Banana for Scale: Qualifying *Reddit*'s Impact on Political Campaigns
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Reddit, popularly known as the front-page of the internet, is an emerging platform for political campaigns. Consistently updating with fresh ideas, *Reddit'*s interface is dynamic with its content being exclusively user-generated. Within the website are separate communities called "subreddits," which function similarly to online forums. IAmA (I am a) and AMA (Ask me anything) are posts on *Reddit* affording users the chance to ask anything of an AMA/IAmA host. Because of it's direct contact structure, political candidates from all levels have taken to AMAs/IAmAs as a way to connect with voters; but until now scholars have not given attention to this website due to *Reddit*'s reputation and complex format. Our research highlights *Reddit*'s key role in voter representation. We examine what motivates people to engage with politicians on the website, and how their interaction affects their engagement and perception of politics. Through surveying active *Reddit* users we analyze the effectiveness of AMAs/IAmAs in changing the perception of a candidate, or helping them seem relatable. Our research will also introduce personal anecdotes from campaigns and *Reddit* users detailing their experience with this unconventional format; illuminating *Reddit's* political potential.

r/Introduction:

Imagine a massive building, and inside this building are thousands of separate rooms that you can enter. Each room offers something unique and completely different than the one next to it. There is a room dedicated to people discussing politics. There is a room of people sharing pictures of their pets. There are several rooms for porn. There is even a room of people photoshopping human arms onto birds. This building containing a myriad of mysterious rooms is not a building, but a website called *Reddit*.

With 542 million monthly users, *Reddit,* a user generated website has been gaining in popularity since its inception in 2005 (DMR). The idea behind the website is that its image is dynamic and driven by users' likes and dislikes. Through a process of "upvoting" and "downvoting" *Reddit* users can vote for the content they like or dislike. This process insures the website's interface is constantly changing. 25 million votes are cast on *Reddit* daily. This imaginative format and unique experience has rocked *Reddit's* internet popularity, earning the website a position of eighth most popular website in the world (DMR, Mediakix).

In addition to voting for content, users can participate in their own *Reddit* communities called, "subreddits." *Reddit* currently houses 853, 824 subreddits, and if there is not a particular subreddit users can easily create their own (DMR). One of the most common subreddits among users is called "Ask me Anything (AMA)." In this community, users submit posts about their job or a particular experience in life. The post is then left as an open forum for other readers to comment and ask questions. This subreddit currently has 246, 378 active subscribers (Reddit). IAmA (I am a) is another common subreddit with 17,836 subscribers that functions in a similar format (Reddit). Posts on this subreddit also discuss career backgrounds and adventure stories similar to AMAs. In addition to hosting these open forum style discussions, AMA and IAmA

style posts can exist on other subreddits.The growth of *Reddit* communities has lead politicians

to create their own subreddits. Donald Trump's campaign created "the_donald" and hosted an

AMA on this subreddit. Bernie Sanders hosted an AMA and IAmA on, "Sanders for President"

and "Political Revolution. The latter being a progressive based ideological subreddit. Due to the

open format AMAs and IAmAs remain a popular tool for campaigns and voters to utilize.

Politicians can log on and host a discussion where voters can ask them questions ranging from

their position on foreign policy to their favorite ice cream flavor. From this, we are wondering

two thing: *how can Reddit shape a candidate's image; and does Reddit, help or hinder voter*

representation?

Current literature analyzes the effects of social media strategy on political campaigns through popular social media sites like *Twitter*, *Facebook*, and *Instagram*. In fact, users of Twitter are among the most politically engaged and attentive to news (Gainous and Wagner 2014). Although the research exists that shows positive correlation between candidate awareness and social media presence, there is very little research done on *Reddit*. Many questions still remain about the effectiveness of subreddit culture as well as the impact this plays on our voting decisions. Our research aims to illuminate this issue.

Political IAmAs and AMAs have become a high trafficked activity on *Reddit*. The popularity of President Obama's IAmA in 2012 crashed the site in a matter of minutes (Kolawole 2012). Through IAmAs and AMAs on *Reddit* politicians are able to open a brand new avenue of communication between the voter and themselves. We argue that *Reddit's* political AMAs/IAmAs increase awareness of political candidate and can be a tool used to shape the image of politicians. From our thesis we frame three hypotheses: candidate or politically specific subreddits will increase a candidate's possibility of receiving a positive percentage of voters on their AMA/IAmA therefore boosting their AMA/IAmA visibility to that subreddit's audience; low salient candidates must host AMAs/IAmAs on candidate or politically specific subreddits in order to receive a positive percentage of user votes; hosting AMAs/IAmAs on *Reddit* reinforces the filter bubble because of the positive outcome candidate and politically specific subreddits produce. In our research we will use survey collection, personal anecdotes, and textual analysis to evaluate our thesis. In this paper we will first review the literature on the topic of *Reddit*, as well as similar sites such as *Facebook, Twitter, and Snapchat*. Next, we will explain our theory and methodology for our analysis before finally providing the observations and results.

r/Literature Review:

Before exploring the literature surrounding this topic it is important to define social media: "Social media are new information network and information technology using a form of communication utilising interactive and user-produced content, and interpersonal relationships are created and maintained. Typical social media network services could be content sharing, web communities, and Internet forums (Center for European Studies)." The literature we have chosen for this paper follows this definition. Another concept we want to highlight and define was first coined by Eli Pariser. It is called, "the filter bubble" and it is our tendency to consume information that is feed to us through an algorithm. There are several components to the filter bubble: you are alone, you are invisible, and you never chose to enter (Pariser). The filter bubble is perpetuated by user data and willingness to share our likes and dislikes. Understanding the concept of the filter bubble will be integral to the outcome of this study. Through our research we found one scholar also studying *Reddit's* political impact. First, we will explore the claims of that author. Due to the limited content on *Reddit*, we have chosen to evaluate additional literature surrounding other social media outlets. We will be breaking this review down into four main research themes.

For *Reddit*, the 2016 election meant an increase in political subreddits. Bernie Sanders, Hillary Clinton, and Donald Trump all created and ran active subreddits during the campaign. A 2017 study out of Cambridge University explored the popularity and use of these three subreddits (Roozenbeek). Roozenbeek's study attempts to marry the research of group community behavior and the consumption of news. He does this through monitoring the framing of breaking news through these three distinct subreddits and tracking the subscriber count. Roozenbeek frames his research through the concept of group cohesion: "group cohesion is

defined as how much group members like the other individuals in the group, whereas group identity refers to how much group members like the group's purpose (Roozenbeek)." From this there are two important conclusion to draw from his work. The first is the initial reason why Roozenbeek decided to research these particular subreddits. He notes that because these communities were campaign created they have particular rules carried out by the subreddit's moderators (all subreddits have moderators that are active *Reddit* users. They are maintained on a volunteer basis, and are no way affiliated with the campaign). In political or ideologue specific subreddits such as these, only subscribers of the community can comment. If any negative or critical content of the candidate or party is shared it is removed by a moderator. Moderators will also apply skins to the interface of the subreddit making the downvote button difficult to find. All of these factors affect the content and thought being discussed on the subreddits. This information helps explain the results of our study as it feeds into Pariser's concept of the filter bubble. The second conclusion we can reach from this research is the demographic of Reddit users. Roosenbeek concludes that the majority of campaign subreddit subscribers are millennials. While this finding is not groundbreaking, it's an important precedent while analyzing user feedback for our study.

