RICHTMANN
PUBLISHING

Research Article

The Role of Social Media on Electoral Strategy: An Examination of the 2023 Municipal Elections in Tirana, Albania

Lorena Liçenji

PhD., Lecturer, Faculty of Law and Political Science,
University of "Aleksandër Moisiu",
Durrës, Albania

Abstract

The main goal of the current study is to ascertain the impact that social media platforms have on electoral strategy, communication tactics, and electoral outcomes in the specific context of the 2023 municipal elections in Tirana, Albania. The purpose of this study is to analyze the official usage data on Facebook and Instagram of Erion Veliaj, the current mayor of Tirana and a candidate associated with the Socialist Party. The temporal scope of the investigation encompasses the period spanning from April 1 to June 1, 2023. The main objective of this study is to investigate the possible impact of widespread use of social networks as a means of political communication on election results, as well as the manner in which this platform influences voter engagement with political candidates. The hypothesis posited in this study suggests that the extensive utilization of social media platforms by political candidates during the municipal elections in Albania in 2023 yielded a favorable effect on public participation in political discussions, hence exerting an influence on the electoral results. The research question under examination are as follows: What were the methods implemented by candidate Erion Veliaj in leveraging social media during the municipal election campaign of 2023? What is the relationship between social media engagement, as measured by quantitative metrics like likes, shares, follower growth rate, and engagement rate, and the electoral success of candidates in the 2023 Municipal Elections in Tirana, Albania? The study used a mixed-methods approach, which combines qualitative and quantitative methodologies, to investigate the correlation between the candidate's patterns of interaction, content tactics across different platforms, and the outcomes of the election. This comprehensive study aims to gain a thorough understanding of the substantial role of social media as a medium for political communication and its positive impact on electoral outcomes.

Keywords: Social Media, Political Communication, Albania Municipal Elections, Electoral engagement

1. Introduction

The media system, in conjunction with the advent of new forms of political communication, has played a substantial role in the advancement of contemporary societies. The exponential progress of digital technology has significantly transformed the manner in which politicians engage in communication with one another and with their constituents. The advent of digital environments and their corresponding channels has had a profound influence on the realm of political communication. Panagopoulos, Gueorguieva, Slotnick, Gulati, and Williams (2009) assert that the use of social media platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, by politicians has

significantly enhanced their capacity to engage in direct communication with the general public, consequently reinforcing their connection with the citizenry. Political actors have altered the role of traditional media intermediaries such as television by actively connecting with citizens through social networks.

The advent of social networks has played a pivotal role in enabling the formation of dynamic connections between politicians and interest groups, fostering the development of consensus, and facilitating the advancement of political leadership. Moreover, they have facilitated the generation and distribution of varied kinds of communication that do not depend on traditional media platforms. In contrast to the conventional paradigm of political communication, when the media assumes the position of gatekeeper, the exploitation of social networks for communication purposes renders this function obsolete. The utilization of social media as a platform for political communication has the potential to enhance democratic processes by enabling an ongoing and direct exchange of ideas between citizens and their elected representatives, aligning with the principles of deliberative democracy. Within the realm of social networks, specifically on the platform of Facebook, individuals possess the ability to engage in the consumption and dissemination of political content generated by others. Consequently, they assume a dual function as both recipients and producers of information.

This study provides empirical evidence to back up the claim that users of social networking sites have an impact on political candidates' communication strategies and election results. A thorough analysis of specific instances, such as the Albanian municipal election campaign in 2023, further supports this conclusion.

1.1 Main Objectives and the Significance of the Study

The primary objective of this research is to examine the online communication methods employed by Erion Veliaj, the incumbent mayor of Tirana, Albania's capital, and a candidate from the Socialist Party, in the context of the 2023 local elections. The main purpose of this study is to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the influence that social networking sites have on the formulation and implementation of political participation and communication strategies. The main aim of this study is to conduct a thorough evaluation of the influence of social media platforms on the formation and expression of political discussions with the general public, as well as the creation of associated communication tactics in the context of the 2023 municipal elections held in Albania.

This study aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of empirical data in order to elucidate the integration of social media into political communication strategy. The data employed in this study is derived from the publicly accessible Facebook and Instagram accounts of the candidates. Subsequently, a comparative analysis is conducted between this data and the final election outcomes for the Tirana district. The findings of this study highlight the evolving dynamics of political communication, which are best exemplified by the emergence of direct interactions between politicians and the general public via social platforms. This has led to a significant shift in the structure and content of communication. The utilization of social media platforms by the audience to engage with politicians and actively interact with them can be considered a form of political participation.

In order to build a thorough framework for this study, a comparative analysis was undertaken to examine the correlation between the population of internet users in Albania and the extent of citizen involvement in the municipal elections held in May 2023.

