The Use of Social Media in Political Campaigns: The Case of Croatian Local Elections

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Abstract

Social media appears as an important public relations tool which enables political parties and candidates to interact with citizens. Extensive literature review has shown multiple benefits of social media usage such as gaining publicity, spreading messages and mobilization of the voters.

Most of the previous studies have been performed in the developed countries and there is lack of evidence for developing countries. Our study thus seeks to fill this gap and investigates the social media usage of political candidates in Croatian context. Aim of the research is to examine Facebook usage by Croatian political candidates during the 2017 local elections. Following research questions are set up: (i) To what extent are Croatian candidates using Facebook to interact with citizens? (ii) Which political candidate was most frequent in using Facebook? (iii) What social media functions did the candidate use? (iv) With whom candidate interacts and how frequently? (v) Which is the reach of the candidate's posts? (vi) Is there significant correlation between candidates' results and social media activity? To address research questions, primary data are collected. Data set consists of posts on the Facebook pages of the candidates for the capital city major and descriptive data analytics and correlation analysis were performed. Results of the research serve as guidelines for the formation of campaigns strategies.

Keywords: social media, campaign strategy, political campaign, election prediction

1. Introduction

The Internet has enabled new ways of connecting, communicating and distributing information. Participants in political campaigns have always used new and innovative ways of communicating in order to reach the voters. Earlier newspapers, radio, television, and today the internet, largely changed political communication. Since it has become a mainstream, it attracts the attention of researchers in the domain of political communication. The new dimension of research in this area is achieved by the emergence of a social media platform [1]. Many authors point out that social media has drastically changed the way of creating, distributing, and measuring political communication. Dynamic interactions and complex interdependencies at different levels and dimensions brought by social media represent a challenge to traditional understanding of political communication [1]. Rapid expansion and application of social media in political campaigns around the world prompted scientists to explore how the use of this technology affects political orientation, participation and attitudes of voters. Boyd states that a profound understanding of the characteristics and dynamics of social media communication provides a valuable framework for understanding the logic of social processes [2]. Buettner [3] defines social media as a computer-mediated tools that allow you to create, share, or exchange information, ideas, images, or videos

in virtual communities and networks. There are various forms of social media: Blogspot, LiveJournal, Yahoo! answers, Epinions, Flickr, YouTube, Digg, Reddit, microblogs (Twitter, Foursquare) and social networks (Facebook, Myspace, LinkedIn, Twitter, Tribe) as the most popular form of social media [4]. Social media play a significant role in politics. Recent research has been conducted with the aim of identifying the influence of social media on political campaigns from several perspectives: political participation, political knowledge and political efficiency [5].

Common characteristic for each of them is persuasion, which is crucial to political campaigns.

Every speech, every phone call, every knock on the door, every announcement through social media has the purpose of propaganda created to influence voters.

The aim of this research is to determine the frequency and means of using social media in political campaigns and associate it to the outcomes of the election. To be more specific, Facebook usage by Croatian political candidates during the 2017 local elections is examined. In order to achieve the objective, this paper analyses the data collected in the context of Croatian local elections by applying descriptive statistics.

This paper is organized as follows. Extensive literature review of this topic is explained in chapter 2. Chapter 3 presents research questions along with the data and methodology description. Chapter 5 presents results.

2. Literature Review

An extensive literature review has been conducted and results shown that there is a need to monitor the content being published and to analyse the impact of that content on the targeted audience. Today, in the big data era this is possible more than ever. Access to data provided a breakthrough from a mere assessment to data-based decision making. Which data and for what purposes have been used in the previous researches?

Housholder and LaMarre [6] investigated relationship between expectations of the campaign on social media and information on participation in the elections that occurred as a result of activity on social media. The results indicate that social media engagement has a positive impact on the campaign. Authors point out that engagement on social networks can also help in prediction the outcome of the election. Housholder and LaMarre believe that future research should investigate to what extent certain types of engagement on social media result with desired outcomes [6].

Guleria *et al.*, [7] discussed the impact of an electronic campaign on the behaviour of voters, their awareness and understanding of political parties. Authors emphasizes the benefits of such campaigns in terms of wider coverage compared to traditional approaches. Their research is qualitative. The guidelines for future research indicate the need for quantitative research to prove the relationship between electronic media and political participation [7]. Chen and Chang investigated the link between Facebook and blog usage with motivation for information and political discussion [8]. The results of the regression analysis have shown that the desire for political discussions is significant predictor of blogging, while the motivation for information is related to the Facebook usage. Bond *et al.*, [9] conducted an investigation of political messages to Facebook users during of the US election to Congress in 2010. The results show that messages sent by politicians through social media have a direct impact on the elections result, not just on the person who reads the message, but also to the people interacting with them. The interpretation of the results emphasizes the importance of a large number of social network followers as factors of election success [9]. Hong and Nadler have been researching whether and to what extent Twitter's use for political purposes has the potential to influence public opinion [10]. Their results are based

on the activities of American presidential candidates on Twitter. Their results have shown that Twitter's activity is not statistically significantly associated with the number of mentioning on Twitter [10].