The remaining body of research we explored analyzed social media's impact on campaigns and voter participation. From this we discovered four themes. The first theme is the promotion of digital communities through social media. Social media has created a new meeting place. No longer is it about connecting in a city hall to discuss the issues. We see this increasingly so with *Reddit* as more users are discussing politics over their separate subreddits. Social media is the new frontier for communication: "The Internet today is like the frontier once was. The government has stayed its hand, backed away, and allowed institutions, organizations,

corporations, and communities to grow and flourish there without law. Absent the threat of government intrusion, this new frontier has found itself free to innovate and prosper (Tutt 2013)." *Reddit* is consistent with this idea because *Reddit* functions as an online wild-west. Innovation is pushed on this online community which draws in new users everyday. We believe that politicians have realized the power of this community and will utilize *Reddit* when they have a fundraising push, or event to organize. *Reddit* is a large community made up of smaller communities all aiming to learn and support one another.

The issue we see in articles surrounding digital community building is that they tend to view this phenomenon from a negative perspective. Much of literature stresses the importance of regulation and government intervention, "...digital technology also stands to grant unprecedented individuated control to the intermediary who carries that information. This makes these intermediaries—which take the form of search engines, social networks, and other media platforms—extraordinarily powerful. But, these intermediaries are more than just powerful in the traditional sense of 'powerful speakers.' Rather, they stand boldly and often invisibly between individuals who wish to speak to each other, fundamentally altering the residual freedom of every individual who uses them (Tutt 2013)." We disagree with this premise and see a necessity in allowing for open dialogue on *Reddit*. The reason IAmAs are popular is due to their unfiltered and uncensored nature. We feel the literature hasn't acknowledged the success of direct communication among citizens and believe *Reddit* can play a positive role in increasing representation.

The second theme we have found amongst the literature is the idea of free advertisements. This topic only appeared in one article specific to *Reddit* but we think it is relevant enough of a concept to explore. Ryan Holiday in *Hail Corporate:The Increasingly*

Insufferable Faker of Brands on Reddit explains that corporations have begun to use *Reddit's* open forum system to post free advertisements disguised as everyday posts. Holiday states,"*Reddit* underestimates the value and attractiveness of the entire community. In a world where these boring (and often genuinely evil) brands have to buy their own Facebook fans, hold enormous sweepstakes or expensive events to get people to interact with them (see: bribes), or spend billions of dollars a year to co-opt popular culture, *Reddit* threads on which people are actually "learning," or hanging out or chatting are priceless. It's real people doing real things, (Holiday 2014)." Holiday's article identifies company's use of *Reddit* to sell their merchandise. The user-driven platform makes it easy to disguise an advertisement as a user endorsement. Holiday's analysis correspondents with our argument because it showcases the power of users and campaign's drive to capture the power *Reddit* posses.

Holiday further explains, "*Reddit* is their launching pad. Blogs like *Betabeat, Business Insider, Huffington Post, Gawker* and hundreds of others troll these sites looking for content they can re-publish and get traffic from. *BuzzFeed*, for example, is notorious for republishing content from *Reddit*. Meaning that one shill thread or photo on *Reddit* can quickly become pseudo-news and then real news across the web (Holiday 2014)." While we will not be tracking the repurposing of these IAmAs, Holiday's article provides an interesting analysis on the scope of *Reddit's* impact.

The next theme we want to explore is that *Reddit* and social media creates an issue of click-baiting. Click-baiting is the tendency of politicians to cater their content to a specific group of people. Matthew Gentzkow and Jesse M. Shapiro in 2011 write about this issue in *Ideological Segregation Online and Offline.* Gentzkow and Shapiro explain that with this influx of information on the internet and more specifically social media allows people to select their news

and information. They argue, and we agree, this is not good for politics or society. Despite the fact that we agree with this analysis we also believe it to be false. The way IAmAs are structured safeguards against this because IAmAs function as an open and inclusive forum. Users are able to ask questions to the politicians, they control the content and discourse. We believe the issue of click-baiting is not a concern for *Reddit* because everything is user generated and nothing is created to force traffic. AMAs are not about partisan habitats (which is often associated with click-baiting) because both Democrats and Republicans are welcome to ask questions on the thread. The exception to this rule is when AMAs or IAmAs are hosted on candidate or ideologue specific subreddits. Through our research we found out results to confirm Gentzkow and Shapiro's claims.

The last theme we want to explore is social media's ability to predict voting behavior. An increase in public awareness has been correlated with higher chances of winning elections due to name recognition. Joseph DiGrazia, Karissa McKelvey, Johan Bollen, and Fabio Rojas examine this question in their work. *More Tweets, More Votes: Social Media as a Quantitative Indicator of Political Behavior.* Through a random sample of tweets that a name mentions on *Twitter* are correlated with a higher voter margin (DiGrazia, McKelvey, Bollen, Rojas 2013). The article concludes by explaining that *Twitter* is able to predict election winners.The more mentions on social media leads to a higher likelihood to win. While *Reddit* does not allow us to track mentions, our research examines the reason people may choose to engage with an AMA. We find similar results in that well salient candidates tend to have more views and upvotes on their AMAs or IAmAs. The one major difference to take into account is the setup of *Reddit* compared to *Twitter*. Politicians on *Reddi*t seek out comments from people, whereas on *Twitter* politicians

play a passive role. We think because of this *Reddit* will be more successful in predicting

candidate awareness.

With these pieces of literature in mind we believe the political science field has a firm

grasp on the effect of social media on politics. We find ourselves agreeing with most theories but

wish to apply them to *Reddit*.

r/Theory and Hypotheses:

We deduce from the case analyses and data presented below that *Reddit* users greatly

value sincerity and completeness in responses to their comments, which is awarded to the

candidate through increased awareness of their campaign and likelihood of casting a vote in their

favor. If the candidate targets interested audiences aligned with their platform, demonstrate a

knowledge of *Reddit*'s inside jokes and processes, and responds to comments from users in tones

unlike their traditional messaging in press interviews, *Reddit* users will respond positively and

boost the post's relevance on the website.

A demonstrated knowledge of the website signals to *Reddit* users that the candidate is

potentially a fellow *Reddit* user and understands that the website is a culture of its own. Since the

candidates are responding directly to users, the candidate's display of *Reddit* knowhow adds an

additional layer of personality and sincerity not commonly seen in press interviews or

campaign media. Showing users that you are a *Reddit* "outsider" can accelerate negative

feedback from users, as was the case for Jill Stein in her IAmA.