The research conducted in this study spans from April 1, 2023, to June 1, 2023. This timeframe was deliberately selected to accommodate the designated electoral campaign period, which occurred between April 14, 2023, and May 14, 2023.

A thorough examination was conducted on the candidate's social media interactions, with two main objectives: *firstly*, to assess the quantitative shifts in data patterns, including audience size, followers, new likes and followers acquired during the electoral campaign, interactivity usage, and

visits to the candidate's Facebook and Instagram pages; and *secondly,* to evaluate the influence of Veliaj's communication strategies on his follower base.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Perspective

The academic field of political communication has established and refined a theoretical framework that highlights the substantial impact of social networks as alternative communication channels in election campaigns. According to Ferree (2002), the dynamic interaction between the governing body and the general populace served as a medium for political discourse between the ruling party and their rivals at the beginning of political communication. According to Mazzoleni's (2000) research, social networks offer politicians a direct avenue for engaging with their audience, bypassing traditional media intermediaries. This phenomenon possesses the capacity to cultivate an elevated perception of personalization within the domain of politics, whereby the focus of the voting population is progressively oriented towards individual politicians rather than overarching party platforms or policy concerns. The comprehension of this issue has broadened to include both traditional and modern media as active participants in the communication process, impacting how political bodies present themselves and their policies. The advent of these novel platforms has significantly altered the political discourse and the relationship between voters and elected officials, hence creating avenues for political participation and public conversation. Nevertheless, they also present new complexities and challenges.

Kruikemeier and Oegema (2018) have underscored the potential of social media in enabling direct communication between citizens and their representatives, hence shining light on its significance in democratizing political discourse. According to the study by Chadwick, Vaccari, and O'Loughlin (2017), using this particular direct channel makes it possible to have a political dialogue that is more extensive and varied. Moreover, it enables politicians to efficiently provide information to their constituents and acquire timely feedback. As a result, this leads to an increase in the levels of transparency, accountability, and responsiveness within the domain of governance.

Vaccari (2012) asserts that the extensive utilization of the internet, including social media, can be attributed to its widespread adoption and perceived advantages. This phenomenon is observed among both the general public and governmental institutions. The utilization of real-time communication facilitates the expeditious response of politicians to emerging events and news. Svolik and Tichy (2021) found that the utilization of these emerging platforms has proven to be influential in aiding grassroots organization and mobilization. Furthermore, politicians have the ability to actively influence their public perception and personal reputation through the utilization of these digital platforms.

Artieri (2009) provides a comprehensive analysis of the triadic dynamic that exists in the realm of political communication. This dynamic involves the intricate interactions among political leaders, the press, and the public. The author also argues that social networks have fundamentally altered the relationship between mass communication and interpersonal communication, leading to a change in our comprehension of communicative obligations within a wider societal framework.

According to Livingstone (2007), there is substantial evidence indicating that internet platforms have emerged as significant arenas for civic dialogue, particularly among the younger demographic. Nevertheless, a significant discrepancy can be observed in the level of accessibility to online interaction possibilities and the degree to which they are effectively employed.

The efficacy of a democratic system relies on the active participation of knowledgeable citizens who are capable of articulating and defending their viewpoints. Kushin and Yamamoto (2009) have observed that social media platforms exhibit considerable promise in facilitating the dissemination of political news and fostering diverse types of political participation. Multiple academic studies have demonstrated that the increased accessibility of information via these platforms has the capacity to

enhance political participation, enabling individuals to have a more comprehensive understanding of the political implications for their personal lives and communities.

According to Castells (2002), the rise of social media on a worldwide scale and its influence on the privatization of social interactions have brought substantial changes in the domain of political communication. Kushin and Yamamoto (2009) suggest that empirical findings indicate that social media platforms, such as Facebook, provide a diverse array of communication alternatives. These platforms fulfill a dual function, serving as a means for political entities and groups to effectively express their strategies during electoral campaigns while also providing a platform for individuals to actively participate in political discourse. There is an increasing acknowledgment of the imperative for political parties and politicians to integrate social media and internet platforms into their tactics and methods. A study by Bode and Dalrymple (2016) revealed that people who engage in online interactions show a higher level of engagement within their personal political communication networks. This discovery highlights the ability of social media platforms to expand the range of political conversations and promote greater citizen involvement. A number of scholarly investigations done by Lu and Myrick (2016), Vaccari (2015), Yamamoto, Kushin, and Dalisay (2015), and Valeriani and Vaccari (2018) have identified significant discrepancies in political communication across several social media platforms. These studies have also ascertained that the attributes and capabilities of these platforms exert a substantial influence on the demographics of users who engage in political discourse and articulate their political opinions.

