Chapter 34
Social Media and Electoral Processes:
An Exploration of Facebook Adoption During the 2019 European Parliament Election Campaign in Romania

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ABSTRACT

Existing research documents extensively explain the reasons for social media use during electoral campaigns. However, there is insufficient evidence showing that social media are indeed being used to complement traditional ways of communication. This chapter uses the diffusion of innovations theory to explain the adoption and non-adoption of Facebook (FB) by Romanian political parties during the 2019 European election campaign. The chapter addresses two research questions: the differences between Facebook adopters and non-adopters during this campaign in Romania and how this adoption or non-adoption impacted the overall election results. 885 Facebook posts were content analysed. This chapter evidences that adopting Facebook to engage the posts does not always result in improved electoral outcomes.

INTRODUCTION

Social media create more significant opportunities for all members of society to interconnect with each other in various ways and across a series of platforms. The immediacy offered by the advent of social media platforms ensures not only that immediate remote contact is now available to a sizeable proportion of the global population but also that traditional forms of communication dwindle. The ubiquity

of social networking websites (SNSs) has fundamentally changed the way individuals communicate, initiate and maintain social relationships and the way they express their political views and act as active citizens. Given that the way people interact with the world has changed, political organisations too had to rapidly adapt their communication efforts to the advent of SNSs, finding new ways to allow for more transparency and dialogue between citizens and political candidates. SNSs have become essential tools for both politicians, who want to connect with voters or mobilise their supporters and voters, allowing everyone to participate, free of charge: often giving a voice to the voiceless. Indeed, voters are more empowered than ever, being able to communicate, free of charge, with each other and interact directly with political candidates at any point during any electoral campaign. Undoubtedly, SNS use has revolutionised political communication by creating new ways to fairer dialogues between ordinary people and the political elites; and enabling citizens to publicly scrutinise their actions, shifting, therefore, the very foundation of the political process (Gainous & Wagner, 2013; Grassegger and Krogerus, 2017; Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). The use of social media is expected to become universal (Gulati & Williams, 2013).

Romanian politicians are not entirely new to using social media in their campaigns. They first used blogs to communicate with their voters in the 2007 campaign for the European Parliament. Politicians then used the blogs for self-promotion only (Aparaschivei, 2011). Social networking websites were not used in electoral campaigns until 2009, when in addition to blogs, *Facebook* began to be used extensively and *YouTube*. One of the most active politicians on social media in 2009 was Traian Basescu, the then leader of the Democratic Liberal Party, who went on to win a second mandate and served as Romania's president until 2014. The use of SNSs in political campaigns have become ubiquitous, with a record number of politicians setting up personal *Facebook* pages. However, it appears as if very few of them have grasped that social media should be avenues for creating honest and open dialogues with the citizens.

SNSs started being used as online campaign tools in 2006 (Gulati & Williams, 2013). Their interactive and instantaneous nature has rapidly become a *must-have* for any politician and political organisation. They are considered an innovative way to reach a global audience in a very short period. *Facebook* was first recorded to have been used in electoral campaigns in 2006 (Karzen, 2015). Still, it was not until Obama's 2008 *Facebook election* (Johnson & Perlmutter, 2009, 2011) that its impact was assessed, leading to an upsurge in popularity. Ever since, politicians have gradually adopted *Facebook* across the world, making it a powerful new media with the ability to reach supporters anywhere in the world. Such high popularity makes *Facebook* a favourite platform for political communication, especially during elections campaigns (Dang-Xuan et al., 2013; Williams & Gulati, 2013) when politicians become eager to connect with the public and gain more supporters. The 2019 European election campaign went on *Facebook* for two reasons: there were new restrictions regarding postings in public places, and there was no regulatory body controlling social media in Romania.

This chapter explains the adoption and non-adoption of social media during an election campaign in Romania, a developing country generally left out of mainstream research. We focus on *Facebook* because it is the most widely adopted social media platform in Romania. In January 2020, there were 11 million Romanian social media users, 90% of which were *Facebook* users (Kemp, 2020, pp. 37, 40). The chapter aims to find answers to the following research questions: in the age of information overload and social media saturation, what differentiated *Facebook* adopters from non-adopters and did *Facebook* adoption or non-adoption influence the overall results of the 2019 European parliament election?

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