporal relevance, and social impact (Cobb and Elder, 1972).

For instance, during the 2004 U.S. presidential Bush-Kerry election, Flores, Adams-Means, and McCombs (2017) studied, how the Hip-Hop Summit Action Network (HSAN) organized a political activism campaign through hip-hop music to motivate young people aged 18 to 35 to vote. The non-partisan HSAN was comprised of hip-hop music industry leaders, performers, political leaders, activists, academicians, and hip-hop music followers. HSAN organized 26 summits across the nation to promote voter education, voter registration, and voting. In addition, hip-hop fans had the opportunity to express themselves through the Play Station 2 survey distributed

at HSN's summits. The research outcomes determined that the degree of correlation between HSN's agenda and hip-hop fans' agenda was not significant ( $\rho = +0.113$ ), indicating that the agendas were independent of each other.

On the other hand, the study of politician-generated agendas encompasses those communication strategies to shape the media's and public's perception of a particular issue or candidate (Cobb, Ross, and Ross, 1976). The agenda-building process takes place in press releases, press conferences, TV and radio ads, newspaper ads, speeches, personal interviews with the media, SNS, websites, and apps, among others. In each of those favorable messages, candidates build up a particular news agenda by selecting a list of topics they want to present to the public; each of those topics has a set of perspectives or issue positions. In addition, the candidates, through those favorable messages, highlight an individual public image or corporate public image by building a set of positive attributes.

The present study focuses on the politician-generated agenda, documenting how two Democratic candidates produce their own political campaign messages on FB. The digital world has presented a new medium to be examined, inquiring if the agenda-building effect detected in traditional media can also be observed in SNS. The agenda-building process in SNS can be noted in websites, YouTube videos, photo galleries, Twitter, FB, Instagram, and e-mails, among other digital means of disseminating information that politicians use to influence voters. These innovative digital tools have created a perfect opportunity to examine the role of FB in local political campaigns. FB can reach a great number of individuals simultaneously, and it is free. Consequently, every candidate can use it.

Johnson and Perlmutter (2010) argued that the Internet has equaled the print media as people's top choice for information; in this context, there is no longer a single media agenda. From their perspective, traditional political campaigns with centralized power and planning are not dead; on the contrary, they co-exist with digital platforms because this is a new political era. Indeed, the SNS's particular 2.0 characteristics, such as instantaneous mass distribution and simultaneous interaction between account holders and their followers, are the main features in this innovative political period. SNS has changed the way political candidates set their agendas.

Plotkowiak, Grubenmann, and Stanoevska-Slabeva (2011) argued that the way SNS forms an agenda is based on two activities: 1) actions performed by the social media account holder; and, 2) reactions from their followers who comment on the particular information presented by the account holder in his/her virtual space. Nevertheless, the same authors acknowledge that account holders act as gatekeepers by accepting or not accepting a particular person/organization as their friend/follower because, in a way, those friends define the relevance of information posted on the holder's



account by commenting on it, recommending it, and sharing it. This interactive digital process among account holder, friends, and followers can be in the form of public messages (public timeline), reply to public messages (comments/feedback), and private messages (only the account holder has access to them), facilitating online dialogue.

In September 2006, FB invited candidates registered to run in the midterm congressional races for U.S. Senate and House of Representatives to create and host profiles in their system that allowed candidates to have friends and to have a space for people to post comments. Sweetser and Lariscy (2008) documented that 88 candidates (32 senators and 56 House representatives) from 18 states accepted the invitation. They considered FB's offer "the greatest dialogic move to date in strategic communication online" (Sweetser and Lariscy, 2008: 176). The outcomes showed that in the House, Democrats' followers were more engaged in dialogue (54 percent) than Republican followers (46 percent). In the Senate races, FB users were very involved with both parties' candidates: Republicans (51 percent) and Democrats (49 percent). The researchers indicated that FB users perceive themselves to be "friends" of the political candidate by writing supportive and positive messages. However, their findings showed that candidates rarely respond to FB comments, suggesting that candidates are not perceiving FB as a two-way, symmetrical, relationship-building process.

