

TRIOLOGY

FACEBOOK PREDICTS ELECTORAL VICTORY, OR NOT?

by Steve Olson & Will Bunnnett

INTRODUCTION

Social media use has grown astronomically in America over the past decade, and political campaigns have posed no exception to the trend, posting and tweeting more each election cycle. But the impact of social media use in campaigns is difficult to quantify. Is there a connection between aggressive use of social media and the ultimate political metric: winning your election?

If you believe the social media powers that be, there is.

A blog on the *L.A. Times* website recently put a stake in the ground with a post titled “Forget kissing babies, you need Facebook friends to get elected.”

Indeed, Facebook’s political data team has reported that in 74% of 2010 races, the candidates with more Facebook “likes” won.

While Trilogy’s experience with dozens of major campaigns during the last four years certainly shows that strong social media campaigns help candidates raise funds and get their messages out more effectively, we refute the claim that there is a direct relationship between Facebook outreach and victory. Our research suggests that, while there is a small correlation in number of Facebook “Likes” and total vote margin for Senate candidates, understanding the real impact of good social networking campaigns is far more complex.

Trilogy often advises its clients to invest in strong social media outreach campaigns across a number of platforms, including Facebook. However, we also promote a data-driven approach to prove the true value of the strategies we recommend, and the broad pronouncements from Facebook and *L.A. Times* only underscore the need for further research.

We looked at the data to see if the total number of Facebook Likes for a given candidate was a good predictor of victory on Election Day. Our results show some correlation in U.S. Senate races, but that correlation effectively disappeared in U.S. House and gubernatorial races.

METHODOLOGY

To determine whether the total numbers of Likes predicted the ultimate outcome of the election, our Trilogy team looked for a linear relationship between the margin of victory on Facebook and the margin of victory at the polls.

This approach let us look beyond the yes/no outcomes of winning the Facebook popularity fight and the election itself -- the simplicity of which could easily produce dubious results. Instead, we tried to gauge whether variation in the number of Likes predicted variation in the vote itself - which we believe should shine more light on the situation.

Our team compiled Facebook Like data published by AllFacebook.com¹ and election results as reported in the *New York Times*² for all U.S. Senate and gubernatorial contests, along with a sample of 34 house races. In order to compensate for the differing size of states and districts, we calculated the margin of victory on Facebook based on the winner's net number of Facebook Likes divided by the total number of Facebook Likes of the top two vote-getting candidates:

$$\text{Facebook victory margin} = \frac{\text{Winner Likes}}{(\text{Winner Likes} + \text{Second place candidate Likes})}$$

We then performed a similar calculation for votes and ran a linear regression comparing the two.

For example, in the Colorado gubernatorial election, Trilogy client John Hickenlooper beat out two major opponents, Republican Dan Maes and late-entrant, third-party conservative Tom Tancredo. Maes came in third with 11.1% of the vote, so we compared Hickenlooper (the winner) and Tancredo (the second place candidate). Hickenlooper had a strong social media campaign from the start and had 15,426 Likes on Facebook compared to 3,747 for Tancredo, who had strong Tea Party support. Hickenlooper's margin of victory on Facebook was a 0.609 share of the Likes in the race, and his margin of victory at the ballot box was a 0.1597 share of the two-way vote.

¹ Facebook Like counts were pulled from <http://statistics.allfacebook.com/election/> and occasionally supplemented with checking the Facebook fan page of the candidate where AllFacebook.com had no information

² Election return data for U.S. Senate and gubernatorial races were pulled from <http://elections.nytimes.com/2010/results/senate>. Data for the U.S. House races were collected from various newspaper websites.

FINDINGS

We observed a slight positive correlation in U.S. Senate races, where the Facebook margin of victory explained about 13% of the voting results.

Figure 1 shows this correlation. If the margin of victory on Facebook did, indeed, predict the margin of victory at the polls to a significant extent, one would expect the red line to slope up and to the right. Clearly that is the case in Figure 1, where there was both a positive correlation and a statistically significant result.