Reddit can create "hubs" for candidates by the user-creation of subreddits specific to that

candidate. Trump during his presidential campaign utilized his subreddit, the_donald, by hosting

an IAmA. His IAmA was met with enormous praise from the_donald's users, evident in their

favorable responses to the survey, seen in *Figure 2*. Bryce sought out progressive *Reddit* users by

hosting IAmA's in Political_Revolution and SandersForPresident. His genuine and in-depth

responses to policy questions enabled him to garner considerable favorability amongst users on

both subreddits. Reaching out to these audiences for Trump and Bryce, rather than hosting an

IAmA on the general subreddit, allowed them to connect with constituents most likely to favor

them before their *Reddit* presence and increase buzz amongst those most aligned with their

campaign.

We hypothesize that candidate or ideologue specific subreddits will increase a

candidate's possibility of receiving a positive percentage of votes on their AMA or IAmA,

therefore boosting their post visibility to that subreddit's audience. Users of politically specific

subreddits join these communities to be around like-minded people. Candidates who take

advantage of this audience will always receive higher positivity scores because the readers of

their posts are pre-conditioned to like their platform or candidacy. Accepting this leads to our

second hypothesis.

We argue that due to the popular and positive outcome of hosting on specific subreddits,

low salient candidates must host their AMAs or IAmA on candidate or ideologue specific

subreddits in order to receive a positive percentage of user votes. The general subreddit of AMA

and IAmA have a varied audience. Not everyone subscribed to those subreddits are politically

minded or enjoy interacting with politicians. Low salient candidates will struggle to garner the

support or positive image they will need to have a successful post. Accepting this leads to our

last hypothesis.

Hosting AMAs or IAmAs on *Reddi*t reinforces the filter bubble because of the positive outcome candidate and politically specific subreddits produce. The need to have successful outreach on *Reddit* and its subsequent posts will draw politicians to these more politically exclusive subreddit. We argue that hosting on politically or ideologue specific subreddits creates a false sense of audience and voter perception due to the fact that the voters are already primed to support the candidate's party or belief system. This is problematic for a site such as *Reddit* which prides itself on honest, open, and unfiltered dialogue. *Reddit* does have the ability to improve representation when candidates host on the general AMA or IAmA subreddit. We believe the problem happens only on the candidate or ideologue specific subreddits.

r/Methodology:

Our study utilizes textual analysis from three mediums: user questions, the candidate's response, and outside survey or anecdotal evidence obtained post the AMA or IAmA. First we start by looking at the most upvoted questions. From there we analyze these question to determine if there was a common theme. Next, we examine the candidate's response and how they chose to answer the question, and which questions they dedicated their attention to. Finally, through a survey and direct contact with other *Reddit* users we compiled and identified themes in users feedback.

The survey was sent to users who asked the top upvoted questions in the selected AMA or IAmAs. Selecting these people as participants guaranteed that we interacted with avid *Reddit* users. Higher upvotes signals someone familiar with the community and format. The survey attempted to quantify users' likelihood of becoming civically engaged and their perception of the candidate before and after the AMA/IAmA. We are defining "civic engagement" as voting or advocating for the candidate outside of the AMA/IAmA. "Perception" encompasses the users

attitudes towards the candidate; whether they felt the candidate was favorable or unfavorable. The top upvoted questions were chosen because they are likely the earliest asked and most likely to be answered as the AMAs/IAmAs are typically brief. In an effort to protect the identities of users, we will not share their usernames if they requested to be kept private. For our data we sent users a survey comprised of two elements: a likert scale and open-ended questions. We made none of the questions required due to the skeptical nature of *Reddit* users and our desire to make the survey process as easy as possible for participants. A sample of the survey sent to users is below:

1. What was your perception of the politician before the IAmA?

    Please choose a numerical value which best fits your response.

    Very Unfavorable   1   2   3   4   5   Very Favorable

2. What was your perception of the figure after the IAmA?

    Please choose a numerical value which best fits your response.

    Very Unfavorable   1   2   3   4   5   Very Favorable

3. How would you characterize the figure's response to your IAmA question?

    Please choose a numerical value which best fits your response.

    Insincere   1   2   3   4   5   Genuine

4. If we were to assume that you live within this politician's district or able to vote in the election they are campaigning for, would you have voted for the politician before the IAmA?

    Please choose a numerical value which best fits your response.

    Very Unlikely 1   2   3   4   5   Very Likely

5. If within this politician's voting district, would you have voted for the politician after the IAmA?

   Please choose a numerical value which best fits your response.

   Very Unlikely 1   2   3   4   5   Very Likely

6. Please indicate why you asked the politician your specific question and what your thoughts on the response are:

7. Do you believe the overall IAmA peaked your interest of the political figure after the IAmA? Why or why not?

We selected a survey method because of *Reddit's* open nature. As *Reddit* users of 10 years combined, we understand the personality type of this website's user. *Reddit* users are active participants who enjoy sharing their opinion. Having open-ended questions allows users a chance to share their perspective, and having a scale helps us as researchers track data.

The other text we analyzed was the actual IAmA. When selecting these we chose to only focus on campaigns. Because of this we did not analyze President Barack Obama's or Joe Biden's IAmA. The dynamics of running for office and being in office are different, and we believe the questions asked would very too much to perform a proper analysis. We also chose to focus only on federal level AmAs/IAmAs. There are few state and local level AmAs/IAmAs that we could find, and for the sake of consistency thought it best to limit our scope. For timeline, we kept our selection current, focusing on 2014 and sooner. We noticed an increase in AMAs/IAmAs around this time period and wanted to only focus on a time frame when AMAs/IAmAs were popular.

For this study there are several limitations to consider. The first issue is with survey responses. Many respondents took advantage of our open-ended questions, but that created an

issue in consistency. Coding language can be tricky since people use different words to describe the same situation. To combat this we tried to discover common words or themes that were being used to describe the user's experience. We also responded to users to clarify their meaning and ensure an accurate response.

Second, some respondents did not live in the district or state of the candidate. We don't see this is a major problem since our research is interested in exploring *Reddit's* political potential, but a non-constituent's opinion might not matter to the candidate and thus affect the outcome of the AMA/IAmA. Similarly, we ran into issues of conflict of interest (such as organizers of campaign PACs). To combat this bias, we made sure to note the conflict in our analysis section.

Third, AMA/IAmA cases were omitted either because many people we contacted had no memory of asking questions to candidates or none of the users from a specific AMA/IAmA responded to the survey. In response to those forgetful of their comment, we replied to users with a reference to their post. In most cases this helped spur people's memory, but some never returned our messages. Despite these limitations, our research provides an in-depth analysis of *Reddit's* function for political campaigns.

Finally, the likert scale is inherently flawed. We wanted to use the scale in our survey because of it's widely recognized format in the political science community, as well as the common public. The likert scale is beneficial in identifying patterns from respondents, but can also be inconsistent. A, "4" on the scale is different to every person. The scale is reliable, but not always accurate. That is why we also added open-ended questions to our survey.

