

**Trolling and sick burns: John Fetterman's winning social media strategy against
Mehmet Oz in the 2022 Pennsylvania Senate campaign**

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Abstract: In 2021, Pew Research Center estimated that 7 in 10 Americans use social media, and it is a political campaign tool that is becoming more important to reaching voters. The Pennsylvania Senate campaign of John Fetterman used multiple social media tools, including Twitter and TikTok, skillfully and in a unique way to differentiate himself from Republican candidate Mehmet Oz. This case will demonstrate the Fetterman campaign's use of an authentic voice, social media trolling, and irreverent humor to get a leg up on the competition in what became a successful Senate run.

Keywords

Politics; social media; humor; campaign; Pennsylvania; Fetterman; Oz; Tik Tok; Twitter

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Introduction

The Pennsylvania Senate race was the most talked-about and expensive political race of 2022 (Otterbein & Allison, 2022). After emerging from the May primaries as their parties' respective candidates, John Fetterman and Mehmet Oz became rivals in the Pennsylvania Senate race. Known for his brash personality and unpolished look, democratic candidate John Fetterman played up his "everyman" status against the wealthy Mehmet Oz, the Republican candidate known by his popular TV show. Despite suffering traumatic cardiological and neurological effects after a stroke on May 13, 2022, Fetterman's campaign continued through his recovery, utilizing proxies for public appearances (primarily his wife Gisele) and influencers on social media. Using social media (including irreverent humor and nontraditional platforms like Tik Tok) to reinforce his everyman voice, Fetterman was able to flip the Republican-held Senate seat. According to Levy (2022), "In one of this year's most competitive U.S. Senate races, the biggest moments aren't playing out on the campaign trail. They're unfolding on social media" (para. 1).

In addition to being arguably the stronger candidate based on political experience, some have credited Fetterman's success to his no-holds-barred use of social media to "troll" his opponent and capitalize quickly on gaffes made by Oz. Certainly, the Pennsylvania Senate campaign frequently made national news for the candidate's memes and use of humor on social media throughout the campaign. This case study will examine the Fetterman campaign's use of social media, look for innovative and noteworthy examples of content that may have made an impact on the race, and view the social media strategy in the context not only of the candidate, himself, but the team who was behind his social media accounts. The case study will conclude with a discussion of the key takeaways from the campaign and lessons that other candidates could learn from in future political campaigns.

Background

John Fetterman became the 34th Lieutenant Governor of Pennsylvania in 2019 after serving as the mayor of Braddock, Pennsylvania, from 2006 to 2019. In May 2022, Fetterman became the Democratic nominee for the U.S. Senate seat to represent Pennsylvania. Standing at 6 feet 8 inches tall, the 53-year-old Fetterman is known for his casual Carhartt gear, bald head and goatee. In 2020, GQ called him "an American taste god" (Tashjian, 2020), praise that Fetterman eschewed, calling the title "ironic because I have no taste" (CBS Sunday Morning, 2021).

Fetterman announced that he was running for the Senate in February of 2021. With a political platform centered on his support for organized labor, a \$15 minimum wage, marijuana legalization and LGBTQ rights, he was the favored democratic candidate. Just four short days before Pennsylvania's May 2022 democratic primary, Lieutenant Governor Fetterman suffered a stroke. He was still recovering in the hospital when he won the nomination to be the democratic candidate.

His Republican opponent, Mehmet Oz, was already well known to many Pennsylvania voters because of his years appearing on television on the Dr. Oz Show and, before that, on the Oprah Winfrey Show. With rising inflation and President Biden's approval ratings dipping, Republicans were hopeful they would keep the Senate seat.

Despite suffering a stroke, which limited his ability to appear publicly and take his campaign on the road, Fetterman won the November 2022 Senate election. Many credit the Fetterman campaign's use of social media, especially in the times during which the candidate himself may not have been healthy enough to speak publicly, for solidifying the win. Specifically, the use of memes and humorous trolling were noteworthy enough to go viral online and gain national attention.

