

## Online Social Networks and Parliamentary Elections. An International Comparison

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**Abstract:** More and more researchers focus on the role of social networks in election campaigns. This article represents a case study of the parliamentary elections from 2015 in Spain and 2016 in Romania, with the aim of comparing the two online political campaigns. We describe how both parties in Romania and Spain used Facebook during the last parliamentary elections, in order to see how the political parties communicate and the online reactions generated by their messages. With the help of content and statistical analysis we take a closer look the messages published in the Facebook profiles of candidates and political parties during the general elections. The results indicate that, during parliamentary elections, unlike the presidential ones, the voters' attention is not directed to a candidate, but to a group of candidates. As a result, the communication strategy is different, focusing on increasing the notoriety of the candidates. The low interest in parties and parliamentary elections leads to using social networks mainly for disseminating information about the candidates and less as tool for mobilizing voters

**Keywords:** Facebook; political campaigns; Romania; Spain

### 1 Introduction

The electoral campaigns represent a key moment in the democratic development of the countries, as they lead to an increase in political and public debate about public policies and ideological positions. During the campaigns, the candidates implement different strategies to obtain electoral benefits, translated into the electoral legitimacy that the vote implies. In this scenario, the traditional media play a

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crucial role in establishing the connection between candidates and citizens, allowing politicians to transmit information, and citizens to get enough information to make their decision. The arrival of the Internet has opened new doors for political activity during the elections (Larsson, 2014; Vesnic Alujevic & Van Bauwel, 2014), generating mechanisms that allow a more direct, fast and economic connection between candidates and citizens. In addition, these new media enable the transmission of a much more updated information compared to the traditional media (Sweetser & Lariscy, 2008). The benefits of social media and, in particular, social networks (SNS, by the acronym in English of Social Network Sites) such as Facebook or Twitter within the framework of the electoral campaigns, have not passed unnoticed by the political actors (Blom, Carpenter, Bowe & Lange, 2014; Fernandes, Giurcanu, Bowers & Neely, 2010; Zhang, Seltzer & Bichard, 2013). As a result, more and more politicians have started to integrate social networks sites in their communication strategy, given that the closeness and proximity between the candidates and the citizens in the online channel are the one to influence the offline electoral process (Williams & Gulati, 2013; Woolley, Limperos & Oliver, 2010).

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows: In Section 2, we provide a brief literature review, primarily focusing on the main characteristics of the online political communication in Spain and Romania. The objectives and methodology are presented in Section 3. We present the findings in Section 4. Finally, in Section 5, we discuss the key conclusions and implications of our study and consider possible avenues for future research.

## **2. Theoretical Background**

Since the 2008 presidential elections in the United States, universities and research centers have struggled to discover how social networks affect elections, focusing on the influence the most popular social networks nowadays - Facebook, Twitter and YouTube - exercise on the voters (2011; Anduiza, 2010; Tufekci & Christopher Wilson, 2012; Settle, Bond & Levitt, 2011). Not surprisingly, the conclusions of these investigations are still precarious and, sometimes, indecisive. On the one hand, there are studies indicating that social networks clearly show political tendency and intention of vote. For example, Hanson, Haridakis, Cunningham, Sharma & Ponder (2010) confirmed that there was a direct relationship between the number of followers and friends who linked to the profiles of leaders and political

parties and the number of votes. That is, the final vote could be predicted by following the online profiles and users of social networks. On the other hand, other relevant studies argue that the theory of predicting the vote through social networks cannot be validated. For example, in the 2009 German elections, a comprehensive study formulated a theory indicating that the number of Twitter users and their messages could explain the voting tendency (Andranik Tumasjan, Timm O. Sprenger, Philipp G. Sandner & Isabell M. W. Help, 2011). However, study conducted for the 2010 elections in Sweden (Anders Odor Larsson & Hallvard Moe, 2011) showed that the management of Twitter messages, although measurable, was more complex than thought and required special attention. In both studies, the emphasis was placed on trend and prediction. Another relevant study was carried by P. Aparaschivei (2010), who conducted an integrated analysis of the entire electoral strategy of social networks in the 2009 election campaign in Romania. Aparaschivei analyzed how the politicians of his country used Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and the spaces of personal blog and concluded the Romanian politicians make poor use of the benefits of social media, focusing on rather informing than engaging with the users.

