



Citizen Engagement and Social Media: The Case of Mexican Presidential Candidacies

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ABSTRACT

Social media has transformed election campaigns around the world. While it is difficult to determine to what extent social media influence voters' decisions, there is no doubt that social media platforms impact on candidate advertising and public debate during elections. This research, the methodological formulation of which is based on a case study, seeks to investigate the use of social media during political campaigns to collect signatures of support. In the elections of 2018, aspiring candidates for presidential election required a certain number of signatures of support in order to register as official candidates. We collected social media data on a weekly basis from the Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube accounts of seven candidates and contrasted this data with the number of signatures validated by the electoral authority. We found no relationship between the level of support received and the use of social media in the case of any of the candidates. However, we observed candidates who did achieve the required number of signatures and who did receive official presidential candidate status as a result of their high level of visibility. This research contributes methodologically to the current literature and provides empirical evidence regarding independent candidates in Mexico.

KEYWORDS

Communication Impact, Elections, Independent Candidates, Persuasion, Political Movements, Political Participation, Social Networks

INTRODUCTION

Social media have been used as low-cost communication channels by various social, public and private organizations to communicate with citizens, customers and/or voters. In this regard, there is diverse scientific evidence that describes the processes and results obtained through the use of social media. This evidence spans a period which begins with the first social mobilizations and ends with their impact on electoral campaigns and the measurement of the level of commitment shown by politicians and institutions.

In Web 2.0, political parties have found a wide range of communicative possibilities via Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram. Additionally, other social media have been increasingly used as platforms for the engagement of citizen support in election campaigns (Babaoglu, & Akman, 2018).

There are many examples of the use of social media as a powerful tool for politics, social movements and elections. This happens when technology is combined with the physical coexistence

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between communities and individuals. This generates digital and social capital through the cooperation or complementation of meanings which the different actors develop (Ruelas, 2016).

Independent candidates in Mexico have a long history of consolidation (Olivos, 2018). Until 2015, citizens could not stand as independent candidates for election at the local level of government without the backing of a political party (Cárdenas, 2015). At this level of government, only six independent candidates were elected and, at the state level, one of them was elected governor of the state of Nuevo León. However, the conditions for competition are extremely unequal. In the words of Lagunes and Arellanes (2016):

The electoral reforms of 2012 (article 35), 2013 (article 116) and 2014 (article 41) prevent independent candidates from competing on an equal footing with political parties. The legal locks strategically placed by the Federal and State Legislatures violate the principle of equity that should normally be applied to electoral processes. The independents have less financing than the traditional parties, scarce access to radio and television time, and in order to stand for election they, require a large number of signatures from voters. (p. 71)

This was the prevailing *status quo* for independent candidates in Mexico during the 2018 presidential elections. In the scarce research on this subject in Mexico, researchers point out that this new political position has not increased citizen participation (Lagunes and Arellanes, 2016). Nor has the use of new technologies such as the Internet served to promote critical thinking in terms of elections (Cárdenas, 2015). However, it is certainly indicative of progress in Mexico as it opens the door to a greater level of equality between citizens and their authorities (Olivos, 2018).

Independent candidates for national presidential election were a novelty in the 2018 election campaign. Never before had a citizen been able to run for President of the Republic without the backing of a political party. However, the gradual loss of legitimacy of previous Mexican presidents, as well as the decomposition of the Mexican political system have resulted in the overarching protagonism of the political parties (partidocracy). This generated enough discomfort to promote the legal changes that would allow for independent presidential candidates in Mexico.

Aspiring independent presidential candidates are required to obtain the support of 866,593 Mexicans. This support is manifested by way of a signature supporting the candidate along with a valid Mexican voting ID. This is the principal requirement in order to be able to stand for election as an independent candidate. Given that the electoral authority in Mexico gives no funding to independent candidates, social media, the cost of which is minimal or even free, is a suitable tool which allows independent candidate to achieve the necessary support. The question that guides this study is: do social media have any impact on the collection of the required number of signatures to run as an independent candidate? The objective of this research is to study the existing relationships between the variables of social media and the level of citizen support received by candidates. A certain level of citizen support was a requirement for aspiring candidates for the 2018 presidential election.

In total, the National Electoral Institute (INE, Spanish initials) received 87 applications from both women and men to run as independent candidates for the Presidency of the Republic during the 2018 federal elections. On October 16, 2017, the INE published the official list of independent candidates for the Presidency of the Republic. Only those who met the stipulated requirements were included on the list. 48 applications were approved by the INE; six women (12.5%) and 42 men (87.5%), and only two of them were recognized as independent candidates: Margarita Zavala and Jaime Rodríguez Calderon.

The remainder of this paper is divided into five sections. The foregoing introduction is the first section; the second section is a review of the literature on the role of social networks in Mexican elections; the third section describes the methodology which this research followed; the fourth section presents our findings; and the fifth section deals with conclusions and future discussion.

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