Research

After the election in November of 2022, a review of the Fetterman for PA social media campaign was conducted, with a focus on posts that went viral. Special attention was paid to the outcome of those viral posts, specifically money raised for the campaign and volunteer engagement and, of course, the eventual outcome of the election. The highlights are discussed below along with insight into the strategy behind the campaign directly from Fetterman's digital director and campaign operatives.

Strategy

Fetterman had been using social media to communicate with his publics long before the 2022 Senate campaign. In an interview with CBS in 2021, he addressed his sometimes controversial, always attention-getting Twitter account. "Getting on Twitter every morning's like starting the day with a dog-turd-and-motor-oil smoothie," he told CBS. "It's horrible. You gotta form that phalanx and push back against that. And I do that in a way that mixes kind of humor and mockery with cold, hard facts" (Stephens, 2021, para. 5).

After waging a very successful Senate campaign throughout early 2022, largely due to his aggressive social media strategy, Fetterman was rising steadily in the polls, besting Oz by double digits. However, after his stroke, polls tightened, and more and more reporters were asking questions about Fetterman's health. At the end of the summer of 2022, the Fetterman campaign decided to double their TV ad spending to match the spending of the OZ campaign, thus helping Fetterman speak directly to Pennsylvania voters even while he was physically sidelined and incapable of speaking publicly. Using Fetterman's voice and actual video footage of Fetterman bashing Oz in speeches prior to the stroke, their ads focused on Oz's unique weaknesses:

The campaign settled on a strategy to weather that strong tide by seizing on one of Oz's ultimate top weaknesses: his paper-thin ties to the state. The thinking went that if Fetterman's team could show that the Donald Trump-endorsed Republican was a wealthy, out-of-touch carpetbagger who didn't understand average Pennsylvanians, then it could make the case that he wouldn't fight for average Pennsylvanians when it came to inflation, either. (Otterbein & Allison, 2022, para. 18)

There were a few key messaging themes the campaign used to attack Oz. The first was that Dr. Oz was not really a resident of Pennsylvania, but actually a long-time resident of neighboring New Jersey. While legally the candidate had proven Pennsylvania residency, the Fetterman campaign tried to use the recency of his move to prove that Oz was out of touch with Pennsylvanians. With Fetterman's deep roots in Pennsylvania, this was a stark point of contrast.

Another common messaging theme in the Fetterman campaign was that Dr. Oz was so rich as to not understand the lives of everyday Pennsylvanians. The campaign argued that the multi-millionaire who owned multiple houses did not care about the high prices lighting up Pennsylvania's grocery shelves. Again, the Carhartt-wearing, bald, brash, tattooed Fetterman could play the everyman foil to Oz's polished, preppy elitism.

In addition to their increased TV ad spending, the Fetterman team doubled down on social media after his stroke. As Levy (2022) pointed out, the Fetterman campaign was in a unique situation where they had to rely heavily on social media after his stroke effectively kept him off the campaign trail. Fetterman's social media memes and PR stunts (airplane banners and celebrity cameo videos, for example) were a way to keep his irreverent voice top of mind and show him as a strong online presence, even when he was physically frail.

For a campaign that could ultimately cost more than \$100 million, the stunts are cheap ways for Fetterman, Pennsylvania's lieutenant governor, to generate attention. The millions of views are helpful for a candidate who has largely been sidelined from personal appearances after suffering a stroke in May. (para. 5)

Utilizing spokespeople and influencers in a time when Fetterman himself was having a hard time speaking publicly was another campaign strategy post-stroke. His most-reliable spokesperson and a very popular sympathetic figure for Pennsylvania voters was his wife, Gisele Fetterman. Gisele

acted as a proxy candidate in the waning days of the [Democratic primary] campaign, taking questions from local and national news media in Braddock and providing updates on her husband's medical status. She even held an election watch party as the tallies came in Tuesday night, which showed her husband winning all 67 Pennsylvania counties and coasting to the Democratic nomination. (Deto, 2022, para. 5)

Later in the summer, celebrities were used to push the Fetterman message online, notably Steven Van Zandt of Bruce Springsteen's E Street Band and Nicole "Snooki" LaValle from Jersey Shore, who will be highlighted later.

