

SOCIAL MEDIA AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN ALBANIA

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the possible impact of social media on political participation, during Election Day. Although voters' choice is assumed to be influenced by disposition and rationality rather than political marketing activities, the increasing role of social media is considered as an important tool during election time. Do social media have the potential to influence the political process? The use of technology has changed the way politicians approach their electorate and conduct the electoral campaigns. The development of modern technologies also enables citizens to use social media to participate in the political process. This paper analyzes the potential influence in Albanian electoral context. The focus of this paper will be on whether or not the Social Media is facilitating and increased engagement of citizens in the political process. In this paper we argue that Facebook creates new opportunities for political engagement, discursive participation, and citizen mobilization. This paper gives examples of how social media has been used by political actors in Albania in an attempt to shed light on the role of social media in recent political developments. It also discusses the idea that voting behavior can be influenced by the use of social media. Findings on a sample of $n = 253$ suggested that young voters, who consume political news from social media increases notably their likelihood to participate on election days.

Keywords: *social media, political participation, democracy, election*

JEL Classification: *M310, O350*

1. Introduction

The use of technology has changed the way politicians approach their electorate and conduct the electoral campaigns. The influence of new technologies over the characteristics of political participation has its own characteristics: interactive communication, open and access of all citizens. The web is at the same time source of information, communication tool and part of public sphere. The crisis of traditional forms of political participation has led to new opportunities and ways of participation. The social media have enabled direct connection between citizens and politicians and a place where citizens could be again protagonist of public sphere. Today, most of the political candidates communicate with people using social media such as Facebook and Twitter. Political advertising is an important feature of the pre-election campaigns and social media is considered as an effective tool for the purpose of political

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advertisement and political communication. Facebook groups and pages, tweets and stories are used to evaluate the number of expected voters and followers of any political candidate. These media may influence choices of voters in favor of one political candidate or another.

Social media is a quite new information network in Albania, which uses a form of interactive communication and interpersonal relationships are created and maintained. Social media has changed the way people search and consume information. Based on a search carried out inside the platform itself (on the section “Advertise on Facebook”) the number of Facebook users in Albania at the beginning of 2016 reached around 1,340,000. The same source provides data related to the users’ age. The biggest number of users, around 980,000, falls in the 18-34 years old age group. This age group occupies 74% of the total number of Facebook users in Albania indicating a high level of social media users among young and older population. Facebook is considered by the young users as a social utility that connects people, get information, share links and videos and exchange opinions. This explains the fact that the Facebook website is the most visited site in Albania according to Alexa index. Among the most followed pages on the “society category” of Facebook users are headed by the pages of well-known politicians like Sali Berisha, Edi Rama, and Lulzim Basha.⁴

Politicians now face new challenges from this way of communication. Politicians have a large social media network and they can reach a large number of people through their posts over popular networks such as Facebook. Political analysts and other types of key influencers contribute to the political discourse through social media. Friends who share the news, who comment could influence the voters too. Social media thus offers a hitherto unprecedented possibility to interact and connect with key audiences without many of the limitations of traditional mass media (Svensson et al., 2015, p. 28). This paper gives examples of how social media has been used by youth to consume information and be active on Facebook pages of political parties and political actors in an attempt to shed light on the role of social media in recent political developments and how political actors have utilized social media during election campaigns and the political debate. It also discusses several important questions for future studies on social media and politics in Albania, including the need of more empirical studies, the changing nature of social media use, and the debate on stakeholder’s use of online opportunities.

2. Defining participatory politics

Social media creates potentials for exchange, interaction and collaboration between politicians and citizens. Social media is software that enables the publication of user-generated content online and the direct, unfiltered communication between individuals and organizations (Winter, Mosena, & Roberts, 2011). Social media are used for different purposes from self-presentation and individual articulation of thought to business, marketing and social purpose. They are used for relationship management and information management (Schmidt 2008, p. 24).

Social media can serve as a public space for virtual political debate and can facilitate opinion shaping processes, where citizens may access information in real time, and express their thoughts and opinions freely. Scholars are still in debate about the impact of this process on societies, process that has been described as the new “structural transformation of the public sphere”

⁴ <http://www.socialbakers.com/statistics/facebook/pages/total/albania/>

(Imhof, 2006, p. 5), reinforcing the Habermas concept of the public sphere. Depending on the purpose of use and the development of social responsibility social media can create new possibilities for political participation (at least digital participation). The greatest potential in the use of social media in politics lies in the power of two-way communication between politicians and citizens who can reach out to the citizens and communicate directly with them.

Some scholars suggest that communication through social media is ineffective at engaging the electorate on Election Day (Ashworth and Clinton 2007; Krasno and Green 2008), and that it has only extremely short-lived effects on individuals' opinions (Gerber et al. 2011). Others think that messages may further the democratic process by providing citizens with potentially valuable information about candidates and their competitors (Bernays 1928; Downs 1957). Thus election campaigns are the strong symbolic moment which is able to convey and reinforce the political offer, the results: obtaining people consent. John Stuart Mill stated that "Democracy only works when you have an informed citizenry at its core" - but the key question is whether social media informs or manipulates citizens? Political communication and advertising through social media in its various forms is often cause for concern, it is considered inappropriate; because it uses persuasion on voters' emotional level, which influences the citizen/voter behavior that instead - according to an ideal vision of democracy - should operate in a rational manner, though ongoing information.