A review of recent papers revealed that very little study so far was conducted about the impact of social media on the election results themselves. Most of these studies focus on describing social media as a marketing tool for politicians (e.g., [11], [12]). To understand the impact of social media and realize effectiveness of this tool, it is necessary to measure the use of social media for the purpose of political activities [5]. Borah [13] highlights increasing number of researches about application of social media sites for political purposes, but also points out that a small number of these surveys examine the content of the candidates' pages. On the same path are directions for further research from Praude and Skulme [14]. They highlighted the need for measuring the effectiveness of messages that are sent via social media.

3. Research Methodology

An implementation of Facebook campaign has become a norm in the elections of most modern democratic societies; however, it is yet unknown what role can Facebook play in the election in the Croatian context. Accordingly, this study will investigate the Facebook usage during the 2017 local elections.

Following research questions are set up:
- RQ1: To what extent are Croatian candidates using Facebook to interact with citizens?
- RQ2: Which political candidate was most frequent in using Facebook?
- RQ3: What social media functions did the candidate use?
- RQ4: With whom candidate interacts and how frequently?
- RQ5: Which is the reach of the candidate's posts?

To address research questions, primary data are collected. Data set consists of posts on the Facebook pages of the candidates for the capital city major. The researchers limited the data to the one-month activity: their page activity is monitored during the official campaign: from 21st April till 21st May. Table 1 depicts variables measured in the research.

Table 1. Variable Description

Variable name	Variable description
Photos	Overall number of photos posted during the campaign
Videos	Number of videos posted during the campaign
Links	Number of links posted during the campaign
Statuses	Number of statuses posted during the campaign
Events	Number of events created during the campaign
Authors	Number of different authors who created the page content
Reactions	Average number of reactions on posts
Shares	Average number of posts shares
Comments	Average number of posts comments
Commenters	Average number of different commenters of posts
Reactors	Average number of different reactors
Top post	Type of most with most reactions
Top post reaction	Number of reactions on top post
Top post shares	Number of shares of top post
Top post comments	Number of comments on top post
Page likes	Overall number of page likes
Score	Percentage of votes on elections

Sociographic tool [14] was used in order to extract data from the Facebook pages of candidates.

The unit of analysis for this study was limited to the candidates for city major. There were eight candidates. Out of those, two did not have active pages. Thus, six candidates were included in the research. Furthermore, elections results in terms of candidate's percentage gained on the elections were also included.

Data analysis includes use of a methodical approach to describe the findings from data collected, extract reasoning, and answer the research questions. This study relies on the use of statistical methods to analyse the data collected. The findings were analysed by using descriptive statistics.

Descriptive statistics is used to summarise and display the quantitative data. The descriptive statistical methods present data in a summarised way that the underlying information contained in the data can be easily identified [15]. The following chapter present the descriptive statistics contained in the data about social media usage for political activities.

4. Research Results

This chapter presents the results of the empirical study. It will present the descriptive analysis of the data collected and their interpretation. This chapter will also answer the research questions.

By means of Sociographic [16] data about six political candidates for capital city major were extracted. Out of eight candidates for capital city major, six of them (75%) had active Facebook pages during the official campaign. Candidate 1 did not have active page for whole period of

campaign, just the half of period. Answer on RQ1: To what extent are Croatian candidates using Facebook to interact with citizens? is in large extent since three quarters of the candidates had active pages. First candidate activity is presented in Fig. 1.

Table 2. Social Media Functions

	Photos	Videos	Links	Statuses	Events	SUM
Candidate 1	77	6	3	6	0	92
Candidate 2	53	18	33	61	1	166
Candidate 3	40	28	17	39	4	128
Candidate 4	88	33	28	0	2	151
Candidate 5	24	20	4	5	4	57
Candidate 6	20	18	12	11	0	61
SUM	302	123	97	122	11	655

The data contained in table 2 show social media functions used by candidates. The type of activities that the politicians engage the most are photos, following by videos and statuses. One could infer that multimedia elements are dominant here. The table also show that there are differences among candidates. Whereas all candidates prefer photo as main medium for communication with voters, usage of other activities is different among the candidates. For instance, candidates 2 and 3 prefer statuses over videos and links, whereas candidate did not post single status. There is small number of created events for each of the candidates: candidate 3 created the highest number of events – four events. Candidate 2 posted most of the content during the observed period, following candidate 3 (see Table 2). Political candidate which were most frequent in using Facebook are second and third ranked at the elections. It is to be noted that first ranked candidate had active page only for a half of official campaign.