Independently of the prediction of votes through the social networks was more or less accurate, Social networks changed the online political communication, bringing important contributions to the development of the electoral processes, such as better public segmentation, message personalization, reduced advertising costs, increased efficiency, recruitment and mobilization of activists, new possibilities for financing the campaign and opening of participation channels, to name but a few (Norris, 2003; Cornfield, 2005; Baygert, 2007; Dader, 2009; Delany, 2009; Montero, 2009; Turiera-Puigbó, 2009; Dader, Campos, Vizcaíno, & Cheng, 2011; Valera Ordaz, 2014). In fact, the websites of political actors have evolved since their implementation as a complementary and subsidiary so called brochure of the offline campaign to its current status as a central and interactive tool. Initially, the web pages were limited to displaying information on the internet that was available in other media, thereby constituting an eminently unidirectional communication tool and a mere complement to the offline campaign (Dou, 2014; Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012, Valenzuela et al., 2009).

### **2.1. Online political communication in Spain and Romania**

The introduction of the political use of the Internet in Spain was later than in The United States and its expansion and development, slower. Democratic Convergence Catalonia was the first party to open its website to the public on September 11 of 1995. The most important Spanish parties in those days, Partido Popular (PP), Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE) and Izquierda Unida (IU) did not register their domains until the month of February 1996 and did not open their websites until months later. In 1998, both Josep Borrell as Joaquín Almunia, candidates in the primary elections for leading the party PSOE to the Government, had pages with information about their candidacies, but it was not until 1999 and 2000, during the General elections in the Parliament and in Catalonia, when it started to be extendedly used by political parties and candidates (Dader, 2009). However, while in US John McCain's campaign website introduced that same year elements of interaction and mobilization (Turiera-Puigbó, 2009), the websites of the Spanish parties continued to be anchored in a more traditional concept. The PP used three websites, for the party, the candidate and the campaign; the PSOE was the first party that published its electoral program on its page, which included multimedia graphics designed with flash technology; and IU included videos and audio files. In Spain Local Elections for autonomous communities of 2003, even though in US the candidacy of Howard Dean had already introduced basic 2.0 web elements of participation (Cornfield, 2005), the Spanish parties continued with the previous approach, their webpages displaying mostly static content, with no possibility of establishing a bidirectional communication (the only exception was the suggestions mailbox). The generalized conception of corporate websites as a brochure described by Dader remained fully valid in the 2004 General Elections and it was not until the Local and Autonomous Elections of 2007 when the Spanish political actors timidly introduced some of the innovations already implemented in the campaigns that were having place that same year in France and the United States - online video politics and blogging. However, the turning point of the use of the internet in electoral campaigns in Spain did not arrive until the General Elections of 2008, with full implementation of aspects of web 2.0.

Regarding the presence and activity in virtual communities, the Spanish parties started what Dader (2009) considers a too late and indecisive exploitation and of resources. The PSOE had at least eight groups of support on Facebook, which accumulated around 5,730 followers (Dader, 2009: 57), but without an account on Tuenti or MySpace. The PP had at least six support groups, with 9,304 members

(Dader, 2009: 57), in addition to Rajoy's own profile - with 5,000 friends (Peytibi, Rodríguez & Gutiérrez-Rubí, 2008), and an account on Tuenti, but not MySpace (Álvarez García, 2010). According to the latest CIS barometer (February 2016), Facebook is the most popular social network in Spain, followed by Twitter and Instagram. What is more, Facebook is being used by 93.1% of voters of the PP, 92.6% of PSOE voters, 86.2% voters of Podemos, 91.2% of Ciudadanos and 90.2% of Izquierda Unida (Política ahora, 2016).

