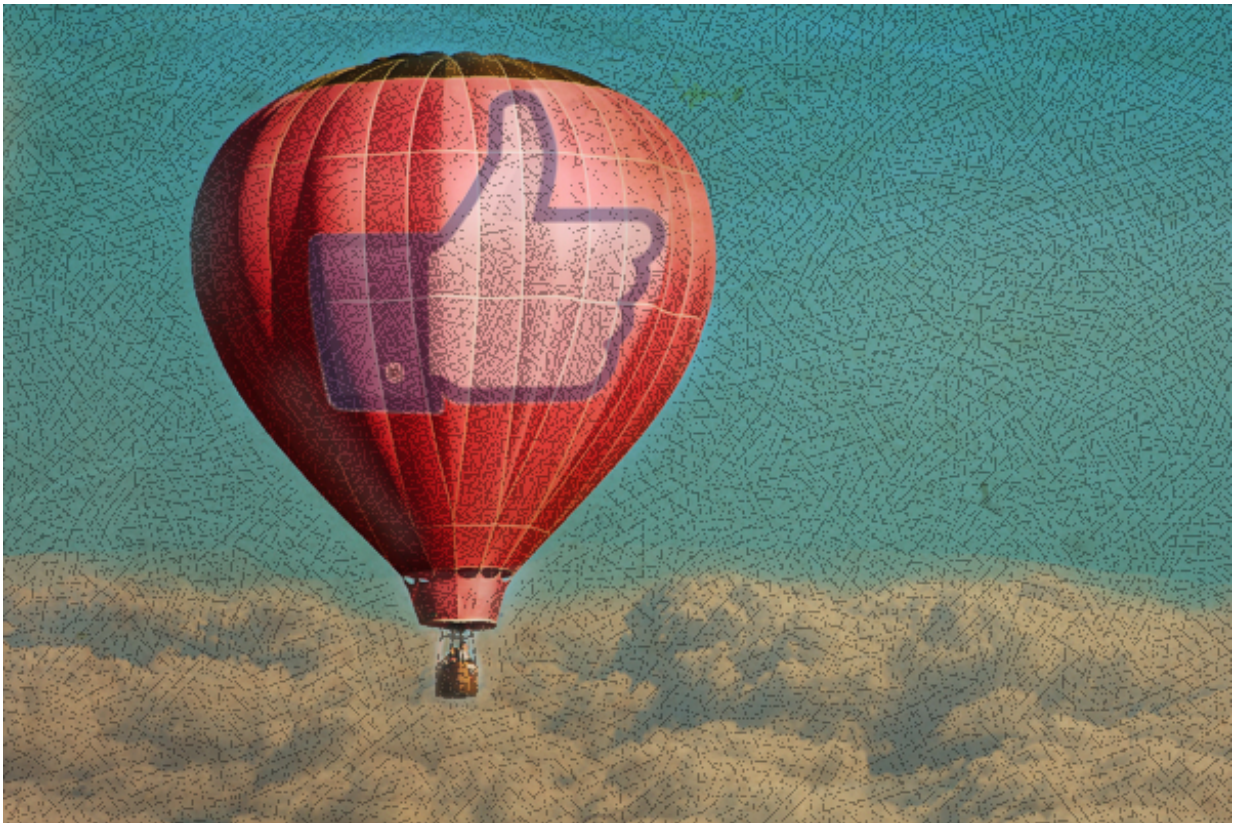


# Positive comments on social media found to influence potential voters

September 24 2015, by Ann Manser

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New research at UD finds that political candidates benefit from positive comments about them on social media. Credit: Jeffrey Chase

When Facebook users see favorable comments on the social media site about a political candidate, those opinions positively influence their own

views of the politician, while unfavorable comments have a negative effect, according to a new paper by University of Delaware researchers.

That influence occurred even though the research participants weren't Facebook friends or even acquaintances of the commenters. In fact, the commenters—like the candidate himself—didn't even exist.

The research team, consisting of faculty and students from the departments of Communication and of Political Science and International Relations, created a Facebook page for a fictitious candidate using general and nonpartisan "information" about him.

Delawareans selected as a test group were sent an online survey, asking them to look at the page and then rate their impressions of the candidate. Some of the recipients saw a page with two fictitious supportive [comments](#), while others saw two challenging comments.

"A social media campaign is practically obligatory for candidates today, and the key to social media is that it's interactive; it's not one-way like traditional political advertising," said Paul R. Brewer, professor of communication and of [political science](#) and [international relations](#) and director of UD's Center for Political Communication (CPC). "We wanted to test this interactivity between the candidate and citizens."

The research, published in the *Journal of Experimental Political Science*, found that those who saw positive comments or "likes" had a more favorable perception of the candidate and were more likely to support him, while those who saw the negative comments had more unfavorable perceptions.

Whether the candidate responded to the comments had no effect on how he was perceived.

"This showed that people trust comments from their peers more than they trust self-generated comments from the candidate," Brewer said. "It's the idea that what other people say about you is genuine, perhaps unlike what you say about yourself. So comments from some random person on the Internet do shape citizens' perceptions."

Calling the study a first step in researching the effect of social media interactivity in political campaigns, Brewer said that it may have been easier to influence viewers looking at the "blank slate" of a fictitious candidate rather than at a real candidate with whom they may already be familiar. He also noted that the survey group was asked to look at the Facebook page, while in real campaigns, citizens decide for themselves whether to check out a candidate on social media.

Still, Brewer said, "I was surprised that no one had done this kind of study before, at least not in published research. Campaigns invest heavily in social media, and this is something that will play out in 2016."

Campaigns already sometimes try to influence social media by removing negative comments from their pages or encouraging staffers and supporters to post positive comments. This is nothing new, Brewer said, recalling a pre-[social-media](#) campaign in which he worked as an intern and was instructed to write positive letters to the editor at newspapers.

"Candidates have long used carefully orchestrated social cues, from endorsements to photo opportunities to stage-managed public events, in their efforts to persuade voters that they are riding a wave of popular support," the researchers concluded in their journal article. "The increasing use of [social networking sites] by voters provides candidates and other actors with new tools for projecting images of popularity or unpopularity in ways that may carry electoral consequences."

Provided by University of Delaware

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