Reddit is a complex website that seems unapproachable due to its interface. The goal of our research is to illuminate *Reddit's* political potential through users personal thoughts and

feelings. We believe this is the best way to understand the website because of its user-driven format.

r/Observation:

Through our methods we were able to compile information on five candidates from different levels of office and political parties. While there were more AMAs/IAmAs we analyzed we felt these were the best representation of *Reddit's* culture, as well as these were the posts we received user feedback from.

Jill Stein

On May 11, 2016 Jill Stein tweeted out, "Starting my *Reddit* 'Ask Me Anything' in a few minutes at 6 pm Eastern! Looking forward to taking your questions." The most popular question (determined by upvotes) asked was about Stein's ability win as a third party candidate. Many users were skeptical and quick to ask Stein what qualifies her to win. MegaManatee was the user who asked the most upvoted question. *Image 1* showcases the conversation.

When asked her thoughts on her interaction with Stein MegaManatee said, "I have worked in politics for many years. I have worked on campaigns ranging from city council to presidential. I firmly believe that no political party can rise to power through presidential elections. I asked my question because if the Green Party wanted to grow and have a shot of winning larger elections they need to convert local voters with local elections. I thought the response was well written and thought out. I didn't know the information that was provided, although I probably should've googled my question before asking it." MegaManatee explains that this response neither helped nor harmed their perception of Stein. The user acknowledges

that this IAmA came right at the peak of their interest in Stein's candidacy and decline shortly

after.
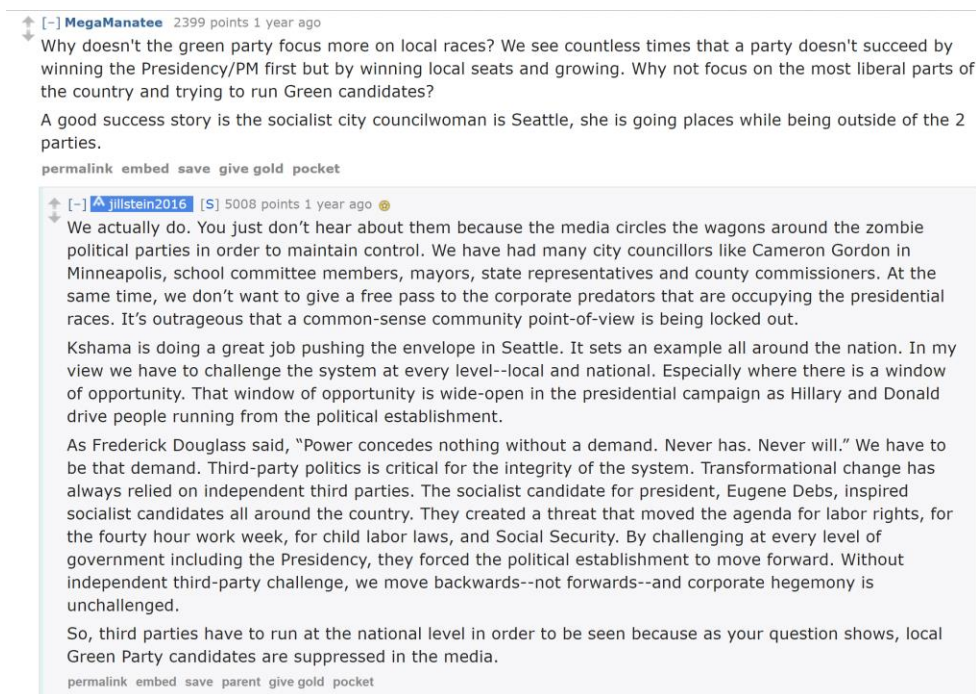
Image 1 (Reddit 2017)

The remaining questions on Stein's IAmA are a mixture of humorous questions such as,

"Have you ever thought about marrying Senator Al Franken and hyphenating your last name?

Dr. Franken-Stein has quite the nice ring to it?" (Reddit 2017). Questions like these are what

Reddit is known for and can alter the image of a candidate. The way a candidate responds to

unique questions can positively alter their perception. In this case. Stein had a quick response:

"Sure, then we can take on the zombie political system and get somewhere!" (Reddit 2017).

Stein's IAmA received mixed reviews. Some people felt she sufficiently answered the

questions, and others felt that her responses were not consistent with her other messages. Out of

all of our cases, she received the lowest percent positive, with a score of 69%.

<u>Donald Trump</u>

Donald Trump's IAmA was different because it took place on his campaign's subreddit, "the_Donald." During the campaign this subreddit was a meeting place for all of Trump's biggest supporters on *Reddit*. This meant that the demographic involved in Trump's IAmA was already skewed towards supporting Trump. Of our data set, Trump received the highest number of comments, with Bernie Sanders following closely behind. The majority of the questions the Trump IAmA were not questions, and instead were users sharing their personal narratives as to why they loved Trump.

We received two responses from the Trump IAmA, and both were already strong supporters noting that the IAmA did nothing but confirm their love for candidate Trump. The second most popular question was from PM-ME-UR-BEST-PHOTO who asked about media bias. The question and response can be found in Image 2. PM-ME-UR-BEST-PHOTO said they asked question because, "Media has became a great concern for conservatives due to their heavy bias and agenda. Media is clearly fueling divide between people, and they are bought by large corporations looking for their interest. Even if you are liberal you can't deny obvious bias and agenda of media. They don't REPORT news anymore, they manufacture it. I asked this question to president Trump to see if he agreed with this sentiment about media as well and what can he do in his powers to make media coverage fair? Obviously president does not have legal or political power to force media to change their coverage but President Trump is master at manipulating them and controlling their coverage. So far he is doing a great job exposing

corruption in media and their bias." For this user, Trump's response and IAmA confirmed everything he already knew and appreciate about Trump.