FB was created to facilitate social ties among people, generating a sense of digital community. Anyone in the world with a valid e-mail address can join the FB community by creating a personal profile that presents information about him- or herself. Also, FB is a social networking digital space where users can create a FB group that can be public (open) or private (by invitation only), where members who share similar interests can engage in dialogue. For example, Woolley, Limperos, and Olivier (2010) analyzed the content of the top four user-generated FB groups of the 2008 U.S. presidential candidates, Barack Obama (D) and John McCain (R), to understand how they were portrayed across those FB groups. The results showed that Obama's groups had a higher membership rate, as well as higher levels of activity than McCain's. In addition, the Democratic candidate was showcased in a more positive way than the Republican.

Likewise, Fernandes, Giurcanu, Bowers, and Neely (2010) analyzed the content of the FB groups of nine college students supporting the 2008 presidential candidates in seven battleground states (Colorado, Florida, Indiana, Missouri, Nevada, North Carolina, and Ohio). The outcomes showed that students used FB to encourage civic involvement and discussion regarding the political process, issues, campaign information, candidates, and merchandise. In addition, students used FB groups to organize local events and display their support for the candidate. As in the previous study, Obama's groups reported more activity than McCain's.

Robertson, Vatrappu, and Medina (2010) examined two years of FB comments posted on the FB pages of Barack Obama, John McCain, and Hillary Clinton, focusing on participation patterns of usage. The results indicated that FB users spent their time interacting on a single candidate's wall; of the three candidates, Obama prompted the most traffic and comments. Nonetheless, the study also documented that some FB users like to post on multiple candidates' walls. Those people tend to be more verbose, provide more outside links, be engaged for a longer period, and refer more often directly to candidates.

In that same election period, other groups of researchers observed the FB group "Join the Coffee Party Movement," founded in January 2010 by filmmaker Annabel Park to create resistance to the national Tea Party movement. Mascaro, Novak, and Goggins (2012) documented that this FB group had 355 000 followers across the nation. Their research analyzed the organization's posts made by administrators as well as the comments made by their group members. The outcome pointed out that the FB group's structure, centralization, and leadership fluctuated greatly over time. They also showed that the FB group administrators acted as gatekeepers by choosing to include specific information only, and they also affected the group's structure by playing different roles, such as administrators, participants, and discussion moderators.

Age is an important factor in the use of SNS. According to the Pew Research Internet Project, social media played a significant role in promoting the vote during the 2012 U.S. presidential election, particularly among voters aged 18-49. The research results indicated that registered voters used social media such as FB and Twitter to let others know how they voted, encourage their friends to vote, and become inspired to vote by their social media friends (Rainie, 2012).

In the 2012 election, the presidential candidates were Barack Obama (D) and Mitt Romney (R). Bronstein (2013) evaluated the FB content of the 2012 candidates, demonstrating that both contenders used FB to gain social and economic capital in the form of donations and volunteer work, and by asking supporters to share their posts with their friends. In addition, Bronstein found that the most frequent type of language of persuasion present on the FB posts of both candidates' profiles was emotional, aiming to create some kind of association or bond with their viewers.

Another study on the use of FB during the 2012 election period, conducted by Shafi and Vultee (2016), also focused on the FB posts of presidential candidates during the general election phase (October 1 to November 6, Election Day). The results indicated that 66 percent of the FB posts came from Romney and 34 percent from Obama, with a non-significant positive correlation ( $\rho = + 0.460$ ) between their FB agendas. For both candidates, the "no specific issue" category ranked at the top with 65 percent for Romney and 46 percent for Obama. This category encapsulated no

issue-related information, but only messages about campaign activities, seeking campaign volunteers, voting information, and encouraging citizens to get out and vote. The economy ranked second for both candidates, Obama with 26 percent and Romney with 23 percent. On the FB agenda, Obama had a tie between education, health, and women issues for third place, with 6 percent for each issue; for Romney, third place was government, with 3 percent.

A separate study that collected data from Labor Day to Election Day, covering 30 more days than the previous study, also scrutinized the presidential candidates' FB pages. Santana and Camaj (2015) determined that FB issue agenda results pointed to a significant positive correlation ( $\rho = + 0.718$ ) between both candidates' FB pages. The top issue for Obama was "living standards," and for Romney, it was "unemployment." In addition, the study explored the relationship between the candidates' FB agenda and FB commentators' agendas, showing a positive correlation for both Obama ( $\rho = + 0.707$ ) and for Romney ( $\rho = + 0.594$ ), documenting a successful transfer of issues from the presidential candidates' FB pages to their FB followers. So far, the results of those studies have documented both a significant correlation of interdependency and a weak correlation of interdependency. Nevertheless, both studies examined the dynamics of political candidates in a national setting. The present research, however, attempts to document the behavior of political candidates in a local setting.

