Chapter 49

Post as Much and as Diversely as Possible:
Intensity and Innovation in the Application of Twitter by Political Parties During the 2014 Slovenian National Election Campaign

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ABSTRACT

The daily interaction between political parties and voters is a driving force in election campaigns and can influence their outcomes. The theory of campaign intensity holds that the timing of message delivery in an election campaign is a key component of the strategies used by political actors. However, this theory also warns political actors to be cautious about the timing of different types of messages sent during the election campaign. Our objective is to examine the intensity and types of messages Slovenian political actors communicated through Twitter during different stages in the 2014 national election campaign. Our study conducts a content analysis of 7,113 tweets posted during the last four weeks of the official election campaign. It includes 17 official accounts of Slovenian parties, party leaders, and influential party twitterians. The results indicated that the stage of the campaign and the differences between established and fringe political parties significantly influenced the intensity of Twitter communications during the study period. The results also revealed that the political actors tweeted different types of political messages (e.g., to inform and to persuade voters) during different stages of the campaign.

INTRODUCTION

After failing to introduce important tax reforms and resolve leadership issues in the main governmental party in 2014, the left-wing government of Prime Minister Alenka Bratušek caused a second consecutive pre-term national election. Increased dissatisfaction with politics in general and the immense distrust of the party elites resulted in the emergence of new political parties that put forward seemingly different agendas based on higher moral grounds. The reduced campaign budgets of the established political parties showed scars of the continuing financial crisis, economic contraction, and recurring pre-term elections, thus playing into the hands of the new parties. Hence, the entire political establishment was forced to use free online self-promotional communication tools, such as websites and social networks (Oblak Črnič & Amon-Prodnik, 2014). One of the latter, Twitter was a widely utilized and influential communication tool in the Slovenian election campaign (see Deželan et al., 2014).

Twitter is popular among politicians, journalists, and opinion makers. As in the election campaign held two and a half years earlier, all political parties made extensive use of Twitter during the 2014 election campaign. All Slovenian parliamentary parties actively used Twitter on a more or less continuous basis, and key party leaders and visible party members chirpily joined the flock of tweeps and twitterians.[1] Traditional[2] and labor-intensive election campaign tools had been used in Slovenian election campaigns since the introduction of political pluralism in the late 1980s. However, the parties began to resort to post-modern tools of political campaigning because they are less capital-intensive than the costly advertising in the mass media, particularly television (see Deželan et al., 2010). Even though there still is the prevailing belief that nothing can replace television, this currently "immoral"[3] option has forced the parties to draft strategies combining the tools available with social media outlets and traditional canvassing with the free-of-charge air time guaranteed by the election campaign legislation. Consequently, election campaigns have become shorter, and they have focused on an officially defined 30-day campaign period, which has frequently been shorter (see CoARS, 2015).

Previous studies have shown that Twitter has been accepted as an integrative element of Slovenian party campaign strategies, which are focused on political interactions with voters and journalists and opinion makers in particular (e.g. Deželan et al., 2014). Informing voters about the party's position on particular issues emerged as the dominant mode of campaigning in the national election in 2011, which indicates that they still had not completely mastered the tool (ibid., p. 152). This also was indicated by their propensity to "visualize" this micro-blogging tool by appending photographic material to update voters on the campaign's progress and the activities that were performed offline (Tomanić-Trivundža, 2014). Additionally, the use of Twitter began to define the negotiation process in politico-journalistic relations (Vobič et al., 2014) and frequently revealed instances of journalists becoming an extended arm of the parties' propaganda machines (i.e., exaggerated re-tweeting of tweets posted by a particular party or by its highest echelons) (Mance, 2014). Predictably, studies also have revealed that parties have restrained from hiring professionals to run their Twitter accounts, even during the most intensive stages of campaigning. However, it is particularly surprising that they engage in their Twitter adventures without using serious strategies (Deželan et al., 2014). This has resulted in a haphazard political battlefield that is probably best understood by the actual audience—engaged network citizens (see Xenos et al., 2014).

Deželan, Vobič, and Maksuti (2014, p. 157) revealed that during election campaigns, the direct communication by politicians with voters, journalists, and opinion makers, which comprised approximately one third of their entire Twitter communication, ranged between expressions of affection and conflict. This finding supports the argument that the utilization of Twitter, particularly to convey emotions, contributes

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