Other questions asked on Trump's IAmA are items such as, "Are you tired of winning?" (*Reddit* 2017). and "Who are some of your favorite presidents?"(*Reddit* 2017). These questions reflect support for Trump and are another example of using IAmAs as a tool for shaping a candidate's image. The fifth most popular question was by a user named davidg1996, another loyal supporter. Davidg1996 asked about police brutality issues and how that was affecting young people's decision to join the forces.   Trump's answered, "We will always stand with and support our nation's amazing police. There is nothing more honorable then serving your community and your country as a law enforcement officer. My administration will protect those who protect us. Thank you to all the incredible police officers in our country tonight," (*Reddit* 2017). The user was pleased with the response explaining, "I was a Trump supporter who saw an opportunity to ask then candidate Donald Trump about violence against police. His response was what I would have expected from him."
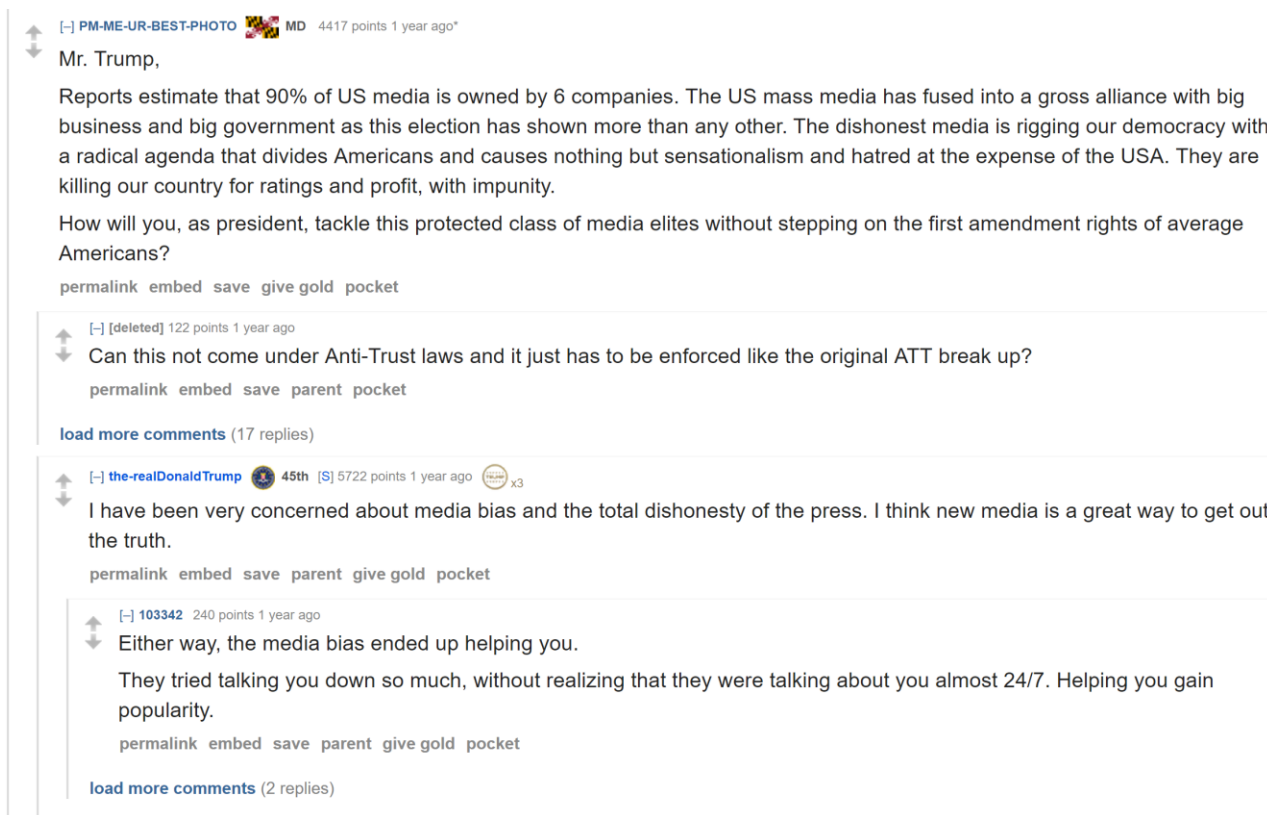
Image 2. (*Reddit* 2017)

The remaining portion of Trump's IAmA featured users skeptical of the *Reddit* community and discussing their qualms on the thread. Users were upset that this IAmA did not make it to a subreddit called, "All." This subreddit is updated daily and features the most popular thread from every subreddit on *Reddit*. Users quickly began to theorize that *Reddit* moderators were tweaking the website's algorithm so that this content would not be shown to the rest of the *Reddit* community. This argument went unchecked, but offers an insight into the Trump subreddit community.

<u>Randy Bryce</u>

Randy Bryce is a Democrat running against incumbent Republican Paul Ryan for Wisconsin's first congressional district and calls himself the "Iron Stache", after the voluptuous

mustache he adorns. Bryce took to r/Political_Revolution, which is a subreddit for liberal

progressives, to host an IAmA in October 2017. He introduced himself to the subreddit as a:

"veteran, cancer survivor, and union ironworker from Caledonia, Wisconsin running to repeal

and replace Paul Ryan (...)," (Reddit 2017). Previously, Bryce has appeared on late night

television and attracted considerable national media attention because he is running against the

Speaker of the House, Paul Ryan, in a time of immense partisan contention. With eyes on his

campaign nationwide, Bryce's IAmA was the most popular congressional candidate's IAmA of

the cases we selected.

The most upvoted comment on the IAmA thread came from the *Reddit* user Qdobe with

753 total votes, seen in *Image 3*. Qdobe asks Bryce about his strategy to pursuade a seemingly

conservative district to vote for a him, a progressive Democrat, citing gerrymandering as a

potential obstacle. Bryce responds with a lengthy answer, stating that Wisconsin's first district

voted for Obama in the 2008 presidential election and many Democrats hold local seats

throughout the district. He continues that he is not a typical Democratic candidate and the vast

unpopularity of Ryan's policymaking will win Bryce the seat. Qdobe responded to our survey's

question 5 concerning their reasoning for asking Bryce their specific question: "The seat is a

difficult one for a Democrat to win, so I wanted to know his strategy to address that. His

response was thoughtful and adequate." The *Reddit* user also indicated that they perceived Bryce

a 4 out of 5 in favorability and sincerity in the previous survey questions.

Image 3 (Reddit 2017)

    For the remainder of Bryce's IAmA, *Reddit* users asked about his strategy to unite the Democratic party and his stance on classic progressive policy planks, like single-payer health care, minimum wage, and workers' rights. The *Reddit* user Knight_of _the_Lepus asked Bryce if the people of the first district truly agree with Ryan's stance to repeal and replace the Affordable Care Act, seen in *Image 4*. Bryce asserts that Ryan will increase premiums and remove access to health care for 23,000 people in the first district. Knight_of_the_Lepus responded to the survey's question 6, which asks if Bryce's IAmA piqued the user's interest of the candidate, stating: "It definitely made me more aware of Bryce, and I respect him for coming to a 'venue' like Reddit to interact with us commonfolk and not just the press." Here, the *Reddit* user's interest was heightened from Bryce's use of the site and commended him on reaching out to people on a platform that is direct to prospective constituents, rather than via a press interview.

Image 4 (Reddit 2017)

Bryce's IAmAs were the highest rated amongst the cases we pulled, with 94% positive from r/SandersForPresident and 85% in r/Political_Revolution (Reddit 2017). Respondents of the survey from his IAmAs were the most pleased with the sincerity of his responses to policy concerns and Democratic party solutions and said they were more likely after the IAmA to vote for Bryce, see *Figure 2*. Bryce effectively utilized the niche audiences within the liberal progressive subreddits to display his knowledge on specific policies and reach progressive constituents.

Steven David

Steven David, a 30 year old Democrat running in Texas's eighth congressional district, hosted his IAmA December 7, 2017. Announcing his post, David used *Reddit* jargon calling himself a, "lurker." This established a positive relationship with *Reddit* before David began because it demonstrated David's knowledge of the website. From David's IAmA we received four responses. The pattern amongst these responses was that if it weren't for the IAmA, these users would never have known who David was. The responses were also critical noting his lack of experience as a reason to be skeptical of his candidacy.