Table 3 also answers RQ3: candidates used almost all social media functions, but not with the same frequency. Candidates are engaged in various kinds of function with the aim to encourage citizens to participate in discussion. The harnessing of these functions can aid an effective communication between the politicians and citizens.

Our next step is to look more closely at the dynamics of each candidate activities during the observed period to see frequency of the interaction with the audience and to answer RQ4. Figure 1 shows distributions of candidate 1 activities. Multimodal distribution is seen for Candidate 1. This shown to be common feature of all candidates, so we emphasized here only one candidate. The data provides a good indication that all candidates are more engaged at the beginning of campaign and on the end of the campaign. The frequency of the activities is not the same during the campaign.
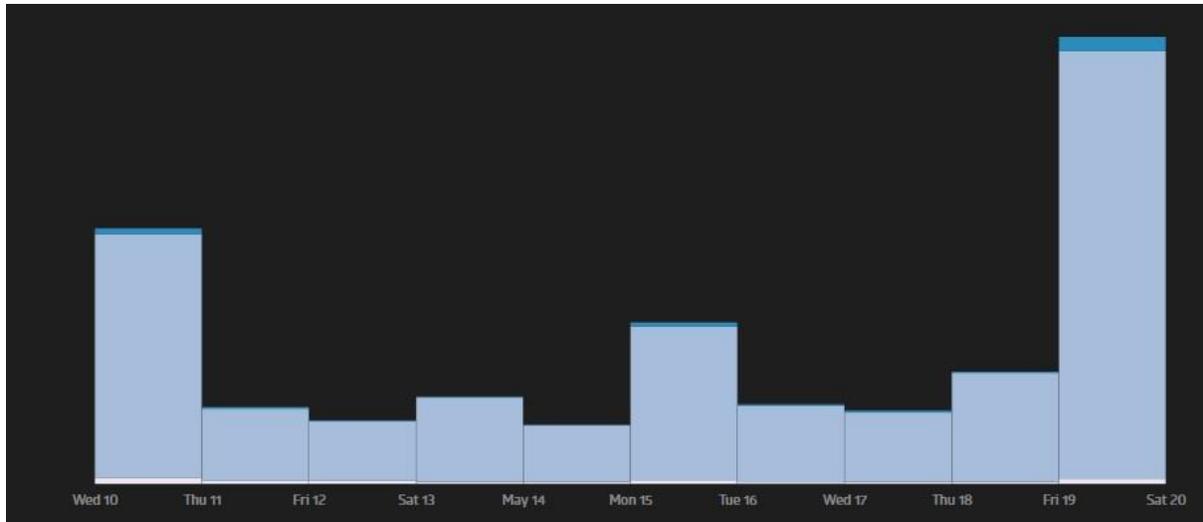
Fig. 1. Candidate 1 Activity

In sum, there are only slight differences in the dynamics of candidate's activity. In general candidates are assigning higher relevance to the use of social media for political communication closer to the elections.

In order to identify reach of posts and to answer RQ3 we have examined reactions and posts comments.

Table 3. Candidates Reach

	Authors	Reactions	Shares	Comments	Commenters	Reactors
Candidate 1	1	42	2	1	72	1127
Candidate 2	54	161	6	11	865	4508
Candidate 3	47	190	12	17	1082	3993
Candidate 4	1	115	10	7	471	2920
Candidate 5	1	331	55	39	1181	3384
Candidate 6	10	124	6	6	217	2177

The data presented in table 3 provides a good indication that the candidates provoke reactions on the social media. Citizens are engaged by reacting, sharing and commenting posts. Candidate 2 had the largest number of individual reactors on the posts (4508), following by candidate 3 and candidate 5. Candidate 5 stands out as candidate with highest number of average reactions, shares and comments.

This amplifies the opportunity for candidate to take advantage of the social connectedness on social media and influence the decision of followers and their friends politically. In line with the results from previous chapter that shows that a good percentage of the functions are actively accepted from citizens. While this category did not indicate that they agree with the presented content, they chose to react on it. Under the right circumstances and with the right content, this category of people can arguably be targeted as potential voters.