Citizen's involvement in the policy cycle and governance processes could increase the legitimacy and acceptance of their actions. Social media can also be used to increase transparency and enable citizens to better understand and control government actions by making sharing easy and fast. Under the given flexible conditions of access to content that is of relevance to the public, this can increase people's willingness to participate in politics (Bennett et al., 2012; Weinstein, 2014) not least by overcoming the "freeloader effect" that is typical of collective action (Bimber et al., 2005). "Informedness" refers to the self-assessed state of being informed about political matters (Morales, 2009); "political efficacy" is about the citizens' feelings "that they have some power to influence the actions of their government" (Wright, 1981, p. 69).

Citizen participation, social media use, the shift in political trust and democracy are overall measures which are "relatively autonomous" from each other (Inglehart, et al, 2005), with the latter more referring to approval of democratic political institutions and their work than to support of democracy as an idea. That means, for example, that people who are disappointed about the way democracy works are not necessarily against democracy in principle, but wish that it worked better in their country (Schaefer, 2013).

There are two alternative views on the role that media plays in the democratic process (Strömberg, 2015). A prevalent opinion is that media matters because it provides valuable information to voters, a process which improves political selection and political accountability. An improved political accountability brings with it an overall better quality of policies and welfare. This in turn implies that information communication through media plays a vital role as citizens need access to information to make political decisions. Research has also shown that media exposure on voter turnout and that it may have a positive long-term effect on political interest (Gentzkow, 2006; Gerber et al., 2009). There is empirical evidence supporting the argument that media access brings with it better policies (e.g. Strömberg, 2004; Besley and Burgess, 2002). Media coverage can promote issues that in turn change the standards that citizens use as reference points when evaluating politicians (Iyengar and Kinder, 1987, p. 57). A common theme in these theories is that political actors use media to influence people during the

political decision process. Naturally, we cannot assume that this use of media in politics automatically results in an overall increase in the quality of policies.

3. Social media and political communication in Albania

In order to upgrade the political communication, part of the Albanian politicians have become active in different social media networks. The Albanian politicians are using the web as a new channel of sending out the information and the messages, as a tool to communicate with their supporters to promote new ideas and projects, to reply to the accusations of the opponents or less favorable comments and also to call upon their supporters to attend different political campaigns. Internet also is assisting the politics to penetrate certain layers of the society considered as difficult to reach out, for example the youth. Directly or indirectly the political message is penetrating on line youth networks as well, especially in Facebook. At the same time the internet is expanding in encompassing in the political debate other layers of the society, contributing in this way to the process of democratization of the politics. In Albanian political communication, social networks are widely used and are being considered as an alternative way to communicate the daily message or to enlarge the ranks of supporters. According to the statistics Facebook is the most visited social media with 97.42% of users, that's why this paper focuses on Facebook use.⁵



Table 1. Social Media Statistics, StatCounter

It has been argued that the 2013 Albanian national election represented a turning point in the use of social media by Albanian politicians. Facebook and Twitter were used by candidates, parties, supporters, and the electorate. By recognizing the capabilities of the online communities, the two major parties, Democratic Party and Socialist Party have created their own profiles in Facebook. In Democratic Party Facebook page (until March 30, 2017) 322,202 fans are following the page; while in Socialist Party Facebook page on the same date there are some 184,099 fans. Even though the two main political parties have a considerable number of fans in Facebook, still this number is smaller compared to the number of fans the two party leaders have. The former leader of Democratic Party has in his Facebook profile more than 1,059,724 fans, while the leader of Socialist Party has 1,055,312 fans, and the current leader of the Democratic Party, Lulzim Basha has 559,314 fans.⁶ Even the large number of followers, citizen participation on election has decreased during the last elections. Politicians need to speak and engage with citizens where they are. Social media is a place where politicians could meet their voters and the voters could connect virtually with policy makers in a public debate.

⁵ <http://gs.statcounter.com/social-media-stats/all/albania/2016>

⁶ <http://www.institutemedia.org/Documents/PDF/media%20sociale%202015%20-%20anglisht%20per%20print.pdf>

4. Targeting Millennials to enable political engagement

The growing use of different types of social media has important implications for the political process in Albania. Democracy as a political system is characterized by the notion of the people exercising sovereignty through an indirect form of governance (Gainous and Wagner, 2014, p. 1). Information plays a vital role in this process, as citizens need access to information to make decisions. People who are interested in policy issues are going to get involved, and the social media is an easy way for both the voter and the candidate to communicate and potentially engage in the political process. We do not believe that being online and becoming “friends” on Facebook with the candidate does not translate to participation on offline political activities and the main offline activity that this paper tends to study participation of young people through voting. Over two million people are involved on following candidates online, but this involvement could create a sense of false efficacy. Our attempt on this study is to present that voter participation on Election Day can be influenced by online participation. Two main hypotheses here would be: H1: Social media has a positive effect on online participation of young voters and H2: Social media has a positive effect on offline participation of young voters.

