
POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND VOTERS ENGAGEMENT ON SOCIAL MEDIA IN MONTENEGRO

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Abstract: The rapid diffusion and social embedding of digital media, its hyper-accelerated growing complexity, together with the widespread use of social media, has changed the ways we organize our political and civic life. As research has shown, social media users are more civically and politically active than non-users.

Although political web sites and blogs attract those who are already politically active, it is possible that many individuals, especially those who are relatively uninterested in politics and who would choose not to watch a broadcast of a political debate or directly follow political actors on social media, might instead encounter information about the debate serendipitously, while using social media for other purposes, such as entertainment or catching up with friends.

In this paper, the results of the research that examines the extent to which Montenegrin mature population uses social media for their engagement in online and offline political participation will be presented. The research is based on quantitative analysis of the results obtained through an online survey (N=210).

Keywords: Political participation, voters, engagement, social media

1. INTRODUCTION

The use of social media is becoming a feature of political and civic engagement for many people. According to Rainie et al. (2012) the social media users who talk about politics on a daily basis are the most likely to use social media for civic or political purposes. Twenty first century's presidential campaigns witnessed enormous and peculiar levels of online engagement in the political process, where millions of people used the internet to stay informed about politics, share their views and ideas, join communities built around shared interests or objectives and mobilize others in support of their candidate (Smith, 2008).

Many years of research have shown that young people all over the world are consistently less likely to vote or to engage in any of the other civic or political behaviors that often precede voting than are other age people (Flanagan & Levine, 2010). But nevertheless, youth participation in presidential elections has firmly increased during the 21st century, especially since the rise of social media (Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement [CIRCLE], 2008).

After analyzing the social media, its functions and how it is used in political participation and engagement nowadays, this paper will also provide research on how social media influence political participation and voter's engagement in Montenegro.

2. SOCIAL MEDIA SITES AND ITS FUNCTION

Social Media are for the first time defined and published in scientific literature by Kaplan and Haenlein (2010: 59), and according to them, "Social Media is a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content."

In the research done by Pew Research Center researchers (Hampton et al. 2011) it is shown that Twitter is the social media site that has shown the most obvious growth in new members. Facebook is, until now, the most popular social network site. From people on which this research is done, and who use some of the social media, almost all of the participants use Facebook (92%). Social media with similar popularity are: MySpace (29%), LinkedIn (18%), Twitter (13%), and other social media services (10%). On the other hand, a very small number of people have joined MySpace in the past year. In comparison, nearly 60% of Twitter users, 39% of Facebook users, and 36% of LinkedIn users joined within the past year. All this statistical data show that usage of social media is growing from day to day.

There are many functions of social media, such as for example, keeping in touch with people or exchanging the information. According to Alexander Richter and Michael Koch (2008), there are two types of social media sites and they are open and closed. Open social media according to them are available to use for everyone in the World Wide Web (WWW) and closed ones are used only by a closed user groups, for example the social media that is used within the intranet of an organization.

3. POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND VOTERS ENGAGEMENT ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Political participation is defined as: "political participation affords citizens in a democracy an opportunity to communicate information to government officials about their concerns and preferences and to put pressure on them to respond" (Verba et al., 1995).

The political environment as the part of each state system in democratic society differs from state to state as well as of the political situation. Nowadays, almost all political parties, politicians and special interest groups have official Facebook, Twitter and Instagram accounts that they use to share their messages and ideologies. There is notable increase in political advertisements that are made exclusively for Social Media audiences. Another interesting fact is that and average populations in many countries, especially developed once, routinely evolve in forums to interact with elected representatives. In a political environment defined by widespread polarization and partisan animosity, even simple conversations can go awry when the subject turns to politics (Duggan, Smith and Page, 2016).

On the other hand, in modern world, online social media environments present new challenges. Election campaigns totally rely on communication. Over the last decade, changes in the communication environment mostly because of digital technologies innovations (Gainous and Wagner, 2015), have forced politicians and political parties to adopt and put into their campaigns highly sophisticated digital communication practices. For example, during the 2012 presidential elections in U.S., over 12 million people "liked" Mitt Romney's Facebook page, and on the other hand, President Obama had over 58 million followers combined on Facebook and Twitter. These platforms create a free and efficient way to reach more potential and preserve existing voters, than they would through speeches, promotional material, or perhaps even television advertisements.

Political posts made on social media sites acquire significant number of comments and sharing. It is not uncommon, for example, for posts on the Facebook page of some of the popular politician in that period such as: Barak Obama, Angela Merkel, Donald Trump etc., to have thousands comments or their tweets to be "retweeted" by even larger number of people which only increases the exposure of the original posts (Journell, Ayers and Beeson, 2013).

4. METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this paper is, first of all, to investigate the relationship between social media use and political participation and voters engagement as well as to provide a quantitative description of the target population's use of social media (such as: Facebook, Instagram and Twitter) in Montenegro and their levels of engagement in political activities on these social platforms. Furthermore, it will explore and provide comparable analyze with the similar research in U.S., and with this research explore weather political participation on social media sites is higher in developed or in developing countries (in U.S. or in Montenegro).

5. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

Today, social media has become a significant tool for political participation and voters' engagement in general, as it allows people to access the latest information and to engage with each other on the topic of their interests through joined chats and hashtag, it also allows people to comment post and share things they want. The objective of the study is to give answer to the following research questions:

- What are the Internet and E-mail usage habits among voters in Montenegro?
- What are the Social media habits of voters in Montenegro?
- To which extent are voters politically active on social media in Montenegro?

6. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION

For the purpose of this research primary quantitative data collection was used, with the combination of data collected from secondary sources in order to provide better understanding of the topic. In order to provide good understanding of the topic and answer research questions stated above, the authors chose the primary data collected through survey designed especially for the purpose of this research. This research also provides comparative analysis of data collected from Montenegro as developing country and secondary data collected for US.

In order to collect necessary data in more organized and easier way, authors decided to use Google forms tool for making surveys. Questionnaire was delivered to participants through social media sites from 05.01.2018 until 20.02.2018. With the use of this tool and method of questioning, participation in the study was voluntary, and anonymity has been guaranteed since there was no question that can personally identify any individual.

The questionnaire was created in English and purposefully it was translated into the Montenegrin language. From total 350 survey samples sent, 210 answers are obtained; from which 205 are measurable and useful (5 people who fulfilled the survey are not using social media sites). Those 205 answers formed sample to represent the population of Montenegro in this study of political engagement of voters on social media sites in this country.

For the purpose of this project, survey was delivered randomly to the people through web, which allowed the participants to complete the study on their own time. The population was limited by the age (18 years and above, or in other words all mature people that have legal right to vote). Following tables present a summary of the participants that participated in the survey, based on their gender, age and educational level.

Total number of participants	Female	Male
210	115	95

Table 1. The Gender overview of the participants that participated in the survey

Total number of participants	18-29	30-49	50-64	65 and above
210	126	52	24	8

Table 2. The age overview of the participants that participated in the survey

Total number of participants	Not finished primary school	Primary school	High school	Higher education level	Bachelor degree	Master degree	Doctorate degree
210	2	5	53	19	76	46	9

Table 3. The education level overview of the participants in the survey

7. INTERNET AND E-MAIL USAGE HABITS AMONG VOTERS IN MONTENEGRO

Easier access to the devices through which people connect and approach to internet, and the transformation of countries into modern and technologically developed ones all around the Globe, has given people the opportunity to use the internet more regularly and with more comfort. Looking at the general use of internet, it is notable that most of the participants in the survey done for the purpose of this study are using it every day or several times a day.

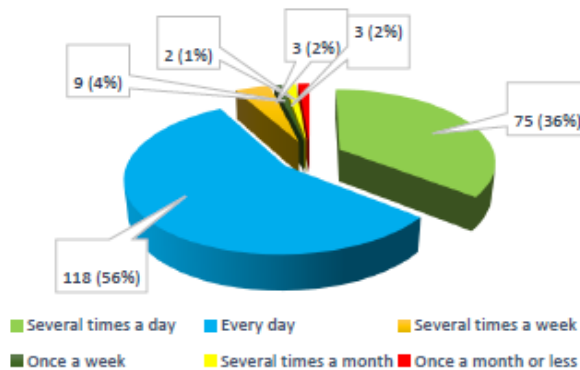


Figure 1. Summarized answers for the question: How often do you use Internet?

For this research, it was important to find out how many of the participants use e-mails, since, as explained before in the text, e-mail was one of the most influential tool for spreading information, used by many politicians in order to increase political participation and persuade people to vote for them. Based on the results received from the survey, the usage of e-mails differs from person to person (Figure 2).

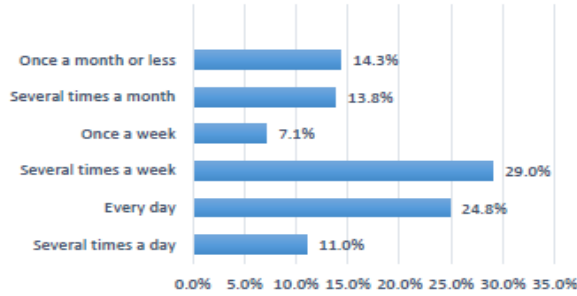


Figure 2. Summarized answers for the question: How often do you send or receive email?