The first user, wanttoknowaboutit, asked David about his willingness to work across the aisle. David, being a younger candidate, was honest and informal with his answer. He wrote, "Of course I'll work across the aisle. I think a defining trait of my generation, and younger, is our stubbornness and disregard for being told what to do. I know how to do my own research, as well as listen to experts, and if it stinks I don't support it," (Reddit 2017). The user we spoke with said this answer did not really peak their interest or sway them into supporting David. When asked why they chose to ask this question the user explained, "First, I would say though, that I came across this AMA by accident. I hadn't seen a politician AMA in a while and I had never asked a question before. To me it didn't really matter who the specific politician was/is, but just that it is a politician. Second, I believe that one of the most destructive elements in politics is the divisiveness and refusal of politicians to work with politicians of other parties. It seems like the focus is far removed from solving real world problems and more on the political game of staying in office. This is something that I think every politician should answer!"

MikeandAlphaEsq was another user who interacted with David during his IAmA. MikeandAlphaEsq, someone who fundamentally disagrees with David, said he wanted to ask a question because he likes seeing younger people run for office. MikeandAlphaEsq asked David about what should be done to get more people to run for office and care about politics. To which David offered his advice: "People our age just need to recognize that we are having our opportunities for a successful future/retirement thrown down the drain by our parents and grandparents generation. Also, I don't care that you and I don't agree on things. If you want to run, please let me help. I've run campaigns before and would be happy to give you advice," (Reddit 2017). Despite this answer, the user explained that he wasn't that impressed with David.

They wrote, " No. He's not really a "political figure." He's a small timer who will get killed in the election."

Most of the comments on David's IAmA were generic policy questions asking about his stance on gun control, college affordability, and health care. What was unique about this IAmA was the lighter questions asked by users.

Sky_lobster was a user who wanted to ask an easy question. He asked, "Have you ever sexually harassed, molested, or raped a woman of any age? Sounds like a dumb question, but apparently this can't be taken for granted these days." Sky-Lobster notes this was an easy question that they expected David to say no to: "I asked my question as a topical joke. Of course he'd never admit to doing something like this. It's a low ball question, but his response reveals a bit about his personality, which is interesting." Sky-Lobster was not the only user who asked these types of question to try and identify who David was as a person. Images 5-8 showcase different instances where ridiculous questions were asked of David. We think we are seeing these types of questions asked of David because he is relatively unknown candidate. *Reddit* users are trying to determine David's image. On the reverse side, David was quick with his responses, using these questions as a tool to shaft his perception.

[−] **Rand_L** 27 points 3 hours ago

Do you wear socks with sandals?

permalink embed save report give gold REPLY pocket

> [−] ⚊ stevendavidtx08 [S] 93 points 3 hours ago
>
> I'm not a monster.
>
> permalink embed save parent report give gold REPLY pocket
>
> > [−] **kz201** 10 points 2 hours ago
> >
> > Thank god, I could never elect a candidate with such irresponsible fashion sense.
> >
> > permalink embed save parent report give gold REPLY pocket

Image 5 (Reddit 2017)

Image 6 (Reddit 2017)

[−] **monkee_see** 17 points 3 hours ago

Are you at all concerned that countless folks could Photoshop your AMA photo so that the piece of paper you are holding up appears to state something horribly offensive?

permalink embed save report give gold REPLY pocket

> [−] ⚊ stevendavidtx08 [S] 45 points 3 hours ago
>
> If it happens I'm coming for you.
>
> permalink embed save parent report give gold REPLY pocket
>
> > [−] **letsgettalking** 4 points 2 hours ago
> >
> > Sorry u/monkee_see, but you better watch your back.
> >
> > permalink embed save parent report give gold REPLY pocket
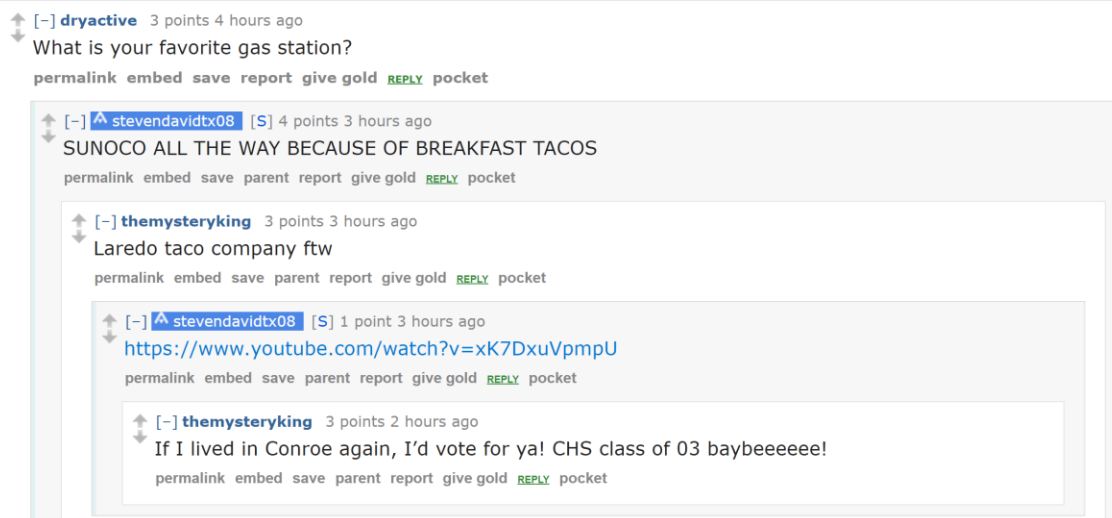
Image 7 (Reddit 2017)

Image 8 (Reddit 2017)

Each of these questions and responses showcases David's knowledge of *Reddit* and his personality. Voters reading this thread would have a better understanding of who David is as a politician and as a person.

After the IAmA ended David posted that he enjoyed his time and learned a lot. He promised to return and complete another IAmA. Several veteran users did critique David during his IAmA. One user explained to David that he need to do a better job of explaining who he was since David, and the incumbent he was challenging, were not household names. We believe that David's IAmA reflects a positive *Reddit* experience despite lots of user feedback. M

Gary Johnson

To say Gary Johnson, the 2016 Libertarian presidential candidate and governor of New Mexico, had a blast during his IAmA would be an understatement. Johnson and his running mate Bill Weld hosted an IAmA last year, proclaiming to users: "Gov. Gary Johnson and Gov. Bill Weld here to answer your questions! We are your Libertarian candidates for President and Vice President. We believe the two-party system is a dinosaur, and we are the comet," (Reddit 2017). *Reddit* has a strong Libertarian user base, so users immediately brought comments concerning involvement in nationally televised debates and marijuana legalization. Johnson tweeted a photo of himself (see *Image 9*) to alert followers he was hosting an IAmA. As is *Reddit* tradition, users consequently photoshopped him into numerous photos (see *Images 10* and *11*), proving some users deeply favor the Libertarian presidential candidate.