Young voters nowadays could be engaged in politics in different ways than other previous generations. Social media users tend to read the news that their online ‘friends’ has shared. Younger voters can now use virtual spaces for public debate, which were more difficult to access in traditional ways. As a means of tracking what we believe is an important dimension of political activity among young people, we included seven statements to measure if online political mobilization works. These statements induce online and offline political self-expression, and also induce information gathering and expected voter turnout (shown on table 2).

	Statements	Strongly Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)	Total (%)
1	Facebook keeps me up to date about political parties program	45	27	28	100
2	Social media platforms are making the political debate more inclusive.	64	15	21	100
3	Social media platforms are giving a voice to young people who would not take part in offline political debate.	70	18	12	100
4	Facebook is a good source of information to get news from candidates.	79	10	11	100
5	I have participated in some kind of political discussion as commenting on a status, sharing a status or video from the page of a candidate.	74	17	9	100
6	I have participated on offline activities on election campaigns as voting, followed by encouraging someone to vote, participating in demonstration or protests, attending a political meeting or signing a petition.	66	15	19	100
7	Facebook has increased my participation on politics.	58	25	17	100

Table 2. Online and offline participatory politics

These statements were used to measure young voters attitudes towards online and offline political participation on a 1 – 3 point scale where 3 is “strongly agree” and 1 is “disagree”. Basic size 253 from which only 192 were valid.⁷ The sample size is represented in equal measures by men (50%) and women (50%), aged 22-27 (50%) and 27-32 (50%). Only young adults that have voted at least once were considered on this study, in order to measure their participatory politics on the last elections. The interviewees were mostly regular users of social media, spending 2-3 hours per day on various social media platforms, mostly on Facebook.

Respondents attitude toward the statement; if they had participate in some kind of political discussion or activity online, during the past or actual national election campaigns, the majority of respondents, 74 percent, was liking a political candidate’s Facebook page (89 %), liking a campaign-related Facebook post (80 %), commenting on a campaign-related Facebook post (52 %) and posting/sharing a link, a photo or an advertisement on Facebook (33%). These same individuals were much more likely to participate on Election Day than those who weren’t engaged on these online activities. According to this study, social media has e great importance on young people engagement on political discussion even that they feel that the quality of political debate has decreased. 64 percent of the respondents totally agree that social media platforms are making the political debate more inclusive and 70 percent of them state social media are giving a voice to young people who would not take part otherwise in offline political debate.

The majority of them are social media ‘friends’ with, a wide range of political parties, individual politicians, political analysts, newspapers and other online news sources, journalists, and campaign groups. 79 percent of them believe that social media are generally useful tools for political communication and engagement, particularly with the candidates. On the other hand only 45 percent of them follow political parties to get informed. This percentage decrease is not surprising taking into account the importance role of the party leader on Albanian political culture.

Even that many effects of online exposition and their impact on political participation still depend on personal factor; these findings suggest that young voters that are being exposed to information, even for persons that are not seeking it, can increase political participation, at least online. Academic research suggests that people who consume more media news have a greater probability of being engaged on offline civically and politically actions as well. Their offline participatory activities on election campaigns was on the 66 percent and the main activities were, voting (82%), followed by encouraging someone to vote (47%), participating in demonstration or protests (12%), attending a political meeting (9%), or signing a petition (2%). Confirming the hypotheses of this study, social media users stated that Facebook had increased their participation in politics. Since the last elections, around 27 percent of young voters report that their use of social media to discuss political issues has increased even further. When asked if social media might influence their participation in the upcoming elections, 58 percent of the respondents, agreed to this statement. These suggest that the level of engagement with participatory politics varies depending on the act of involvement and people, who consume political news and are updated from social media, increases their likelihood to participate on Election Day. This means that the more the young voters’ like, share or commented on Facebook political updates, the more active they will be in traditional online and offline forms of participation.

92 % of invalid questionnaire were the audience that did not use social media.

Conclusions

Social media drives action mostly among young voters. Whether the goal is to influence policy, influence legislators, or confront or support a candidate, a targeted online program enables campaigns to be more effective by serving specific messages, to specific voters, on the devices and social networks best suited for them. Ultimately, this boosts civic engagement, and that is a win for everyone. Political participation through social media could be better considered as an addition to an individual's engagement than as an alternative to other political activities. While self-expression through political participation on social media does not guarantee that one will vote on Election Day, news reports are filled with examples of how social media have influenced policy debates. The study hypothesized positive relationships between social media use on political discussion and online/offline forms of participation among young voters, within the Albanian electoral context.

Political participation through social media is a significant dimension of the political life of young people. If parties and politicians, will pay attention to the positive effects social media may provide valuable opportunities to engage young people in the political sphere and give them a voice and a potential influence over issues of their interest. More quantitative studies are thus needed for us to better understand how social media is truly used and the effects on the political process and how this communication channel could be utilized to foster young generation political participation. Election Day is less than two months away, and this study will follow up the respondents to measure their voting participation on the upcoming elections and despite the paper's limitations, the results bring a contribution to a new field of research in political communication.

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