2.2 The concept of public engagement on social networks

The academic community in the domains of political science and communication studies is currently showing considerable interest in the phenomenon of online political engagement. This term refers to the use of digital platforms for political participation and advocacy. This concept encompasses a wide range of actions, such as the distribution of political information, active engagement in discussions, support for political campaigns, and direct interaction with politicians and political institutions. Norris (2001) coined the term "digital democracy" to elucidate the internet's potential in facilitating communication, mobilization, and involvement in novel and unparalleled manners. The activities outlined above, which display various levels of complexity, indicate a shift from traditional modes of political engagement to the domain of digital democracy. According to Shah (2005), the advent of digital technology has the capacity to allow increased citizen engagement through improved accessibility to political information and the promotion of a more participatory discourse between political players and the general public. The transition towards a digital environment possesses the capacity to facilitate a more knowledgeable body of voters and a government that is more receptive to their needs.

Valenzuela, Park, and Kee (2009) argue that employing social networking platforms as instruments for the distribution of political information holds promise for augmenting user engagement in political activities. Furthermore, these platforms not only function as a medium for disseminating knowledge but also enable avenues for discourse, contemplation, and cooperation. There have been voiced concerns regarding potential negative implications, particularly in relation to the phenomenon sometimes referred to as echo chambers. Echo chambers, as conceptualized by Sunstein (2001), are settings where individuals are solely exposed to information that serves to reinforce their preexisting beliefs. The phenomenon of selective exposure has the potential to contribute to the polarization of attitudes and the dissemination of inaccurate or deceptive information.

In addition, Norris (2001) presented the concept of the digital divide, suggesting that discrepancies in the availability of digital technology could result in inequalities in political participation. On the other hand, Boulianne (2015) said that social networks have the potential to significantly impact political participation through the facilitation of lengthy dialogues, exchanges, and interactions related to political content. This phenomenon possesses the capacity to enhance

political engagement by facilitating individuals' participation at unprecedented levels.

According to Dahlgren (2005), the advent of novel modes of participation has led to a shift away from traditional political structures, leading to a blending of boundaries between politics, cultural values, and identity processes. According to research by Bond (2012), active participation in online activities like expressing support, sharing, and leaving comments on political content has a significant impact on political outcomes in the current digital environment. Tufekci (2017) asserts that the previously mentioned phenomenon may be observed in the political mobilization exhibited in social movements such as the Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street. In these instances, the use of social media played a crucial role in facilitating the coordination and dissemination of information.

The analysis of the diverse and complex effects of social media on political participation is a vital and intricate area of study in the field of modern political science and communication studies research.

3. Methodology

The present study employed a mixed-methods approach, integrating qualitative and quantitative research methods, to examine the social media involvement of Erion Veliaj, a candidate in the 2023 Tirana municipal election. The analysis focused on publicly accessible Facebook and Instagram profiles. The study encompassed the temporal interval from April 1 to June 1, 2023, encompassing the entirety of the campaign period. The quantitative metrics encompassed by the data collected from the candidate's public profiles include several elements, such as the size of the audience, the quantity of new likes and followers, the level of user interaction, and the frequency of page visits. Descriptive statistics are employed to provide a concise summary of the data, while comparative analysis is employed to examine the relationship between social media involvement, final election outcomes, and internet usage within the Albanian population. The qualitative component of this study investigates the particular content and strategy utilized by the candidate across various channels. The primary aim of this research is to investigate the candidate's application of social media techniques and assess the consequences of integrating social media into political engagement and communication strategies.

With a focus on gathering information that was already available to the public, the data collection procedure strictly adhered to Facebook and Instagram's terms of service. In order to ensure accuracy and protect the confidentiality of sensitive information, manual data gathering methods are employed while also respecting the privacy preferences of the individuals involved.

The main goal of this study is to look into any connections between a political candidate's level of social media engagement and their electoral success. A correlational analysis was done to evaluate the influence of substantial social media usage on the electoral performance of candidates in the 2023 municipal elections in Tirana.

4. Results and Discussions

4.1 The Evolution of Social Media in Albanian Election Campaigns

The Internet is widely acknowledged as a prominent communication channel that has the ability to enhance public discourse through the promotion of inclusivity and the facilitation of citizen engagement. The democratizing influence of this phenomenon extends beyond the mere augmentation of experience for the political elite. The increasing significance of Facebook and comparable platforms in forthcoming political campaigns has resulted in the incorporation of websites and social media into the comprehensive communication tactics utilized by a multitude of political figures. The Democratic Party (PD) and the Socialist Party (PS), Albania's two main political parties, have largely shaped the country's political landscape over the past thirty years. Nevertheless, the utilization of social media as a communication tool during the 2005 general election was

considerably restricted due to its comparatively low adoption rate among the Albanian populace, in contrast to the broader influence of conventional media. Since 2007, there has been a discernible surge in the utilization of social media platforms among the overall populace of Albania, exerting a significant influence on the country's engagement in political campaigns.