When it comes to Romania, the 2014 presidential election triggered an alarm, demonstrating the importance of social networking in recent years. The 2016 parliamentary elections continued the tradition, giving an enhanced role to social networks in communication campaigns. In Romania, the internet penetration rate is 60% (Eurostat, 2017). The internet has known a rapid evolution, from 3 billion users in 2015 to 3.8 billion users in 2017. The case is similar to social networks, nowadays 2.8 billion users being registered on social platforms (in comparison to 2 billion users in 2015). In the top of the most popular social networks Facebook is the leader, with 1.8 billion users (Facebrands.ro, 2017), followed by YouTube - 1.3 billion users, Instagram - 600 million users, LinkedIn - 470 million users, Google + and Twitter - 300 million users. In 2014, Klaus Iohannis became the first politician in Europe to reach one million fans on Facebook, surpassing Merkel, Sarkozy and Hollande. When it comes to the parties in the Romania, the most popular party on Facebook is the National Liberal Party with 255 359 fans, followed by the Social Democratic Party - 68 560, Save Romania Union - 61 480 and the Popular Movement Party - 45 387 (Facebrands, 2017).

### **3. Objectives and Methodology**

The article takes a closer look at the parliamentary elections from 2015 in Spain and 2016 in Romania, in an attempt to compare the two online political campaigns. We study how both parties in Romania and Spain used Facebook during the last parliamentary elections by focusing on:

1. the key objectives of the online campaign;
2. the online engagement generated by the posts.

A statistical analysis was carried out through the use of the SPSS program of all the posts published in the Facebook profiles of candidates and political parties during the general elections.

For the Spanish election, we use data from the analysis conducted by Cervi & Roca (2017), Ballesteros Herencia (2017) and Chaves-Montero, Gadea-Aiello & Aguaded-Gómez (2017). The investigation included data for main parties (PP, PSOE, Ciudadanos and Podemos) and their respective candidates for president (Mariano Rajoy, Pedro Sanchez, Albert Rivera and Pablo Iglesias, respectively).

The period of analysis was limited to two weeks, between November 16 and 22, 2015, one month after the elections were held, and the week immediately preceding the election, between 14 and on December 20, 2015. In these two weeks, all the messages published on Facebook were automatically captured by a computer program, which lead to a total of 973 messages.

For Romania, the study was conducted by the authors and the period under observation was from November 12 to December 11, 2016, which is stipulated in the Constitution to be the time allocated to the electoral campaign. In total, 327 messages were published during 30 days of campaign, but for our sample we kept only 237 messages excluding irrelevant messages: ads on debates / invitations on TV shows or messages that did not contain text, but only photos or video).

## **4. Findings**

### **4.1. The key objectives of the online campaign**

During the Romanian electoral campaign, the three most important parties (PSD, USR, PNL) published 327 messages, out of which we selected 237 messages. The top most active parties are led by USR with 129 messages, followed by PSD (63) and PNL (45). When it comes to the parties' leaders, the hierarchy is similar, with Nicusor Dan, leader of USR, on top of the list, followed by Liviu Dragnea (PSD leader) and Dacian Ciolos (from USL). The tone of communication is predominantly positive during the electoral campaign, being the newly established party – USR and its leader - the party with the most negative messages. As expected, these negative messages target USR opponents, with a focus on PSD leader, Liviu Dragnea. The language is simple, clear and straightforward, with a tendency to use the pronouns of the first and second person (I, you, us). In the case

of PNL and its leader, Dacian Ciolos, the communication strategy focuses on two directions: asserting support for Dacian Ciolos as prime minister and criticizing the Social Democratic Party (PSD). In contrast, PSD and its leader Liviu Dragnea focus their efforts mainly on presenting the government program, with more than 50% of the messages dedicated to the electoral measures. What is more, Liviu Dragnea was the only leader during the elections who allowed users to post messages on his wall, while all the other leaders disabled this option on their online pages.

If we take a look at the Spanish elections investigation conducted by Cervi and Roca (2017), we see that Mariano Rajoy (PP) used Facebook especially to disseminate information. Thus, he focused on exposing his proposals for government, as the fight against terrorism and the defense of the unity of Spain. He refrained from negative campaigning and attacking its rivals. The candidate did not try to encourage dialogue with his supporters as they did not talk to each other and limited themselves from giving opinions, suggestions, proposals or even criticism. Followers could not write new messages directly to the candidate's wall, so they could only write in response to messages posted by the candidate.