This study contributes to the agenda-building body of knowledge from two perspectives: first, by testing McCombs's hypothesis, which predicted that the correlation between new media agendas would need to be negative, showing a weak correlation between agendas, and suggesting that the agendas are independent of each other, offering a diversification of content. The second perspective is that, while the predominant research regarding the FB agenda in the digital political communications dynamic has examined international and national settings, considerably less attention has been paid to the study of local FB agenda interaction. Not much evidence exists of the FB agenda applicability in local elections of communities located on the U.S.-Mexico border. This research was conducted in a unique bicultural and bilingual site, the southern border. This article documents how border political candidates competing at the local level integrate and implement FB as a campaign communications tool to disseminate their political messages to voters.

Furthermore, this research determines the FB political agendas of two Democratic candidates running for the position of Webb County judge during the March 2014 primary election. In addition, it measures the agenda-building effect of those FB agendas to determine the degree of similarity or difference between them in order to identify the degree of interdependency or independence between those FB agendas. In other words, this study identifies whether or not Valdez's and Tijerina's political

messages to voters were different or alike. Five research questions guided this inter-candidate FB agenda-building investigation: first, what were the FB election issues agendas for Valdez and Tijerina? Second, what were Valdez's and Tijerina's FB personal attributes agendas? Third, what was the inter-candidate FB agenda-building effect of Valdez's and Tijerina's election issue agendas? Fourth, what was the inter-candidate FB agenda-building effect of Valdez's and Tijerina's personal attributes agendas? And fifth, does the inter-candidate FB agenda-building effect of Valdez's and Tijerina's FB agendas confirm or reject McCombs's digital media hypothesis? The next section presents the particulars of this research design.

## METHODOLOGY

The methodology for the present study consists of a two-step process. The first determines Valdez's and Tijerina's FB issues agendas as well as their FB personal attributes agendas. In order to identify those agendas, I conducted a content analysis of Valdez's and Tijerina's FB pages. I captured a census sample of each post that appeared on both candidates' FB pages for 90 consecutive days, from December 5, 2013 to March 4, 2014, the official time frame for political campaigning. The unit of analysis was every FB post. This examination yielded a total of 246 FB posts, 73 percent (180 posts) from Valdez and 27 percent (66 posts) from Tijerina.

The variables "general issues" and "campaign issues" were used to establish the candidates' issue agendas. The first variable measures all FB posts that discussed a particular issue such as education, economy, health, and immigration, among others. However, no general issues were found,<sup>4</sup> and only seven campaign issues were identified:<sup>5</sup> voting procedures, rallies, political TV ads, block-walking, endorsements, debate, and fundraising.

In addition, I used two more variables to establish the candidates' personal attributes. The variable "positive" measures favorable personal attributes, and the variable "negative" measures damaging personal attributes. Positive and negative personal attributes were coded into seven categories: family, intelligence, leadership, experience, integrity, socializing, and other. Coders carefully examined each FB post and performed the inter-coder reliability test, resulting in a 95 percent coefficient of reliability among coders.

<sup>4</sup> General issues are topics that have a direct impact on voters' lives, such as education, immigration, taxes, economy, and health, among others.

<sup>5</sup> Campaign issues are topics that have no direct impact on voters' lives such as rallies, dances, voter education, political ads, and block-walking, among others.

The second methodological step determined Valdez's and Tijerina's agenda-building effect of FB election-issue agendas and their FB personal-attributes agendas. A statistical analysis was conducted to determine the degree of similarity or difference between FB agendas. Specifically, I used the Spearman's rank-order correlation coefficient ( $\rho$ ) to assess the degree of correlation. A correlation coefficient of +1.0 would indicate perfect agreement; a correlation coefficient of 0.0, no agreement; and a correlation coefficient of -1.0 would indicate perfect inverse agreement.