Within the context of the 2009 election, the first endeavors were undertaken to harness the influence of social media. However, these endeavors exhibited inconsistent implementation and were devoid of a complete strategic framework. The Socialist Party's use of social media platforms during the 2010 protests in Albania experienced a noticeable change, demonstrating the perceived ability of these platforms to facilitate political engagement.

In the context of the 2011 municipal elections, the Socialist Party employed a novel approach by utilizing its official Facebook page as a platform for disseminating personal narratives. The utilization of technology in the field of politics was notable in the year 2013, as evidenced by the establishment of Rilindje.net, a website that functioned as the first online campaign platform in Albania. The 2013 national election in Albania had a clear trend towards digitalization, with a notable emphasis on utilizing internet resources, particularly social media platforms, for political campaign purposes. Since the 2017 election, the employment of social media platforms, such as Twitter and Facebook, has become a significant tactic for the promotion of election campaigns by party leaders and candidates.

The advent of the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in significant alterations to election campaign strategies, primarily due to the implementation of restrictions on public gatherings. The electoral period of 2021 witnessed a significant shift towards the digital realm, underscoring the significance of social media in political campaigning. The growing endeavor to include social media in campaign strategies holds noteworthy ramifications, particularly when contemplating the evolution of online political marketing techniques designed to enhance visibility and reach a broader audience.

4.2 Understanding the relationship between online political campaign and political engagement

The main aim of this research paper is to examine the complex relationship between the usage of social media platforms, notably Facebook and Instagram, and their influence on political activity and communication tactics. Cioni and Marinelli (2010) argue that the extensive integration of digital technology provides a distinct correlation between public concerns and potential solutions, hence augmenting the efficacy of political communication. The lack of journalistic involvement on these platforms fosters a perception of genuineness in the dissemination of political information, resulting in a progressive democratization of politics and a shift in traditional political communication frameworks. Hence, it is imperative to grasp the patterns of social media engagement in order to acquire a full comprehension of these new dynamics. This comprehension possesses the capacity to clarify the manner in which the growing usage of these platforms is transforming political engagement and participation. In the specific context of Albania, the Internet has become a vital tool for an important segment of the population, serving as a key means of communication, entertainment, and information gathering. It is crucial to acknowledge, however, that not all political figures possess the aptitude to effectively utilize the pervasive digital communication landscape.

Table 1. Data about the correlation between internet users and electoral participation in 2007-2023
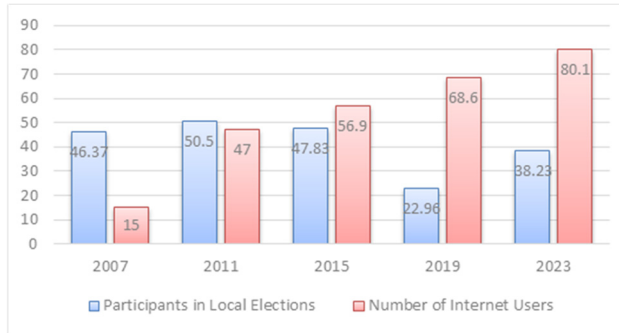
Source: Institute of Statistics 2023. Data processing by the author.

The data presented in Table 1 illustrates a complex and nonlinear relationship between the proportion of individuals using the internet and their involvement in local electoral endeavors from 2007 to 2023. Despite a consistent and considerable increase in internet usage, which has experienced a substantial climb from 15% to 80.1% over the stipulated time frame, electoral engagement has displayed significant variations. At the outset, there was a marginal rise observed, with figures climbing from 46.37% to 50.5%. Nevertheless, in the ensuing years, there were fluctuations in the extent of electoral participation, with a notable decrease to 22.96% in the year 2019. The apparent instability can be partially attributed to political events, such as opposition boycotts. The research also indicates that Albanian legislators demonstrate a notable level of expertise in effectively leveraging digital technology to capitalize on emerging opportunities and transform mechanisms for disseminating information. The advent of the digital revolution has brought about substantial transformations in the political sphere, leading to the disruption of conventional dynamics that govern the relationships between politicians and journalists. While electoral engagement has experienced oscillations, the ongoing increase in internet usage indicates its ability to exert a substantial influence on forthcoming political participation.

**Table 2.** Social media users in Albania in 2018-2023
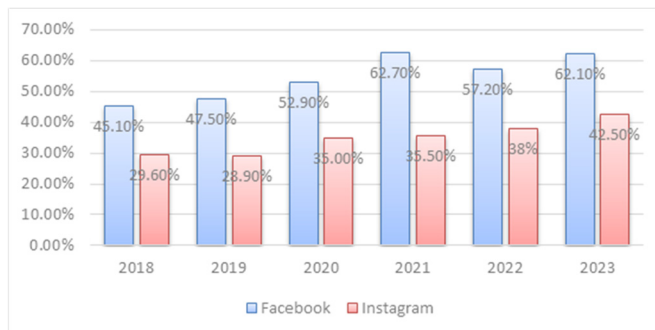
Source: Datareport.al 2023. Data processing by the author

The utilization of social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram are experiencing a notable increase in popularity within the country of Albania, as an expanding proportion of the population is

engaging with these platforms on an annual basis. The observation of Facebook's usage surpassing that of Instagram suggests that Facebook's features or interface contain a higher level of attraction or fit for the Albanian market. The observed decrease in Facebook usage in 2022 indicates a temporary shift towards other platforms.

