

2016 presidential campaign emails reveal strategy, surprises

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While public discussion during and after the 2016 presidential campaign between Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton largely focused on emails and email servers, a team of political science scholars zeroed in on email

communications distributed by the campaigns and found that email is still an important campaign tool despite its mundane nature.

In their new research titled "The (surprisingly interesting) story of [email](#) in the 2016 [presidential election](#)" published in the *Journal of Information Technology and Politics*, Dr. Jeff Broxmeyer, assistant professor of political science at The University of Toledo, and Dr. Ben Epstein, associate professor of political science at DePaul University, explored 10 months of emails leading up to Election Day and analyzed ways that emails sent by campaigns reveal varied strategies and goals of campaigns.

Notably, Trump campaign e-mails were more participatory, fitting the populist theme of the campaign, and the Clinton campaign made the surprising strategic decision to stop direct e-mail communication to passive e-mail subscribers more than two months before Election Day.

"Trump's campaign was oddly silent with emails through the primary and the general up until October. When it revved up, turns out his campaign had fewer appeals to donate and more appeals to do something—show up to an event or make phone calls," Broxmeyer said. "That was a big outlier because we found that most of the top-tier candidates—the serious ones—ran sophisticated, full-gauge operations and used email extensively and almost entirely as an ATM to ply supporters with appeals for small donations, including Bernie Sanders despite his mobilizing rhetoric."

A window into campaign intensity, the researchers found that Clinton was sending eight emails a week to her supporters at peak; U.S. Senator Ted Cruz stopped campaign emails long before the Republican National Convention; Jim Gilmore, former governor of Virginia and chair of the Republican National Committee, didn't send a single email to supporters; and Lincoln Chaffee sent a total of eight campaign emails to his

supporters.

The emails showed the degree to which campaigns existed on paper, but were not actively being run.

"Some candidates—also-rans—claimed they weren't getting enough attention from the press, but they didn't really try to communicate at all with their own supporters, people who went on the website and actually signed up to be on the email list," Broxmeyer said.

The researchers were surprised by the Clinton campaign's decision to stop sending emails to accounts that had not engaged with the campaign since signing up for emails.

"The Clinton campaign made that move in August, nearly three months before the end of the election and just as the Trump campaign started ramping up its email [campaign](#)," Epstein said. "Overall this study demonstrates how some strategies, such as the frequency of emailing, focus on fundraising, and consistent forms of interactions have become widely accepted norms. It is clear that e-mail remains valuable for campaigns and an important subject for scholarship, despite its mundane nature."

More information: Ben Epstein et al, The (surprisingly interesting) story of e-mail in the 2016 presidential election, *Journal of Information Technology & Politics* (2020). [DOI: 10.1080/19331681.2020.1755762](https://doi.org/10.1080/19331681.2020.1755762)

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