The  $\rho$  statistic requires that each category analyzed be ranked in order of importance, and the importance of each category was determined by the frequency of posts. Therefore, the categories within the "campaign issues" variable were ranked from first to last separately for each candidate. Specifically, within the "campaign issues" variable, the categories of voting procedures, rallies, political TV ads, block-walking, endorsements, debate, and fundraising were ranked. The same procedure was followed within the "personal-attributes" variable, ranking the categories of family, intelligence, leadership, experience, integrity, social skills, and other. Negative candidate personal attributes were found to be very few in number for both candidates; therefore, it was not possible to perform a statistical analysis of them.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This article examines the role that FB played in the 2014 primary election for judge of Webb County. This section presents the outcomes for each of the five research questions that guided this inter-candidate agenda-building investigation, beginning with the FB campaign-issue agendas for each of the Democratic candidates. At the time of the election, the incumbent Webb County judge, the Honorable Judge Valdez, was the twenty-second judge to serve in office. He had served two consecutive three-year terms since January 1, 2007, and was reelected in 2010. After finishing his high school education, Valdez decided to join the Navy for four years, subsequently enrolling in Laredo Junior College.

Valdez started his 32-year public service career as justice of the peace, holding that position for 24 years. Under his leadership, the county established a working partnership with the City of Laredo, formed the County Legislative Committee, supported alternative ways of generating electricity using wind farms, and completed water and sewage improvements for homes, as well as sewage improvements in the rural towns of Rio Bravo and El Cenizo. Also, Valdez supported Texas House Bill 136 (2007) to limit school district taxes on the elderly as well as the disabled, and completed the county's Youth Village for juvenile offenders, among other things. The 2014

election was the third time that Valdez ran for county judge. His campaign motto was “Experience money can’t buy.”

Valdez had a personal FB account to promote his campaign. A personal account is a personal timeline that lets the user connect with friends, post his/her thoughts, pictures, videos, and view friends’ posts through their news feed. Advertising on a timeline is prohibited. At the time of this study, Valdez had 4 989 FB friends and 219 followers. Valdez did not manage his own FB page, but was assisted in this task by his campaign team. The results indicate that 180 posts were uploaded over the 90-day campaign period. The source of the majority of the posts (53 percent) was the candidate himself; however, 47 percent came from his FB friends by means of posting directly on his wall and tagging him with text, photo, or text and photo. This means that the candidate was able to build a political agenda on his FB wall, but the high volume of FB friends’ activity created noise, or a distraction, on his page. The most frequent type of post was 31 percent plain text, followed by 26 percent text and photo gallery, 20 percent text and photo, 12 percent only photo, 4 percent text and video, 4 percent only video, 1 percent photo gallery, and 1 percent other. The videos were campaign ads, debates, rallies, and endorsements linked to his YouTube account, which stored all his audio/visual information.<sup>6</sup>

Of Valdez’s 180 posts, only 33 percent (60) presented election information. Furthermore, an in-depth examination of the campaign-issues variable, as shown in Table 1, produced the following: 22 percent rally activities, 20 percent block-walking activities, 18 percent debates, 18 percent voting procedures, 12 percent fundraising events, 5 percent endorsements, and 5 percent presenting his political TV ads. The remaining 67 percent (120 posts) of the time, topics presented on FB were not related to the election process. The outcomes indicate that those non-election topics were 32 percent social events, 26 percent work-related activities, 21 percent voters expressing their support for Valdez, 14 percent FB friends paying their respects to Valdez because his father passed away during the first month of the campaign, and 8 percent other.

The challenger was Tijerina, a wealthy rancher, businessman, and former professional baseball player with the Milwaukee Brewers. In 2002, he earned a bachelor’s degree in kinesiology with a minor in criminal justice from Texas A&M International University. In 2010, the first time that Tijerina ran for county judge, two of his campaign managers wanted him to change his personal image from wearing a cowboy-like outfit (boots, jeans, cowboy belt buckle, knife on the side of his pocket, and white cowboy hat) to a more urban look (blue-collar shirt, slacks, and shoes). Tijerina decided to let them go because he wanted to stay true to himself, a true cowboy, because that

<sup>6</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC\\_alLCBqwjFu4P167rUbjGQ](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC_alLCBqwjFu4P167rUbjGQ).

is who he is. Tijerina loves to be challenged; as he said, "Tell me that I cannot do something and I will prove to you that I can; that is who I am. It's engraved in me!" (Tijerina, 2013). Consequently, the night of Election Day 2010, when Tijerina lost the political race, he decided to run for office again in 2014. Tijerina's campaign colors were red and yellow on both occasions, not the patriotic approach of red, white, and blue. His political campaign slogan was "What time is it?"