Table 3. Instagram and Facebook users by age in Albania in May 2023
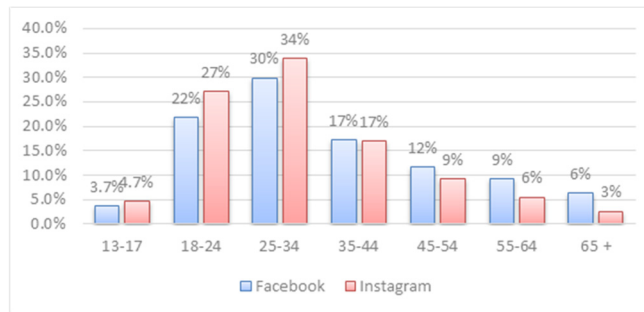
Source: Datareport.al 2023. Data processing by the author

The data shown in Table 3 indicates that individuals within the demographic category of 25–34 years old demonstrate the highest levels of engagement with Facebook and Instagram platforms. Furthermore, it is evident that Instagram is predominantly preferred by people in the younger age group of 13–24, whereas Facebook exhibits higher levels of popularity among individuals aged 35–45. A discernible decline in usage is observed among individuals as they advance in age, specifically in relation to the social media platform Instagram. The increasing prominence of these platforms among younger populations offers significant potential for politicians seeking to connect with this particular cohort, given their escalating involvement in online political endeavors. Hence, the implementation of a multi-platform approach that incorporates both Facebook and Instagram platforms has the capacity to effectively engage diverse age cohorts. In light of the extensive adoption of social media platforms among the younger population, politicians have the potential to reap benefits by broadening their campaign methods beyond traditional websites and blogs. The proposed expansion should involve the integration of interactive material on these platforms, thereby promoting active participation and mobilization among the younger demographic of potential voters.

4.3 The analysis of Candidate Erjon Veliaj's online communication strategy.

Erion Veliaj assumed the position of Mayor of the Municipality of Tirana in 2015. In 2003, Veliaj established the "Enough" movement, an organization that successfully brought together the activist and protest ideals of the Albanian youth, exerting a notable impact on his later political trajectory. Veliaj assumed the position of Minister of Social Welfare and Youth in September 2013. Since the beginning of his political career, candidate Veliaj has shown a thorough understanding of the potential social networks present as influential platforms of communication.

This section explores the tangible impact of social networks on Candidate Veliaj's communication strategy, focusing on how his regular use of these platforms has contributed to the establishment of a strong online presence and the formation of a dedicated audience.

According to the findings of the study, the utilization of social networks by the candidate has had a notable impact on strengthening the effectiveness of communication and improving the accessibility of the candidate. This has been achieved through the application of strategic messaging, targeted advertising, and real-time interaction. Upon doing an examination of the candidate's public

profile on Facebook and Instagram over the period from April 1 to July 1, it becomes evident that a noticeable disparity in the number of followers exists between the two aforementioned social media platforms. The candidate's Facebook page has a significantly higher number of followers, totaling 544,749, in comparison to their Instagram account, which has a follower count of 379,422. This implies that the aforementioned campaign possesses a higher level of establishment and exhibits a more prominent association with the demographic of Facebook users.

Despite having a smaller total number of followers on Instagram, the candidate exhibits a relatively stronger growth rate on this particular social media network. The candidate noted a significant disparity in the growth of their social media following, with a substantial gain of 10,960 new followers on Instagram compared to a very modest increase of 4,664 new likes on Facebook. This discovery suggests an increase in interest among Instagram users or a heightened level of engagement with the candidate's recent activity on the platform.

Table 4. The differences between Facebook and Instagram followers by age and gender from 1 April to 1 July
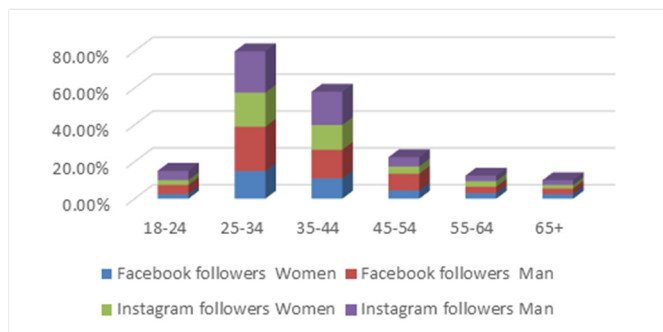
The data presented in Table 4 illustrates a notable trend in the utilization patterns of Facebook and Instagram among different demographic groups. The data clearly indicates that there is an overrepresentation of male users on both platforms, with a more significant gap observed on Facebook. The age group of 25–34 years old exhibits the highest level of engagement on both platforms, with a particular emphasis on males within this demographic.