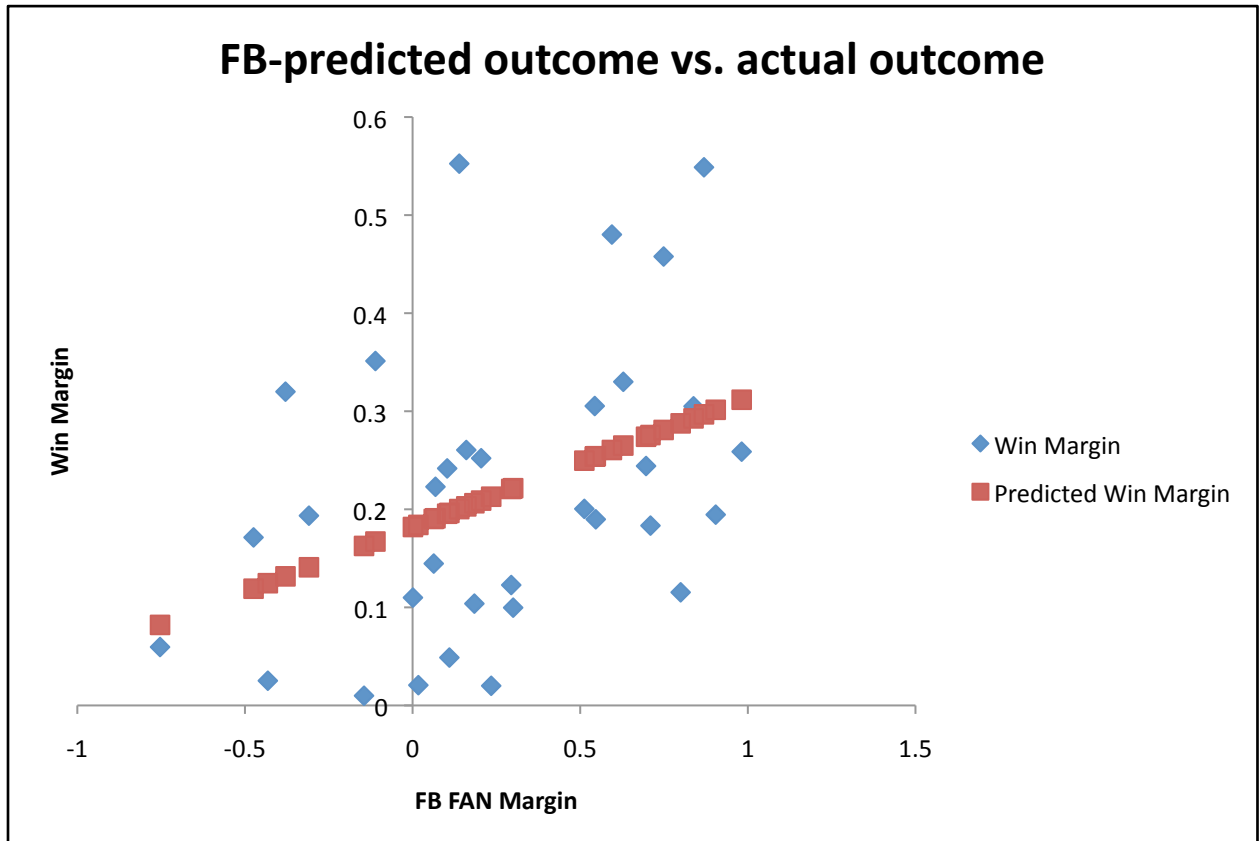


Figure 1: U.S. Senate races

But for gubernatorial races, Figure 2, we see only a very weak correlation, as represented by the red line sloping only slightly up as you move from left to right. The strength of the campaign's Facebook presence would only explain about 0.008 of the vote margin, according to these calculations.

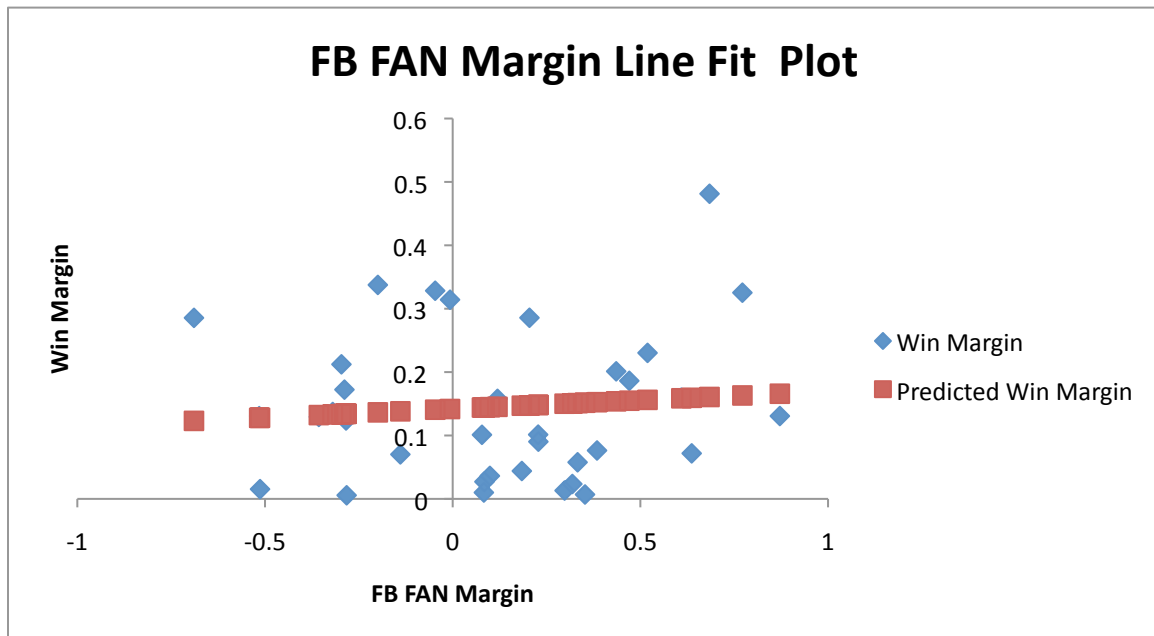


Figure 2: Gubernatorial Races

For our sample of U.S. House races, we observed a slight negative correlation, meaning a stronger Facebook presence was associated with a smaller margin of victory. Figure 3 shows predicted win margin decreasing as you move from left to right.