According to Tijerina's political website,<sup>7</sup> his political platform consisted of three main topics: public safety, public health, and public service. Tijerina planned to incorporate a couple of first responders' services, such as fire and emergency medical services, and to build a new correctional facility. He also intended to restore health services, to establish an adult drug rehabilitation program, to provide a clean water supply for the county, and to establish an effective leadership strategy that "puts public service above self-service."

Tijerina's social media campaign strategy consisted of a website and Twitter, YouTube,<sup>8</sup> and FB accounts. Tijerina had three FB accounts: one personal, known as "Tano Tijerina" that he kept for his family and friends, and two FB business pages known as "Tano for County Judge" for his campaign. The FB personal page is a personal, private communication venue where people make friend requests to the account owner, who can accept or reject them. Once someone becomes a friend, they can post information on Tijerina's wall. The owner of the FB account can have friends and followers.

On the other hand, FB business pages are created to help connect people to business and/or non-profit organizations. FB business pages allow advertisements. Usually, users can "like" the page and immediately start receiving messages from the account owner, but only the owner can post on his/her wall. Consequently, the owner can only have followers, not friends. At the time of this study, Tijerina's FB campaign pages had about 4 983 followers on each business page and another 4 000 on his personal page. Tijerina could reach about 14 000 people from his computer or smart phone, not counting the multiplier effect of his followers' friends and his friends' friends. He likes to manage his own social media accounts; every morning he likes to go on FB to congratulate people who are celebrating their birthdays.

Of the 90-day campaign cycle, Tijerina had activity on his FB page for 39 days (43 percent), but for 51 days (57 percent), he did not: so, the number of days that reported no FB activity was higher than those with activity. Tijerina was the source of all 66 posts due to the technological nature of his FB business page. The type of content most frequently used was 31 percent text and photo; followed by 22 percent, only text; 18 per-

<sup>7</sup> [www.tanoforcountyjudge.com](http://www.tanoforcountyjudge.com).

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UChtKyHsummD738rPg7mrzA>.

cent, text and video; 12 percent, only photo; 9 percent, text and photo gallery; 6 percent, text with photo and link; and 2 percent photo gallery. Of Tijerina’s 66 posts on FB, the majority (77 percent, or 51 posts) disseminated election information, and 23 percent (15 posts) were about other topics such as social life, family, and voters’ support. Further examination of the type of campaign issues that Tijerina presented on FB indicated that 41 percent were about voting procedures; 25 percent, rally activities; 20 percent, presentation of political tv ads; 6 percent, block-walking activities; 6 percent endorsements; and 2 percent, debates (see Table 1).

**Table 1**  
INTER-CANDIDATE FACEBOOK AGENDA-BUILDING EFFECT, CAMPAIGN ISSUES

Campaign Issues	Danny Valdez N=60			Tano Tijerina N=51		
	Frequency	Percentage	Ranking	Frequency	Percentage	Ranking
Voting procedures	11	18	(3.5)	21	41	(1)
Rally	13	22	(1)	13	25	(2)
Political TV ad	3	5	(6.5)	10	20	(3)
Block-walking	12	20	(2)	3	6	(4.5)
Endorsement	3	5	(6.5)	3	6	(4.5)
Debate	11	18	(3.5)	1	2	(6)
Fundraising	7	12	(5)	0	0	(7)

Spearman’s rho correlation = +0.286

**Valdez’s and Tijerina’s FB Positive Personal-Attributes Agendas**

The second research question inquired about Valdez’s and Tijerina’s FB personal-attributes agendas. The target audience for each FB post was determined by analyzing the post’s word choice, syntax, and tone. The outcomes show that 50 percent of Valdez’s FB posts targeted his FB friends; 29 percent were posts by friends and followers to get the candidate’s attention; 11 percent were for Team Valdez (supporters and volunteers helping out on his campaign); and 9 percent, for all voters in the county. The border electorate is bilingual; political candidates should be able to communicate fluently in two languages. Of Valdez’s 180 posts, 72 percent were in English, Valdez’s language of preference; over 6 percent, Spanish; 6 percent bilingual; and 16



percent had no text. The term bilingual in this context indicates a typical border form of communication that, in the same message, sentences/phrases/words in English are mixed with sentences/phrases/words in Spanish.