The wide range of features offered by Facebook, such as news, groups, and a marketplace, has the potential to appeal to a larger proportion of male users. It is important to acknowledge that there is a decline in usage of both platforms as individuals age, regardless of demographic, with the age group of 65 and above exhibiting the least amount of involvement. In general, the data underscores the need to consider demographic distribution when developing communication strategy plans.

Table 5. New followers on Facebook and Instagram from 1 April to 1 July
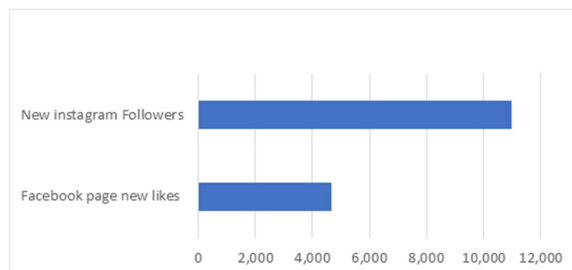
The analysis of the candidate's social media presence demonstrated significant progress on both the Facebook and Instagram platforms. The political campaign has shown significant growth on both the Facebook and Instagram platforms. Based on the statistics shown in Table 5, it can be deduced that Instagram's comparatively greater growth rate suggests its potential as a more effective platform for the candidate.

It is noteworthy that the ratio of newly acquired followers and likes is above the rate of reach growth, indicating a significant level of audience involvement rather than a simple increase in passive viewership. This demonstrates a strong commitment to the candidate's political effort. Although Facebook has a wider user base, Instagram's capacity for rapid growth and increased user interaction indicates that the campaign should prioritize this platform.

Table 6. Users reaction on Facebook 14 April-14 May
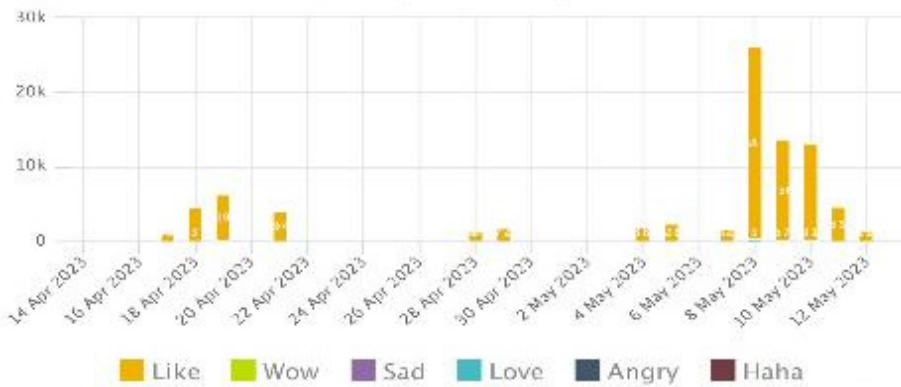
After analyzing the data on user reactions, a significant increase in the number of likes was observed on May 8, 9, and 10. The winner of the Big Brother VIP Albania competition celebrated their wedding ceremony within a municipal edifice, with the celebratory events being prominently displayed on many media outlets, including a real-time broadcast on the country's public television network. Therefore, a discernible correlation may be observed between the substance disseminated on social media and the favorable reactions it elicits from users on those platforms.

Table 7. Election results for 2023
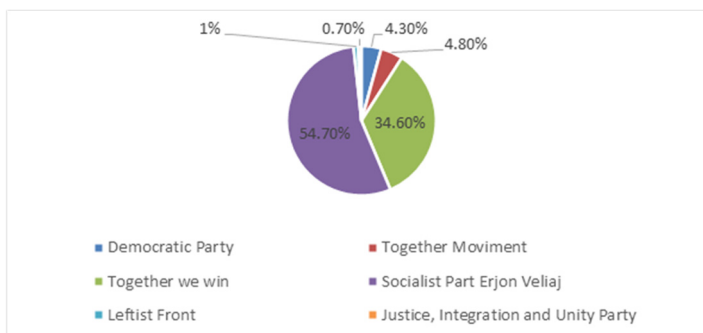
Source: Central Election Commission 2023. Data processing by the author.