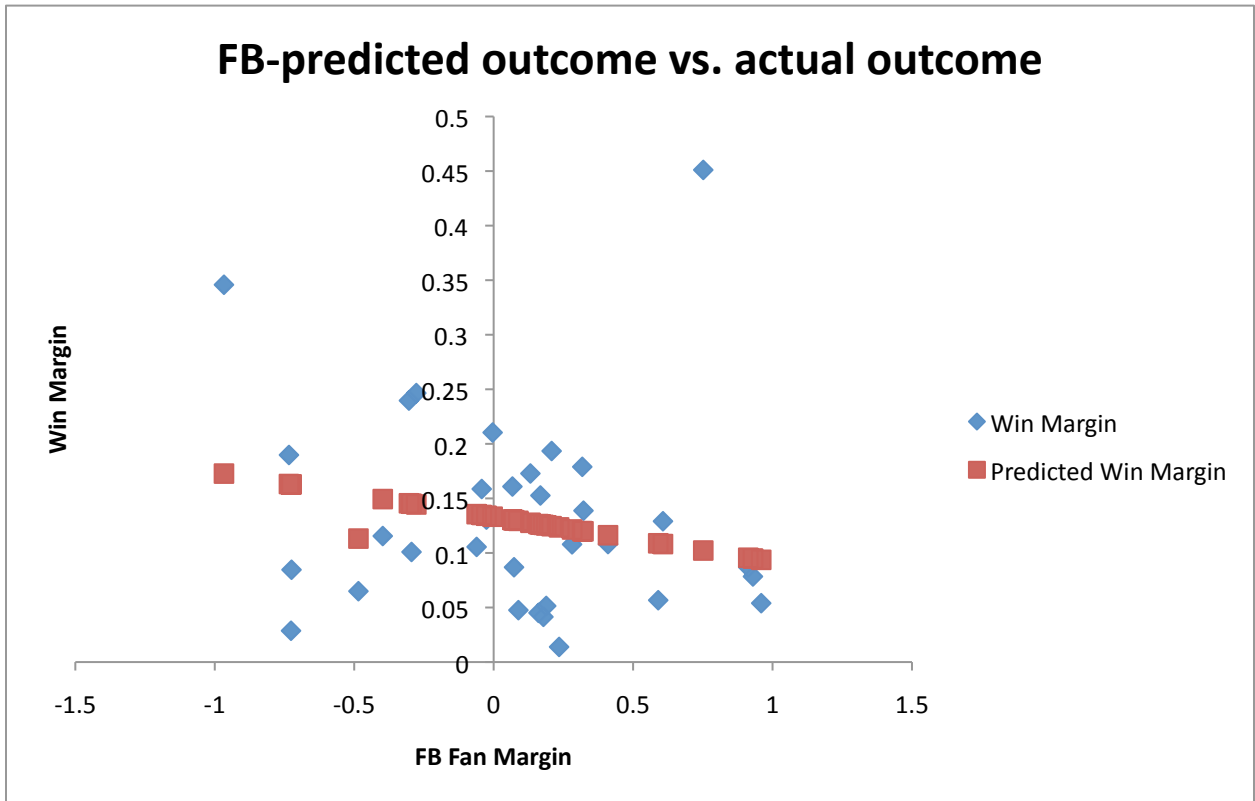


Figure 3: U.S. House Races

One thing all three graphs have in common is the wide scattering of the win margin plots. All three sets of data produced large standard deviations, which hints at the broad variety of factors in play in this election.

SUMMARY

Rather than seeing the statistical significance of the U.S. Senate data as validating the *L.A. Times/Facebook* argument, we think it comes closer to confirming that statistical significance is not the same as actual significance.

The related truism, that correlation does not imply causation, also comes into play here. Enthusiasm, for example, is widely thought to predict both Facebook following and election results. Since non-incumbent Republican candidates were more likely to benefit from enthusiasm in 2010, for example, it would stand to reason that their Senate candidates would acquire larger Facebook followings.

We at Trilogy are still enthusiastic about social media and believe strongly that smart use of tools like Facebook and Twitter is an essential component of a winning campaign. And we predict social media will be even more important in 2012. But we need to recognize social media for what they are: tools to move supporters up the engagement ladder, rather than a magic bullet that wins races. Ultimately, the return on investment is a far more complicated equation than a simple ratio of Likes to votes. After the midterms, Trilogy's position is clear: Campaigns should be ready to embrace highly visible online tactics like social media, but a measure of skepticism and a dose of reality will serve them equally well as they plan for victory.