Of Valdez’s 180 FB posts, only 37 percent (67 posts) contained information directly related to his positive personal attributes, as Table 2 illustrates, including 51 percent, very social individual; 25 percent, leadership; 19 percent, experience; 1 percent, for family; 1 percent, integrity; and 1 percent, other. Out of all 180 FB posts, only 4 mentioned negative personal attributes for Valdez: for lack of integrity, lack of leadership, and lack of intelligence. The remaining 109 contained no candidate personal-attribute information.

<b>Table 2</b> INTER-CANDIDATE FACEBOOK AGENDA-BUILDING EFFECT, CANDIDATE’S POSITIVE PERSONAL ATTRIBUTES						
Positive Personal Attributes	Danny Valdez			Tano Tijerina		
	N=67			N=46		
	Frequency	Percentage*	Ranking	Frequency	Percentage*	Ranking
Leadership	17	25	(2)	29	63	(1)
Family	1	1	(5)	8	17	(2)
Social skills	34	51	(1)	5	11	(3)
Integrity	1	1	(5)	2	4	(4)
Experience	13	19	(3)	1	2	(5.5)
Other	1	1	(5)	1	2	(5.5)
Spearman’s rho correlation = +0.386						
* The total percentage does not add up to 100 percent due to rounding off.						

In contrast, the results indicate that the type of audience that Tijerina’s FB posts targeted, according to their word choice, syntax, and tone, was 61 percent, all voters; 28 percent, friends; and 11 percent, Team Tano (supporters and volunteers). Tijerina prefers to communicate 90 percent in English, then 8 percent in Spanish, and 2 percent in both languages. In terms of his personal attributes (see Table 2), the results show that out of the 66 FB posts, 70 percent (46) promoted a positive personal attribute. The item ranking at the top of the list was 63 percent for leadership, followed by 17 percent for family; 11 percent, social skills; 4 percent, integrity; 2 percent, experience; and 2 percent, other. The results indicate that out of the 66 FB posts, Tijerina received

only one negative personal attribute opinion, regarding his lack of experience. The remaining 19 posts contained no candidate personal-attribute information.

### Agenda-building Effect of Valdez's and Tijerina's FB Campaign Issues and Positive Personal-Attributes Agendas

The third and fourth research questions (campaign issues and positive personal attributes, respectively) asked about the agenda-building effect of Valdez's and Tijerina's FB agendas. In terms of the campaign issues, the results indicate that both candidates used FB to disseminate predominantly election campaign issues, demonstrating that FB could be used at the local level for electoral purposes. As Table 1 illustrates, the FB agenda-building effect of campaign issues indicates a slight positive correlation ( $\rho = +0.286$ ). That is, Valdez's campaign issues were not interconnected with Tijerina's, and *vice versa*. Each candidate presented his own independent FB campaign issues agenda. The results indicate that both political candidates concentrated their efforts on presenting campaign issues, not on discussing general electoral issues.

Furthermore, in terms of Valdez's and Tijerina's FB personal attributes, Table 2 shows that the FB agenda-building effects of the candidates' positive personal attributes were not associated. A Spearman's rho correlation coefficient was calculated to determine the relationship between Valdez's and Tijerina's positive personal attributes, resulting in a weak positive correlation ( $\rho = +0.386$ ). Consequently, Valdez's positive personal-attributes agenda was not related to Tijerina's, and *vice versa*. FB political messages generated by each candidate to highlight his positive personal attributes were independent of each other because each one presented a completely different political public image to the voters, offering greater content diversity.