Pedro Sánchez (PSOE) concentrated on disseminating information about him and revealed more details about his life than Mariano Rajoy. Sánchez also made efforts to attack the candidates of the so-called new politics, Pablo Iglesias (Podemos) and Albert Rivera (Ciudadanos). Nonetheless, Sánchez promoted an initiative consisted in that his followers could propose a series of questions that the candidate answered later through a short video.

Rivera, as the candidate of Ciudadanos, used Facebook to spread the word about his campaign activities: rallies, interviews, meetings etc., so he made his daily agenda known to his followers so that they could follow his campaign activity. Albert Rivera encouraged the dialogue with his followers by allowing them to make direct publications on his Facebook page, but the truth is that there was not established a real exchange of opinions between the followers and the candidate. The Ciudadanos candidate indirectly asked for the participation of his followers in the elections through Facebook, but this was the only measure he took to promote the participation and mobilization of his voters and bring them closer to political affairs.

Similar to Rivera's campaign, the Facebook page of Pablo Iglesias (Podemos) was preponderantly used to promote the campaign events in which he participated: rallies, debates, meeting etc., and even announced the acts or interviews he was going to participate in advance so that supporters could support him. However, the Podemos candidate did not publish the electoral program, but like the rest of the candidates, disseminated some of his government proposals.

Pablo Iglesias was the candidate who not only had more followers on Facebook but also, the one who gained the most during the campaign days. Albert Rivera was the second candidate with the most followers, but Mariano Rajoy was the second to get more followers and displaced the Ciudadanos' candidate in third place. Finally, Pedro Sánchez was the candidate who had the least number of followers and, at the same time, the one who gained the smallest amount of followers during the electoral campaign.

Overall, in the case of Romanian elections, for PNL the objective of communication was to show its support for Dacian Ciolos. For PSD, that was the presentation of the electoral platform, while the recently established USR focused on increasing the notoriety of the party and its members. Of the 129 messages posted by USR, 30% are statements against the current political system, with an obvious focus on attacking PSD. Confronting PSD is an important objective for PNL as well, many of its messages targeting this party. Although newly established, focusing on the political program is not an important part of the USR communication strategy, only seven of the messages presenting the electoral platform (0.05%). The same situation can be found in PNL, with only 11% of the messages presenting the political program. When it comes to endorsement, USR limited itself to 7 endorsement messages (0, 05%), while PSD is on the opposite side, 20% of the published messages referring to the support given to the party by various public figures, both in Romania and abroad.

According to the study conducted by Ballesteros Herencia (2017), the Spanish campaign is similar to the one in Romania, the main communication objective being to raise the awareness about the candidates. Only 12.4% of the messages tried to mobilize the followers of Facebook. The messages where the candidates asked directly for vote represent 4.1%, those asking for virtual mobilization through internet actions 3.0%, and those requested donations reached 0.6%. Therefore, the messages that did not intend to mobilize the followers accounted for



87.6% of the total, with the majority being experiential narrative (35.4%), and electoral descriptive information (20.7%).

The study also emphasizes that the PP, despite being the party with the highest number of posts on Facebook, was the one with the lowest percentage of mobilizing messages published. Specifically, PP did not try to mobilize its followers towards real physical action. In addition, there was only minimal mobilizing intention registered through five messages in which he requested the vote. In contrast with the previous results, the Facebook page of Ciudadanos candidate, Albert Rivera, was the only one that registered a highest number of mobilizing messages, with 16.7%. Finally, the study pointed out that only one party, Podemos, and its candidate, Pablo Iglesias, requested donations through Facebook.

#### **4.2. The Online Engagement Generated by the Posts**

When it comes to Romania, the party that most frequently uses mobilization messages is USR. But when it comes to users' response, PNL is the leader, with an average of nearly 2000 likes per published message and 800 - the average of shares. PNL is also the party that generates the largest amount of discussion among online users, generating an average of 230 comments.

