Chapter 11

Invest, Engage, and Win:
Online Campaigns and Their Outcomes in an Israeli Election

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ABSTRACT

Though the use of social media for political campaigning has been widely studied, its correlation with electoral success has not received much attention. The current study uses the 2013 Israeli elections to examine the impact of social media on campaigns as a process. Findings indicate that parties and candidates that invest in social media are more likely to achieve social media success, which in turn increases their chances of achieving electoral success. Some may dispute the level of influence of social media; however, study findings suggest that being active in the digital arena has become a significant element in achieving ballot box success.

INTRODUCTION

One of the most challenging political communication questions concerns social media in election campaigns. These days, social media serve as a public stage for political deliberation (Bode et al., 2014; Dvir-Gvirsman et al., 2014; Kushin & Kitchener, 2009; Zhang et al., 2010). As the new media become an increasingly important part of every campaign (Dimitrova et al., 2014; Trent & Friedenberg, 2008; Trippi, 2013), researchers and practitioners have been attempting to understand whether social media popularity can be linked to electoral success. This study deals directly with that issue by looking at the role of Facebook in the 2013 Israeli elections.

In the U.S., the 2008 presidential campaign was considered a social media turning point. Indeed, in 2008, CNN went so far as to ask whether the presidential election would be won on Facebook (Rawlinson, 2007). In 2012, the Obama digital campaign made several significant changes, and the general impression was that these contributed to the President's re-election (Trippi, 2013).

Previous studies have examined this phenomenon from various perspectives. Some that examined political preferences and election results (Ceron et al., 2013; Lui et al., 2011) found that social media activity can be used to forecast results in Italy and France (Ceron et al., 2013). Others looked at how citizens use social media during election campaigns (Baumgartner & Morris, 2010; Fernandes et al., 2010; Kushin & Yamamoto, 2010; Robertson el al., 2010; Small, 2008), and how candidates were portrayed (Woolley et al., 2010). Some studies dealt with the impact of social media on political participation (Bakker & de Vreese, 2011; Baumgartner & Morris 2010; Conroy et al., 2012; Dimitrova et al., 2014; Vitak et al., 2011; Wolfsfeld et al., 2013; Zhang et al., 2010) and social capital (Pasek et al., 2009; Valenzuela et al., 2009; Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012), while others focused on candidates' use of social media (Bronstein, 2013; Church, 2010; Gueorguieva, 2008; Metzgar & Maruggi, 2009; Perlmutter, 2008; Robertson et al., 2010; Wen, 2014).

The current study examines the impact of social media on election campaigns as a process, beginning with the amount of resources a political party invests in digital media, the extent to which this investment leads to greater social media success, and the extent to which this second variable can be translated into electoral success. To better understand this process, the authors took into consideration additional factors such as the parties' initial Knesset1 size and their relative success in the traditional news media. The 2013 Israeli elections were considered by many to be the first Facebook elections in Israel, since social media hosted an extensive part of the campaigns and political discussions. Using Israel as a case study provides a more international perspective (compared to most studies in the field, which were conducted in the US). The characteristics of the Israeli political system enable us to compare these variables in a multi-party parliamentary system.

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