### McCombs's Hypothesis Regarding Digital Media Was Confirmed or Rejected

The last research question inquired about McCombs's hypothesis about digital media. He states that the correlation between online agendas would need to be greatly opposed rather than greatly redundant, like those typically found in traditional news media outlets (McCombs, 2004). The results confirm McCombs's hypothesis, because the evidence determined that Valdez's and Tijerina's FB agenda-building dynamics were independent of each other by showing a weak positive correlation in both cases (see Tables 1 and 2). This research provides evidence that confirms that FB agendas

for political candidates can be independent of each other, resulting in enhanced content diversity. Also, the outcomes confirm that FB posts can function as an agenda builder for local candidates on which to promote their political platforms.

## CONCLUSION

In summary, FB builds a specific political agenda for closed/private group(s) with their personal page, as well as a semi-private group with their business page. Communication between candidates and voters is direct because political messages instantly appear on people's smartphones and is nearly unavoidable by FB users because FB posts appear on their smartphone's home screen. FB has a two-level flow of communication to circulate content, making this social media outlet an important direct digital communications channel between candidates and voters. FB has the power to disseminate political messages not only to Valdez's and Tijerina's followers and friends (first-level flow of communication), but to their followers' friends as well as their friends' friends (second-level flow of communication), creating a multiplier effect.

Although Valdez reported a higher number of FB posts than Tijerina, his posts were not as effective as Tijerina's. The latter's messages were very clear, specific, and targeted all county voters, not just FB friends, as Valdez did. Political messages should be carefully written to capture the interest of all voters. Therefore, careful construction of FB posts content is more important than the actual number of FB posts. Tijerina used a FB business page, which allows for additional control over the content, lowering the risks of negative campaigning. In contrast, Valdez's FB personal page allowed his friends to post content that had the potential to jeopardize his political message or to distract voters by creating noise/interference. His target audience was his FB friends instead of voters in general. The type of FB content that Tijerina most frequently used was text and photo, and for Valdez, it was only text. According to the Obama campaign experts, voters prefer a combination of text and photo, as in the case of Tijerina's FB content.

The results of this study indicate that the top FB campaign issues for Valdez were rallies, block-walking, debates, and voting procedures. For Tijerina, they were voting procedures, rallies, and presentation of political TV ads. No general issues were presented/posted on FB by either candidate. The inter-candidate FB agenda-building effect of campaign issues showed a slight positive correlation ( $\rho = +0.286$ ). These outcomes indicate that each candidate presented a completely different campaign-issue agenda to voters because the degree of interdependency between agendas was weak. A parallel result was observed regarding the inter-candidate FB agenda-building effect of positive personal attributes, showing a slight positive correlation ( $\rho = +0.386$ ) and dem-

onstrating that there was no similarity in the construction of Valdez's and Tijerina's FB public images. The top two personal attributes emphasized on FB posts for Valdez were social skills and leadership, while for Tijerina, they were leadership and family.

The 2014 primary election was the second time that Valdez and Tijerina had faced each other in the local political arena. Back in 2010, on the day of the primary election, 105 995 Webb County residents were registered to vote, but only 26 percent actually cast their ballots. The Webb County Elections Administration Democratic Primary Runoff report indicated that the difference between the candidates was about 2 percent; it was a very close race: 51 percent supported Valdez and 49 percent supported Tijerina (Webb County Department of Elections Administration, 2010). Four years later, the Webb County 2014 Primary Election Results indicated that 112 130 residents were registered to vote, but again only 26 percent went out to cast their ballots. The primary election results indicated that 65 percent voted for Tijerina and 35 percent voted for Valdez (Webb County Department of Elections Administration, 2014).

This study's limitation was that it did not measure the comments FB friends made after a post. It would be instructive to know the reactions that individuals had to those comments. Suggestions for future research would be a comparative agenda-building study of Valdez's and Tijerina's FB political agendas and their political ads placed on traditional media outlets to discover the transfer of issues and personal attributes among them. Since Obama's 2008 presidential campaign, SNS have been used for political campaign promotional purposes, specifically to promote a political candidate, for fundraising, and to reach out to/for voters. This research project contributes to the field of political communication by testing the role of FB in a local election. It also documents evidence confirming McCombs's hypothesis indicating that the correlation between digital media agendas is opposing and they are independent of each other rather than redundant and interdependent, like those found in traditional media agendas. By extension, this study also contributes to the field of communication studies by examining the development of digital political communication in the U.S.-Mexico border region.

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