8. SOCIAL MEDIA HABITS OF VOTERS IN MONTENEGRO

Social media sites have an enormous power now and it is such that, the number of worldwide users according to statista.com (2018), reached 2.34 billion and is expected to grow to some 2.95 billion by 2020. The idea of how many people use social media sites is a great indicator of the remarkable impact that these platforms and applications can have in our everyday activities, which include political participation as well. From 210 Montenegrins that participated in this research, 205 said that they use social media sites and only 5 are not using them. According to this 96.2 percent of the population in the Montenegro had a social media profile (Figure 3).

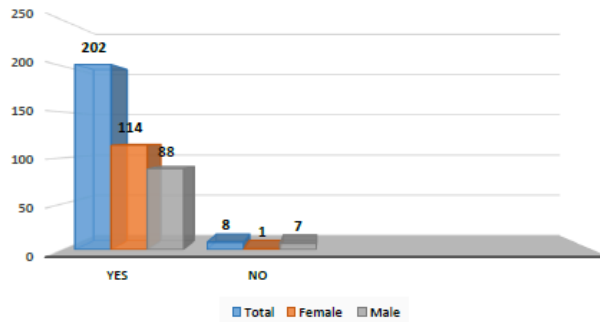


Figure 3: Summarized answers for the question: Do you use social media sites?

Another interesting thing is the gender difference in social media usage. As seen on Figure 3, females (114) are using social media sites more than male (88 participants).

Next question was related to the social media sites that participants are using. When it comes to this question, participants in this research answered that Facebook (90.2%) and Instagram (78.5%) are the most preferable ones. Then comes Twitter with 22.9% of participants that are using it. The new popular social media app, that was recently launched called Snapchat, was the fourth social media site according to the participants in this research with 17.6% of users (Figure 4).

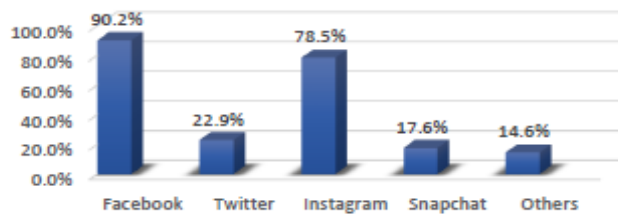


Figure 4. Summarized answers for the question: Which social media sites do you use?

Concerning the platforms participants said they use, only 31 respondents (Figure 5) answered this question. Most of them (11 of them) claimed that the Viber is the social media site they use. Other popular social media sites were LinkedIn (9) and WhatsApp (5).

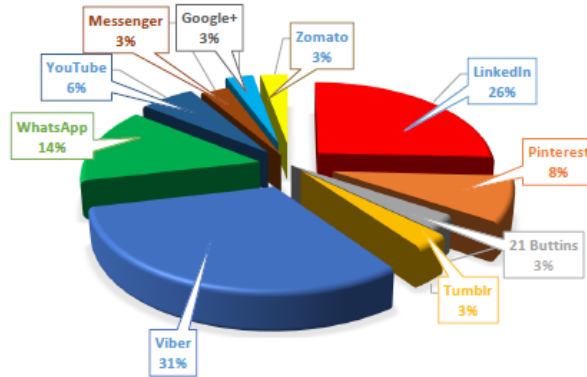


Figure 5. Summarized answers for the question: If you are using other Social Media Site, please list them?

9. THE EXTENT TO WHICH VOTERS ARE POLITICALLY ACTIVE ON SOCIAL MEDIA IN MONTENEGRO

Users of all social media sites are exposed to a big extent of political content from a number of different people or social media official pages of political parties or officials. In that regard, it is important to figure out if social media users are part of social media groups that are of political content. In order to find out to what extent participants of this survey are exposed to political content, they were asked whether they belong to a social media group that deals with political issues. According to the answers they gave, 42% of all participants said that they do belong to a social media group that deals with political issues and 58% said that they do not belong to any group of such content. From this result, it can be concluded that those big portions of people are actually under the direct influence of political content.

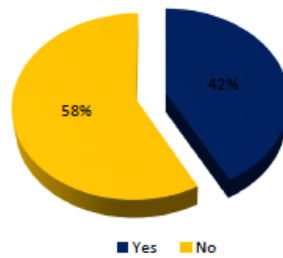


Figure 6. Summarized answers for the question: Do you belong to a social media group that deals with political issues?

Becoming friend or follower of a certain celebrity or political figure on social media sites is becoming increasingly popular among people in Montenegro. They use these sites to associate with public figures, learn about the events and the news as well as to participate in them, to share their views on different topics, etc. On the other hand, politicians and political groups from each political orientation, have begun using this opportunity to unify and communicate with their current and potential supporters at large. The results from the survey that is done for the purpose of this research are showing that 49.8% of Montenegrins occasionally follow some elected officials, candidates for office or other political figures on a social media site, 23.4% are following them always and small portion of 26.8% are never following any political figure on social media sites.