The digital director of the Fetterman for PA campaign, 26-year-old Sophie Ota, organized his team's messaging into a "voice guide" to create a consistent, authentic message. The voice guide

included expressions Fetterman is partial to using, plus his favorite emoji (the smiling face with three hearts — "He uses it all the time"), and favorite turns of phrase ("the Union Way of Life — we always capitalize it"). To Ota, these patterns are as distinct to Fetterman (she refers to him as "John") as the fact that he met President Joe Biden while wearing shorts in winter. (Latifi, 2022, para. 2)

Because Fetterman had established a social media voice along with favorite memes and emojis, his team was able to harness his authenticity to create a powerful messaging strategy even when he was physically sidelined and unable to be actively campaigning.

Execution

As previously discussed, after Fetterman's stroke in May 2022, the campaign leaned heavily on social media and influencers to score political points against their opponent and to keep Fetterman's authentic voice alive, even when he couldn't make live appearances. The social media meme war really heated up in July, with candidates sparring using memes and quote tweets to gain advantage and popular support.

On July 10, the Fetterman campaign paid \$2,000 for an airplane to haul a banner over weekend beachgoers on the Jersey Shore welcoming Mr. Oz back home to the Garden State. The video of the banner flying over the Jersey shore received 58k likes on Twitter and the stunt garnered plenty of local and national news coverage.



Image 1. Post from John Fetterman's Twitter account

On July 14, the Fetterman campaign posted a Cameo video made by D-list celebrity Nicole "Snooki" LaValle from the reality show Jersey Shore. The affordable stunt only cost the Fetterman campaign \$393.75, and made voters, who themselves use Cameo to buy videos for their own friends and frenemies,

feel like Fetterman was “just like us” (Gularte, 2022, para. 1). In the video, Snooki addresses Oz personally, saying she heard he was leaving New Jersey to look for a new job.

"Personally, I don't why anyone would want to leave New Jersey because we are all hot messes, but I want to say best of luck to you," she said. "I know you're away from home and you're in a new place but Jersey will never forget you" (Griffiths, 2022, para. 3).

Snooki didn't realize her video would be part of a campaign, and Fetterman staff gave her a script to read (Levy, 2022). Originally the Fetterman staff had approached Mike “The Situation” Sorrentino, also from the Jersey Shore television show, but his Cameo fell flat. Fetterman adviser Rebecca Katz said, “He was like, ‘Good luck, Mehmet. We’re rooting for you.’ It was all wrong.” So, they went for Snooki instead. Her video landed in their inboxes during a meeting. “We were all screaming,” said Katz.



Image 2. Twitter post featuring a video from Jersey Shore's "Snooki"

One of Fetterman's most popular tweets was a “sick burn” on July 15 that highlighted the recency of Oz's move to Pennsylvania and his outsider status. Fetterman quote tweeted the Oz campaign's post about Dr. Oz's visit to two renowned Philly cheesesteak restaurants, joking about how Oz is a Pennsylvania tourist rather than a real resident.



Image 3. Retweet from the Fetterman Twitter account

Using a page from the Fetterman playbook, Oz posted a poorly designed Stepbrothers movie meme on July 20 to remind voters that Fetterman had been endorsed by the radical left-wing Bernie Sanders. The tweet received just 1,770 likes. In response, the Fetterman campaign roasted the poor graphic design of Oz's meme, by posting their own ironic "graphic design is my passion" meme. The Fetterman response received 46.8k likes.





Images 4 and 5. Meme tweets between the Fetterman and Oz campaigns

On July 21, Fetterman started an online petition to get Dr. Oz enshrined in New Jersey's Hall of Fame — a nod to Mr. Oz moving from his longtime home in New Jersey to run in neighboring Pennsylvania.



Image 6. Video from the Fetterman Twitter account

Not wanting to let Fetterman dominate the social media space, on July 21, Oz posted a meme to troll Fetterman. One messaging strategy of the Oz campaign after Fetterman's stroke on May 13 was to highlight Fetterman's lack of public appearances. To call attention to the fact that Fetterman's stroke made him an absentee candidate and unfit for political office, the Oz campaign shared their own social media meme.