A further analysis was carried out on the level of post to drill down categories of post with highest number of reactions. This is to discover the function on which the respondents are more

active politically and the owners of which function are likely to cause reactions on social media politically.

Table 4. Top Post

	Top post type	Top post reaction	Top post shares	Top post comments
Candidate 1	Photo	283	8	16
Candidate 2	Link	4070	67	237
Candidate 3	Video	3682	286	309
Candidate 4	Photo	765	26	98
Candidate 5	Video	2134	2001	174
Candidate 6	Status	1295	60	48

The above result shows that the link is post with highest number of reactions, whereas video is post with highest number of shares. Video and photo are most frequent top post among candidates.

The most commented post is video. It can therefore be deduced that the popularity of multimedia elements application across different spectrum makes social media phenomenon that has come to stay. This makes it necessary for politicians to explore the possibility of making use of social media.

Table 5. Elections Score

	Page likes	Score
Candidate 1	11 708	30,87
Candidate 2	22 280	24,48
Candidate 3	11 008	19,14
Candidate 4	12089	5,6
Candidate 5	14092	2
Candidate 6	3144	1,88

Social media provides the platform for the politicians to interact, and develop connections online that can generate election success. This could provide increased, participation and drive election victory. Table 5 depicts number of pages likes and election score measured by percentage votes gained by each candidate. Raw data gives potential to explore interdependencies among activity and election results, so we have performed correlation analysis. Results are presented in Table 6.

Table 6. Correlation Analysis

	Authors	Reactions	Shares	Comments	Commenters	Reactors	Top post reactions	Top post shares	Top post comments	Score
Authors	-	0.09	-0.29	-0.02	0.48	0.76	0.92	-0.28	0.81	-0.35
Reactions	0.09	-	0.91	0.98	0.87	0.59	0.47	0.90	0.56	0.47
Shares	-0.29	0.91	-	0.96	0.66	0.25	0.11	0.99	0.23	0.45
Comments	-0.02	0.98	0.96	-	0.83	0.47	0.37	0.96	0.48	0.39
Commenters	0.48	0.87	0.66	0.83	-	0.85	0.77	0.64	0.88	0.12
Reactors	0.76	0.59	0.25	0.47	0.85	-	0.91	0.22	0.91	0.04
Top post reactions	0.92	0.47	0.11	0.37	0.77	0.91	-	0,12	0.93	-0,13
Top post shares	-0.28	0.90	0.99	0.96	0.64	0.22	0.12	-	0.22	0.40
Top post comments	0.81	0.56	0.23	0.48	0.88	0.91	0.93	0.22	-	-0.11
Score	-0.35	0.47	0.45	0.39	0.12	0.04	-0,.3	0.40	-0.11	-

Table 6 answers RQ6 and examines correlations between candidates score measured as rank and social media activity seen as: number of authors on candidates' page, number of reactions, shares, comments, commenters and reactors of posts. The results indicate a statistically significant correlation among candidates' score at the elections and number of reactions, number of comments and number of top post shares. This correlation is positive indicating that candidates with higher number of follower's reactions and comments achieved better result. There is also statistically significant, but negative correlation between candidates result and number of authors of content at the Facebook page of the candidate. Negative correlation coefficient indicates that candidates with higher number of posts authors performed worse. Top post reactions, shares and comments are highly correlated with number of overall reactions. High number of statistically significant correlations between observed variables points out the need for further investigation of relationship and indicates possible need to group these indicators in index of candidate's activity.

5. Conclusion

This research aims to provide insight into the use of social media in political campaigns.

Politicians are attempting to connect with their target market via social media, but not all of them are gaining competitive edge from it. Literature review suggested that the concept of social media is associated with elections results and those links should be explored. Therefore, the social network activities of candidate provided a basis for the study that was carried out on the usefulness of social media in political campaigns. Analysis presented here tried to identify how politicians are taking advantage of social media.

The contributions of this paper are as follows. First, this paper provides an extensive literature review on the social media for political communication. Second, based on the empirical results, high level of interest for social media-based communication of political parties is identified. We also observe a strong will of citizens to engage with reactions, comments and shares. Furthermore, this study reveals that politicians are willing to engage in social media and citizens have the need to stay updated about current political situation and about politician's reputation in social media.

Social media are excellent tool to detect new trends and identify influential politicians. In Croatian context, there are yet untapped opportunities for the use of social media for politics. This could be an opportunity for the politicians to engage more via social media. As a limitation, our

study focuses on Croatian politicians and only one city. In the future, research should be repeated in different legislative periods and with politicians from other cities. Also, further investigation of interdependencies should be investigated by means of advanced statistical methods and machine learning approaches.

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