In the Municipality of Tirana's municipal election on May 14, 2023, Erion Veliaj's Socialist Party won with a commanding 54.7% majority of the vote. The coalition "Together We Win," which represented the second-most popular party, received a significantly lower level of support than the political party that received the highest percentage of votes, which was 48.2%. This party, which formed a partnership between Sali Berisha of the Democratic Party and Ilir Meta of the Freedom Party, secured 34.6% of the total votes cast. Sali Berisha, who is commonly seen as the de facto leader of the Democratic Party of Albania, currently holds the position of head of the political alliance known as "Together We Win." The remaining political parties garnered a vote share amounting to less than 5%. The significant achievement seen in the local election aligns with the increased level of engagement and expanded follower count on both Facebook and Instagram during the same period. This implies that the online campaign of the candidate has demonstrated effectiveness in organizing supporters, thereby establishing a correlation between the candidate's social media popularity and the outcome of the election.

When examining the social media involvement of candidate Veliaj on platforms such as Facebook and Instagram within the designated timeframe, it is possible to identify and categorize different types of information into five unique classifications.

The first category, denoted as "*past-present comparison,"* encompasses postings that engage in discourse regarding the changes and achievements that occurred in previous periods. The primary objective of this content is to highlight the progress made during Veliaj's term, with the potential to influence voters' perceptions of his overall achievements.

The second category, referred to as "*endorsements,"* encompasses video testimonials of support from prominent figures in diverse domains, including sports, art, entertainment, and culture. The utilization of this classification functions as a strategic instrument to exploit the widespread acclaim and impact of these prominent figures in order to garner support for Veliaj.

The third category, known as "*live events,"* pertains to the live streaming of electoral assemblies in real-time. The primary objective of these live events is to enhance transparency, thereby cultivating heightened participation and a feeling of inclusiveness among the candidate's followers.

The fourth category, referred to as "*visual documentation,"* encompasses an extensive compilation of images that document various events associated with the campaign. The integration of visual depictions of these occurrences possesses the potential to augment the candidate's aptitude for establishing a rapport with the audience, thereby offering a more intimate understanding of his campaign trajectory.

The last category, denoted as "*entertainment,"* encompasses storylines that are intended to provide amusement or engage the viewers, generally referred to as "fun reels." These pieces of content offer a means of enhancing the candidate's appeal among younger demographic segments by providing a more personal and accessible component to the campaign, thereby imbuing the candidate with a feeling of humanity.

5. Conclusions

The research findings presented in this study center around the municipal elections in Tirana, Albania, in 2023. These findings shed light on the increasing importance of social media in changing political communication tactics and exerting influence on electoral outcomes. The data obtained from the Facebook and Instagram profiles of Erion Veliaj, the current mayor of Tirana, reveals a distinct correlation between digital participation and political successes. The candidate has an effective approach that utilizes many social networking platforms, especially targeting a wide range of demographic groups and fostering active engagement, resulting in significant accomplishments. The data indicates a significant rise in the number of followers and degree of engagement on both platforms during the course of the campaign. Although Veliaj had a larger number of followers on Facebook, his Instagram followership experienced a more rapid growth rate, indicating a wider appeal among diverse demographic groupings.

Moreover, the results of the research indicate that the type of shared content exerts a significant impact on user engagement. Veliaj's digital strategy encompassed a wide array of content forms, encompassing historical analogies, endorsements from notable figures, real-time event coverage, visual documentation, and entertainment-oriented content. Overall, these various types of content have significantly contributed to enhancing audience engagement. Additionally, the study highlights the existence of demographic gaps in the utilization of social media platforms. Individuals between the ages of 25 and 34 constituted the most actively involved population on both sites. The data revealed a notable trend wherein persons in younger age groups showed a greater propensity for utilizing Instagram, while individuals aged 35 and above displayed a preference for Facebook. The presence of a significant gender disparity in the utilization of Facebook has been observed, emphasizing the need for customized approaches that take into consideration variations in demographic factors.

In conclusion, the research confirms the increasing significance of social media platforms in the realm of political communication, emphasizing the necessity for a comprehensive understanding of these tools. This underscores the importance of politicians employing social media platforms to build direct lines of connection with citizens, foster active participation, and skillfully manage political discussions. Future research should strive to further investigate the intricate correlation between social media and political results, taking into account diverse external variables and varying geographical contexts.

References

Artieri, G. B. (2009). SuperNetwork: quando le vite sono connesse. In Network effect. Quando la rete diventa pop (pp. 21-40).

Artieri, G. B. (2014). Il senso del network. Le scienze sociali computazionali e la sfida dei Big Data. Salute e Societa, (2014/3).

Baumgartner, J., & Morris, J. (2010). MyFace Tube politics: Social networking web sites and political engagement of young adults. Social Science Computer Review, 28(1), 24–44.

Bode, L., & Dalrymple, K. E. (2016). Politics in 140 characters or less: Campaign communication, network interaction, and political participation on Twitter. Journal of Political Marketing, 15(4), 311-332.