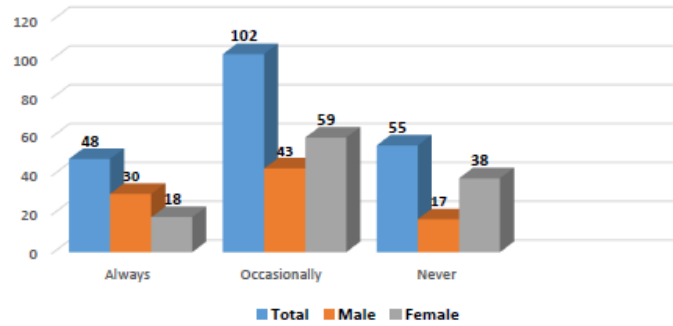


Figure 7. Summarized answers for the question: Are you following elected officials, presidential candidates or other political figures on social media sites?

Moreover, when asked about the political interactions they are involved in, on social media sites, politically engaged users (7.3%) always comment, post or discuss political issues with others on social media sites. Other group of people (33.7%), on the other hand is also involved in discussions and comments about politics but only occasionally. In addition, most of the social media sites users in Montenegro (59%) as showed in Figure 8, are never performing any of these actions on social media sites.

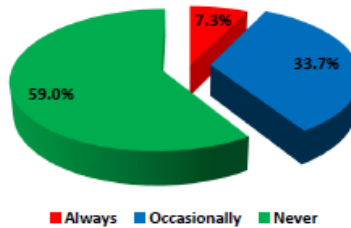


Figure 8. Summarized answers of question: How often do you comment, post, or discuss about politics with others on social media sites?

Nearly 31.7% of social media users in Montenegro, as you can see in Figure 9, say they have blocked, unfriend or changed their settings in order to see fewer posts from someone in their feeds because of something related to politics, while 68.3% of users just try to ignore this kind of posts.

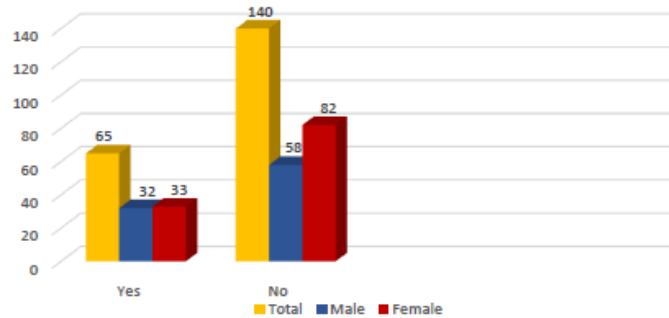


Figure 9. Summarized answers of question: Did you block, unfriend, or change your settings to see less of someone because of something related to politics?

Although, the people often have negative opinions about the political issues they see on social media, sometimes, they end up with changing their opinion about political party or candidate just because of something they saw or read on social media sites. 33.2% of social media users in Montenegro have changed their views on political issues because of something they saw on those sites. As presented in Figure 10, 66.8% of the participants could not be influenced through social media sites.

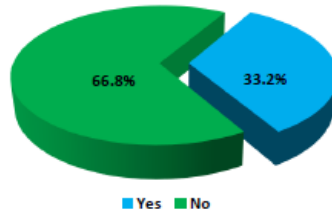


Figure 10. Summarized answers for the question: Have you ever modified your views about a political issue because of something you saw on social media?

10. CONCLUSION

Taking into consideration the fact that social media continues to influence people's everyday lives and activities worldwide, scholars continue to investigate this topic from various points of view, and this particular study had an aim to go a step further in this direction. The number of followers, as well as the frequency and tone of response, gives the politicians and political parties, or the teams responsible for their campaigns, a relevant guideline on what will be the next steps of their campaign strategy. Furthermore, with the advanced features of social media sites, which allow people to share their ideas and thoughts, ordinary people, are also becoming active users and creators of political content in the online world, which is making the job of politicians and political parties even easier.

Social media use has big effect on political participation and voters engagement all over the world, including Montenegro, and regardless of the limitations of this research, the results collected take along big contribution to existing research in political communication.

This research shows that people in Montenegro are very active internet and email users (from 210 participants in the survey, 118 of them are using internet on regular basis, or in other words every day). When it comes to the gender difference in internet and e-mail usage, according to the research, we can conclude that female citizens are more active users of these platforms than male population in Montenegro.

Voters in Montenegro, among other social media use, tend to be active email users, but the extent to which they are active depends from person to person, depending on their other social media activity, and is more frequent among those voters who are already politically active.

Social media sites are the platforms that are having the biggest impact on the population all over the world. With the globalization and technological development, people all over the world are able to connect, communicate, share their ideas and thoughts and promote certain content that is interesting or important to them.

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