*Image 9.*   *Image 10.*   *Image 11.*

Johnson's IAmA quickly went awry, as *Reddit* users demanded more lengthy and specific answers from Johnson. Common comments from users under his responses asked for further clarification or debated the validity of statistics Johnson cites. In response to the question, "Do you believe it is the role of the US government to maintain hundreds of military bases all over the world?", Johnson responds, "No, we would initially target a 20% reduction in those bases," (Reddit 2017). In a presidential debate or press interview, this response would be entirely too vague to be considered a full response. *Reddit* users heavily downvoted Johnson's response and asked for further details, to which Johnson did not continue commenting (see *Image 8*) (Reddit 2017).

Image 8 (Reddit 2017)
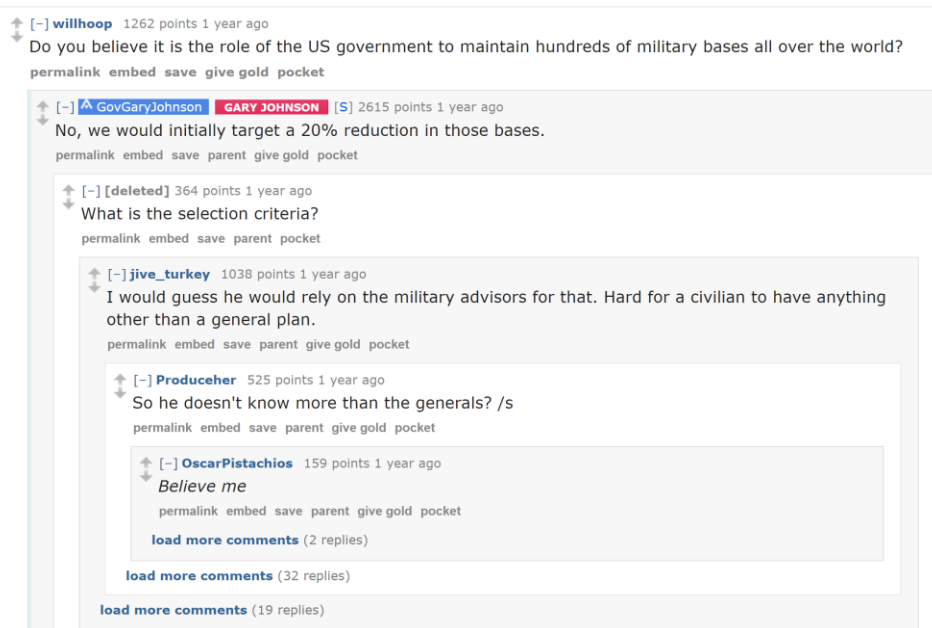
Johnson's other interactions with *Reddit* users who asked policy questions went over similarly to the previous example. Users were generally displeased with the Libertarian candidate's brief and uninformed responses, which awarded him a low positivity percentage of 66% (Reddit 2017). Johnson and Weld's IAmA had the lowest positivity percentage of all the cases we pulled for the survey. Johnson displayed a deep knowledge of the *Reddit* community, but failed to provide thoughtful responses to users' questions.

Beyond the AMA: What is the value to lesser-known candidates?

The presidential candidates received loads of attention from *Reddit* users, garnering double or triple the amount of votes than their congressional counterparts (see *Figure 1*). With proportionately more votes, the presidential candidates' AMAs/IAmAs are boosted to the front of the respective subreddits they hosted within, which perpetuates their post's popularity by becoming more visible. With greater popularity for presidential campaigns, their name alone can intrigue more *Reddit* users to their AMA/IAmA than those of congressional candidates. When

hosting AMAs/IAmAs, congressional candidates are likely reaching people mostly outside of their district and state, which questions whether *Reddit* adds value to a lesser-known candidate's campaign. We observed in an informational interview with Texas congressional candidate Steven David that lesser-known candidates learn how new audiences perceive their campaign and have the opportunity to answer a wider variety of campaign questions utilizing *Reddit* AMAs/IAmAs.

The subreddit most popular for AMAs, IAmA, has over seventeen-million subscribers. In a sidebar to the right of the subreddit's main page is a simple calendar highlighting when celebrities, writers, athletes, and politicians will be hosting their AMAs. David's AMA was marked on the calendar and brought in over a thousand comments and ten-thousand total votes (see *Figure 1)*. Even David didn't expect the traffic on his AMA, but he stuck to a common successful factor in AMAs, stating, "It got more attention then I thought it would. The upvote number was surprising. I did research before and looked at the other AMAs. If you are going to do the *Reddit* AMA you have to do the questions. If there are two or more upvotes you have to answer it." David saw in his research of AMAs that redditors are quick to downvote an AMA if a host doesn't answer a prominently upvoted question. This viciousness from redditors is more intense for politicians, given a reputation of dodging questions, and greatly contributed to the downfall of Jill Stein's AMA (see section *Jill Stein*). David continues, "The thing that I find myself seeing is that politicians have to be ready to be truly honest about their opinions." A redditor is able to praise or ridicule a politician in a matter of seconds and with thousands of other Redditors behind them. A political candidate's best chance at success on *Reddit*, whether a presidential or congressional candidate, is answering questions honestly and candidly.

Of our survey respondents from David's AMA, none of them were from his district and likely most of the people active on David's AMA were not either. The value in conducting an AMA remains even if a candidate isn't meeting their constituents because they are exposed to a range questions to exercise their campaign prose. David explained, "The best question was the most upvoted, which was about, 'How can you trust someone with two first names?' People will ask another variant of that question, about what it's like to have two first names. That was the one question that I paused on answering." Questions from redditors are not like those of journalists or fellow politicians; they can be funny, sarcastic, or pointed. An example of the *Reddit* community's sometimes-mean-spirited sense of humor is seen in David's AMA: "How do you expect to be a good elected official if you're a beta male?" (*Reddit* 2017). The redditor is insinuating that David could not be a good politician because he is the opposite of an alpha male, which was a popular insult about liberal men during the 2016 elections. When questioned about this comment, David responded, "I have never heard that before. I urban dictionary-ed it. I hate the type of questions where people come in with their absolute ridiculous bias." Certainly these kinds of insults are unnecessary in a political discussion, but *Reddit* exposed David to questions and comments he would not have otherwise encountered, further strengthening a candidate's response to other questions along the campaign trail.