Image 7. Meme tweet from the Oz Twitter account

The lack of involvement with the post compared with the previous Fetterman post examples is notable. 1,001 likes vs 170k likes for the Philly cheesesteak post is a sharp contrast. *Lost* creator Damon Lindelof came to Fetterman's defense by quote tweeting Oz, pointing out that Fetterman's stroke would take time to heal and that if Oz had actually watched the TV show *Lost*, he would know not to mess with the bald guy. Lindelof's quote tweet received 3,600 more likes than Oz's original tweet.



Image 8. Response to Oz's tweet

Inspired by the success of the Snooki video, the Fetterman campaign asked actor-musician Steven Van Zandt of "The Sopranos" and Bruce Springsteen's E Street Band to record a video telling Oz to come home to New Jersey. On July 27, Fetterman posted the video on Twitter, which went viral.



Image 9. Fetterman tweet posting the Stevie Van Zandt video

The Oz campaign posted a TikTok video in April 2022 that featured Dr. Oz grocery shopping and arguing that inflation was making items such as asparagus, broccoli, guacamole and salsa more expensive. In the video, he referred to the aforementioned items as “crudite” and said he was shopping in “Wegn timers,” an apparent combination of Wegmans and Redner’s grocery store names. The TikTok video Oz made about the price of “crudite” tallied 4.4 million views in one week and was shared thousands of times on Twitter with mostly critical commentary. A few months later, on August 15, Fetterman responded to the video by claiming Oz was out of touch with real Pennsylvanians who know how to pronounce Wegmans and who also know that a pre-made veggie tray from Wegmans costs around \$10. The Fetterman response tweet got 68.4k likes.



Image 10. Fetterman vegetable tray tweet countering the Oz crudité-creation video

In October 2022, Fetterman made a shaky appearance in a televised debate with Oz, leading to many reporters, pundits, and political adversaries questioning whether Fetterman was fit to lead. Post-debate polls showed Fetterman and Oz neck and neck. As Fetterman’s lead over Oz tightened, the campaign released Fettermemes.com, a depository of videos and photos of Dr. Oz saying and doing funny or compromising things, like talking about how he lives in New Jersey and saying that he wants a \$90 hamburger. The strategy behind this particular tactic was a logical extension of the campaign’s general strategy related to using social media to troll Oz. “You’ve got to find the fun in [politics] and find a way to reach people that isn’t too doom and gloom and that gives them some hope and gives them some fun to have along the way,” Fetterman campaign spokesperson Emilia Rowland said. By launching Fettermemes.com and encouraging fans to create their own memes that the campaign could then amplify and reshare, the Fetterman team was able to crowdsource even more anti-Oz content.

Evaluation

After all the votes were tallied, Fetterman earned 51% of the vote to Oz's 46%. Maggie MacDonald, post-doctoral fellow at New York University's Center for Social Media and Politics, said Fetterman's social media game is among the best, if not the best, she's seen in a congressional campaign (Levy, 2022, para. 23) In addition to making people laugh, she said she suspected Fetterman's stunts motivated appreciative viewers to contribute money to his campaign and push apathetic Democrats to get off the sidelines to vote for him.

This hypothesis appears to have been confirmed by Fetterman's Digital Director after he prevailed over Oz in the November election. In an interview with Teen Vogue, Digital Director, Sophie Ota, said that in the 24 hours after their crudité video response tweet went viral, the Fetterman campaign raised \$500,000. In just one week, the campaign said they raised one million dollars from the "crudité" incident, including proceeds from "Wegners" stickers that were sold in the Fetterman campaign store (mocking Oz for mispronouncing the Pennsylvania grocery store chain).

Ota also explained that the campaign was able to capitalize on the crudité gaffe beyond fundraising. She said that the Fetterman campaign used "that moment to get more people to volunteer with us and sign up for our relational organizing training and canvass-your-friends-on-social-media training" (Latifi, 2022, para. 7).

By using proxies for the candidate when he was incapacitated, including his wife, Gisele, and social media influencers, his messaging stayed strong. The campaign was fortunate to have audio recordings of Fetterman criticizing Oz that were made prior to his stroke, that could then be edited for use in TV and radio advertisements after his stroke. Allowing voters to hear his authentic voice boosted confidence in him as a candidate when many were worried about his ability to serve. The Fettermemes.com strategy was a novel way to let voters participate in the fun of roasting Oz online, which also made lighter work for the Fetterman campaign who then just had to retweet or share clever content from other users.