Bond, R. M., Fariss, C. J., Jones, J. J., Kramer, A. D., Marlow, C., Settle, J. E., & Fowler, J. H. (2012). A 61-million-person experiment in social influence and political mobilization. Nature, 489(7415), 295–298. https://www.nature.com/articles/nature11421

Boulianne, S. (2015). Social media use and participation: A meta-analysis of current research. Information, Communication & Society, 18(5), 524-538. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/1369118X.2015.100 8542

Boulianne, S., & Larsson, A. O. (2023). Engagement with candidate posts on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook during the 2019 election. New Media & Society, 25(1), 119–140. https://doi.org/10.1177/14 614448211009504

Castells, M. (2002). The Internet galaxy: Reflections on the Internet, business, and society. Oxford University Press, USA.

Castells, M. (2007). Communication, power and counter-power in the network society. International Journal of Communication, 1(1), 238-266.

Chadwick, A., Vaccari, C., & O'Loughlin, B. (2017). Do Social Media Influence Elections? Evidence from a Natural Experiment. Journal of Communication, 67(6), 963–986.

Central Election Commission. (n.d.). Zgjedhje Vendore. Retrieved from https://kqz.gov.al/

Cioni, E., & Marinelli, A. (2010). Le reti della comunicazione politica: tra televisioni e social network (p. 236). Firenze University Press.

Dahlgren, P. (2005). Internet, public spheres and political communication: Dispersion and deliberation. Political Communication, 22(2), 147–162.

Datareportal. (2023). Digital 2023 Albania. Retrieved from https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2023-Albania. (accessed on 10 June 2023).

Ferree, M. M., Gamson, W. A., Gerhards, J., & Rucht, D. (2002). Four models of the public sphere in modern democracies. Theory and society, 31(3), 289-324.

Kruikemeier, S., & Oegema, D. (2018). The Populist Communication Style: Toward a Critical Framework. International Journal of Communication, 12, 4306–4324.

Kushin, M. J., & Yamamoto, M. (2009, February). Searching for media complementarity: Use of social network sites and other online media for campaign information among young adults. In Annual Convention of the Western States Communication Association, Phoenix, AZ.

Livingstone, S. (2007). The challenge of engaging youth online: Contrasting producers' and teenagers' interpretations of websites. European Journal of Communication, 22(2), 165–184.

Lu, Y., & Myrick, J. G. (2016). Cross-cutting exposure on Facebook and political participation. Journal of Media Psychology.

Mazzoleni, G. (2000). A return to civic and political engagement prompted by personalized political leadership?. Political communication, 17(4), 325-328.

Norris, P. (2001). Digital Divide? Civic Engagement, Information Poverty and the Internet Worldwide. New York: Cambridge University Press. Institute of Statistics. (n.d.). Home - INSTAT. Retrieved from https://www.instat.gov.al/al/

Panagopoulos, C., Gueorguieva, V., Slotnick, A., Gulati, G., & Williams, C. (2009). Politicking online: The transformation of election campaign communications. Rutgers University Press.

Shah, D. V., Cho, J., Eveland Jr, W. P., & Kwak, N. (2005). Information and expression in a digital age: Modeling Internet effects on civic participation. Communication research, 32(5), 531-565.

Sunstein, C. R. (2001). Republic.com. Princeton University Press.

Svolik, M. W., & Tichy, L. (2021). Political Advertising Online: Evidence from a Field Experiment. Public Opinion Quarterly, 85(S1), 356-382.

Tufekci, Z. (2017). Twitter and tear gas: The power and fragility of networked protest. Yale University Press. https://www.yalebooks.com/book/9780300234176/twitter-and-tear-gas

Vaccari, C. (2012). Online Campaigning in Italy: Candidates, Platforms, and New Models of Interactivity in Italian Political Communication. Journal of Political Marketing, 11(1-2), 94-118.

Vaccari, C. (2013). Digital politics in western democracies: A comparative study. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Vaccari, C., & Valeriani, A. (2018). Digital Political Talk and Political Participation: Comparing Established and Third Wave Democracies. SAGE Open.

Valenzuela, S., Kim, Y., & Gil de Zúñiga, H. (2012). Social networks that matter: Exploring the role of political discussion for online political participation. International journal of public opinion research, 24(2), 163-184.

Valenzuela, S., Park, N., & Kee, K. F. (2009). Is there social capital in a social network site?: Facebook use and college students' life satisfaction, trust, and participation. Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, 14(4), 875-901.

Veliaj, E. (n.d.). Instagram. Retrieved from https://www.instagram.com/erionveliaj/

Veliaj, E. (n.d.). Facebook. Retrieved from https://www.facebook.com/ErionVeliaj/

Yamamoto, M., Kushin, M. J., & Dalisay, F. (2015). Social media and mobiles as political mobilization forces for young adults: Examining the moderating role of online political expression in political participation. New Media & Society, 17(6), 880–898.