In regards to the integration of multimedia elements, we observe that during the 2016 Romanian elections, the parties constantly used photos, videos or links. PNL mostly uses videos (32 out of 44), being the party that most frequently uses one of the most recent Facebook tools - live video. Thus, 8 of the videos represent live broadcasts of various conferences or statements by party leaders, the predominant figure being the candidate Dacian Ciolos.

USR mainly uses photos and videos featuring either candidates or party leader Nicusor Dan (53%). Also, a large number of messages are links to Nicusor Dan's official website. The party that makes the least use of multimedia is PSD (24% - only 15 videos and photos out of a total of 63 messages). The PSD differentiate from the other two parties by the frequent use of links, 76% of posts representing shares of party leader Liviu Dragnea's messages.

During these elections, posts including pictures generate the most public reactions. A message containing a photo sums up around 1400 likes, it is shared nearly 300 times and generates around 100 comments. Videos are shared in a proportion almost equal to the photos, but they receive fewer likes, about 700. The lowest response is generated by posts not containing multimedia elements. Videos and photos generate the highest total of comments, likes and shares.

If we analyze the influence of the multimedia element, we see that there is a significant correlation between messages containing videos and photos and the number of likes and shares. For PSD, there is a significant connection between the messages containing videos and the number of comments. Since most of the videos refer to party leader Liviu Dragnea, the result is not surprising. In the case of USR, the most significant connections are created between the messages attacking the opponents and the number of likes, shares, comments. In the case of PNL, the only significant correlation is between the multimedia element used in the message and the likes: video messages influence the number of likes. The predominant figure in this type of message is Dacian Ciolos.

In the case of Spanish elections (Ballesteros Herencia, 2017), there was a type of content linked to the mobilizing messages, finding a significant association with the presence of a photograph in the message, trend association with the presence of videos and lack of association with the presence of links and tagging of other users. The messages included photographs were the most frequent – 72%, followed by videos and links. All the messages that asked for the vote contained a photograph. By contrast, 62.1% of the non-mobilizing messages did not include a photograph, nor did any of those which requested donations. There have not been significant links between variables that designate communication goals and variables that represent users' reactions (like, share, comment).

## 5. Conclusions

The beneficial impact that social media in general, and SNS in particular, can have on the development of democracy has been widely documented. However, for this beneficial impact to occur, it is necessary that the political actors make better use of these networks and start using them as a valid instrument for establishing dialogue, educating citizens and encouraging their political and civic participation. That is, they need to generate change, from the participatory attitude to the action

of participating. Nonetheless, an our case study indicates that SNS are more commonly used as tools of disseminating information and propaganda strategy, and not as mechanisms to favor citizen participation in the political and civic field.

Although communication on social media has experienced a remarkable quantitative and qualitative progress, both Spanish and Romanian parties were not able to intensively promote the synchronized multimedia use of diverse platforms in combination with the existing audiovisual and traditional journalism channels. What is more, the use of Facebook made by the candidates was unequal: they put all their efforts into spreading information but most missed the opportunity offered by this network to talk with their supporters, while they were not aware of the possibility of promoting participation and mobilization of your voters. The candidates, then, focused mainly on increasing their notoriety, giving few details about their government proposals: in fact, none of the candidates published the entire electoral program so that voters could consult it.

What is more, our case study confirms that having an account on social platforms does not guarantee the success. It is not enough to open a profile and dedicate yourself to gathering a fan base. Politicians need to constantly engage with their fans, update content, respond to citizens, all that can indicate an open dialogue. Actively using these networks only before elections clearly indicates a lack of interest for the citizens and will influence their attitude and behavior towards the candidates.

Nonetheless, the study generates valuable insight into 2014 presidential and 2016 parliamentary elections that can be used in future research and sets up the parameters for further complex investigation. Future research could take into consideration extending the content analysis to all the posts published on Facebook before Election day, this sample being a partial snapshot in the context of a massive campaign that started months before Election Day. Certainly, this field has yet to be exploited and future progress will take a better look at the integration of social media in political campaigns.

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