Beyond the AMA: What is power is of speciality subreddits

As highlighted in Roozenbeek's work candidate or ideologue specific subreddits can create a positive sense of community. We saw in the 2016 election both Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump utilize the organizing power of *Reddit* through their own subreddits. Hector Sigala, the former digital media expert for Bernie Sanders presidential campaign provided

insight into *Reddit's* organizing potential through an interview. Sigala notes that during the

campaign he noticed that *Reddit* was becoming increasingly popular. He explained that Sanders

was huge into digital community building and the idea of hosting a *Reddit* AMA seemed like a

strategic way to reach-out to voters. From this success Sigala said the campaign oversaw the

creation of "SandersforPresident," a Bernie Sanders specific subreddit. On this page users would

repost campaign announcements or share Bernie Sanders themed wallpapers. The campaign was

able to utilize the subreddit for fundraising as well. Sigala told us that he believed the campaign

average $7 million in donations from just *Reddit* users: "If we needed a big push, we went to

Reddit." After Sanders lost the Democratic primary the subreddit folded and turned over to

Trump supporters. The subreddit now remains inactive and most of the users interact on,

"political revolution," a progressive based subreddit. Sigala's interview highlights the power

Reddit communities can have over campaigns.

r/Results

Through interviews, surveys, and textual analysis we were able to discover several patterns that

make a AMA/IAmA successful. Below is a chart, *Figure 1*, detailing the amount of traffic on

each of these IAmAs byway of total comments, total votes (upvotes and downvotes), and percent

positive votes (percentage of upvotes). Trends we observed from the *Figure 1* include the

positive relationship between level of desired office and traffic: those running for president tend

to attract greater total comments and votes. The presidential candidate with the lowest total

comments, Jill Stein, had four times more total comments than the congressional candidate with

the highest total comments, Randy Bryce. We can expect that the presidential candidates'

IAmAs are more relevant to a wider audience, garnering them greater traffic from *Reddit* users.

The comments column indicates the number of comments posted to the AMA/IAmA. That does not mean the candidates responded to that many questions; more often comments are between users communicating with each other. The total votes column represents the total number of downvotes or upvotes on the post. The percent positive column reflects the number of upvotes versus the number downvotes. A higher number indicates a high number of upvotes and a more favorable view of the AMA/IAmA.

Figure 1.

Name	Desired Office	Party	Subreddit	Total Comments	Total Votes	Percent Positive
Steven David	Congress-TX	Democrat	r/IAmA	1265	9332	70%
Donald Trump	President	Republican	r/the_donald	21271	42123	73%
Gary Johnson	President	Libertarian	r/IAmA	9165	44838	66%
Randy Bryce*[1]	Congress-WI	Democrat	r/SandersForPresident	376	1036	94%
Randy Bryce*	Congress-WI	Democrat	r/Political_Revolution	1823	3524	85%
Jill Stein	President	Green Party	r/IAmA	5925	17402	69%

Compiled below is a dataset, *Figure 2*, of the numerical responses we received from the survey we sent *Reddit* users. The most recent congressional candidates, Steven David and Randy Bryce, who hosted IAmAs accumulated more responses than the presidential candidates who hosted AMAs/IAmAs last year.

Figure 2.

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[1] * Randy Bryce is listed twice in *Figure 1* because he hosted two different AMAs on different subreddits.

Candidate	Question 1	Question 2	Question 3	Question 4	Question 5
Jill Stein	3	4	5	3	3
Average	**3**	**4**	**5**	**3**	**3**
Donald Trump	5	5	4	5	5
	5	5	5	5	5
Average	**5**	**5**	**4.5**	**5**	**5**
Steven David	1	1	1	3	3
	3	5	5	5	5
	1	2	4	3	1
	3	1	1	1	1
Average	**2**	**2.25**	**2.75**	**3**	**2.5**
Gary Johnson	4	4	4	5	5
Average	**4**	**4**	**4**	**5**	**5**
Randy Bryce	5	5	5	5	5
	4	3	1	4	3
	4	4	4	5	5
	4	4	4	4	4
Average	**4.25**	**4**	**3.5**	**4.5**	**4.25**

Patterns we observed in our survey and the numerical analysis of AMAs/IAmAs are that candidates who chose to host on subreddits specific to themselves or their political leanings

yielded a higher positivity percentage in votes and had more active AMAs/IAmAs than those who posted in the general IAmA or AMA subreddit and candidates who were asked questions that challenged their platform or previous responses received lower positivity percentages (see *Figure 1*).

Trump and Bryce received that highest positivity percentages and were the only candidates in our study to utilize subreddits outside of the IAmA platform (see *Figure 1*). These candidates also received the highest averages in our survey results from respondents (see *Figure 2*). Trump's overall survey average is a 4.9 and Bryce's is a 4.1. High survey results across the survey questions means that the respondent agrees they favored the candidate before the AMA/IAmA, still favored the candidate after the AMA/IAmA, and were more likely to vote for the candidate because of their AMA/IAmA participation. One of our respondents to Trump's survey who wished to remain anonymous said that he joined the AMA as a participant because he loved Trump's stance on honoring police officers. After asking a question pertaining to police brutality, the respondent said they were more affirmed than before that they agreed with Trump's overall platform. We can conclude that *Reddit* AMA success relies on candidates finding niche subreddits outside of the AMA or IAmA subreddit to attract users to their post and boost the post's visibility to other like-minded users, affirming our first hypothesis.

A reason for this success factor besides *Reddit* users liking content that affirms their beliefs is that IAmA or AMA is a significantly larger pool of users who are more likely to challenge a candidate's stance. IAmA has seventeen-million subscribers and does not cater to a specific political leaning, evident in the subreddit's calendar of AMAs that includes people from a medley of occupations outside of politics. Survey respondents from Trump's and Bryce's AMA said they already knew the candidate and already had a favorable opinion (see *Figure 2*,

Questions 1 and *2*). Compare these results to David's AMA, in which the congressional candidate posted to the IAmA subreddit: survey respondents said they did not know and did not have a favorable opinion of David before the AMA. The discrepancy in survey favorability and positivity percentage between David and Bryce, who are both less-known congressional candidates, is due to Bryce's utilization of *Reddit* communities that already agree with him or are more likely to listen. For *Reddit* users, not knowing the candidate and not having a favorable opinion of them going into the post would provide little incentive for the user to upvote the post of the candidate's responses. David, Stein, and Johnson also received more questions within their AMA that challenged or fact-checked their platform, resulting in lower positivity percentages than their counterparts. For AMAs/IAmAs, it is best to be a big fish in a small pond that already adores you. The difference in the congressional candidates' AMA success and the behavior of *Reddit* users to favor candidates that post to their niche subreddits affirms our second and third hypotheses.

r/Conclusion:

     Reddit, known as the frontpage of the internet, attracts high volumes of users everyday. Now, politicians are realizing that having an active *Reddit* presence is critical to maintaining voter bases and shaping their image. In our research we found that politicians who participated in IAmAs saw a positive affect to their image when hosting on their specific subreddit. This echos an already existing problem and showcases how *Reddit* is not immune to similar pitfalls other social media platforms are facing. As data and algorithms continue to deliver our news, so too will politically niche subreddits dominate the AMA and IAmA format. Beginning this study we assumed *Reddit* was free of errors and could solve issues of underrepresented and disconnected voters. Through our research we discovered *Reddit* is also responsible for perpetuating the filter

bubble and special interest politics. Moving forward we hope candidates continue to host outside of their specific subreddits, but predict that these subreddits will only continue to grow in popularity.

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