Analysis & Discussion

One of the hypotheses put forth by political talking heads is that Twitter magnifies the personality of the user and then gives millions of people the opportunity to pass judgement. "The problem for Oz, which John Fetterman has taken full advantage of, is that Twitter amplifies Oz's humorlessness" (Jong-Fast, 2022, para. 3). Likewise, Fetterman's funny, quick-witted personality shone through his social media posts, even after his stroke left him unable to speak clearly. According to campaign spokesperson Joe Calvello, a lot of the material for the viral memes came from Fetterman himself. Calvello said Fetterman did a lot of the posting on Twitter and if he himself doesn't post it, he helped originate ideas (Levy, 2022).

Fetterman's direct involvement in his social media posts likely played a significant role in his success. The voice and ideas that had made him popular as lieutenant governor and, before that, as mayor, also made him popular as a Senate candidate. This consistency of voice and tone (even though it was a more

casual, lighthearted, and humorous voice than many Senate candidates) was appreciated by voters and made him appear authentic.

Relatedly, it was important that his team be able to match his voice and tone even when he, himself, was unable to be as active in his campaign during the recovery from his stroke. While his team managed his social media posts, they also selected surrogates like his wife, who obviously understand Fetterman's voice and can relate to his audience, and online influencers who reflected Fetterman's irreverence, like Snooki and Steven Van Zandt.

There is recent historical precedent for the candidate perceived to have the more authentic personality to win an election, despite using humor and trolling. As Theye and Melling (2018) pointed out, Donald Trump was very popular in large part because voters viewed him as authentic in a race against a candidate that did not have the same authentic appeal.

Similarly, Shugart (2021) believes that as more and more Americans become disenchanted with the political system, the more they will gravitate towards candidates that buck tradition and even use vulgar and abject language. "Political authenticity, as illustrated in the cases of [Chris] Christie and Trump, is increasingly aligned with the abject, reflective of public distrust of political and media establishments that have been identified as discounting 'real' Americans" (p. 283).

While Christie and Trump's vulgarity and political incorrectness served as proof of their apparent authenticity in the minds of voters, it is debatable whether Fetterman could be categorized as politically incorrect. Fetterman certainly used trolling and personal attacks against Oz, and wore unrefined, informal clothing which some may deem unbecoming a Senate candidate, but his messaging couldn't be described as vulgar or unethical. The common thread among these political case studies is that social media messaging that sounds and feels authentic to the candidate seems to be a winning strategy.

The month after the election, Slate published an interview with Annie Wu Henry, a 26-year-old digital and social media specialist from the Fetterman campaign team. She confirmed that after his stroke, the Fetterman campaign leaned heavily on social media.

Once he won the primary, he had to shift because he could no longer be on the campaign trail, as he traditionally would, until he started to recover. So we turned to a lot of these digital platforms to be able to convey a message, to continue to reach people, and to continue to reach a broad audience. (Docter-Loeb, 2022, para. 15)

Another way in which the Fetterman campaign was groundbreaking is that it showed that social media messaging could effectively take the place of in-person appearances and allow the candidate to still reach a wide swath of voters. Clearly, in situations where the candidate is unable to take to the campaign trail, perhaps in the case of another pandemic or if the candidate (or a family member) were physically incapable of traveling to make appearances, social media becomes a viable method of sharing information and conveying their political messages.

Discussion Questions

As social media evolves (see the changes to Twitter/now-X after the Elon musk takeover) and new tools emerge, what opportunities exist for political digital campaign managers? What are the risks to using new tools or existing tools as they change?

Fetterman's digital director, Sophie Ota, thinks that Fetterman's social media campaign for his Senate race could be a model for future presidential campaigns. Do you agree? Why or why not?

If you worked on social media for Dr. Oz, what clever responses would you have suggested to defend yourself against Fetterman's claims that you were out of touch with real Pennsylvanians?

Do you agree that authenticity was a significant factor in Fetterman's messaging success? What similarities or differences do you see between the authenticity attributed to Fetterman and the authenticity attributed to Donald Trump?

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