(Re)shaping political culture and participation through social networks

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(RE)SHAPING POLITICAL CULTURE AND PARTICIPATION THROUGH SOCIAL NETWORKS

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Abstract: *The influence of social networks is growing intensely. They do not only influence only certain aspects of our lives, but they also influence political participation and political culture. In recent years, this influence has been very notable. We have seen a change of policies as a result of pressure, a lot of significant political movements started via social networks. This paper concentrates on the influence of social networks on political participation and political culture. The paper tries to foresee the future implications and the intertwining of social networks and political culture and political participation. It also gives conclusions for the past, present and future implications and it gives a comparison between political participation before and after the rise of social networks. It also analyses the positive and negative implications that social network could have on political participation.*

Keywords: *Social Networks; Social Media; Political Culture; Political Participation; Fake News*

INTRODUCTION

The influence of social networks is growing intensely. In the beginning, social media was only a way for people to communicate and connect to each other, but today they have huge impact on the business community and the marketing strategies of the companies, they influence the way media share their news, and they also influence political participation and political culture.

In recent years, the influence of the Internet has been very notable. Today, people, especially young people, and teenagers spend most of their time online. According to research, 92% of teens (age: 13 - 17) go online every day, with 24% reporting being online almost constantly (Lenhart 2015). And it is not just that people spend most of their time on-line, but they also receive most of their news from social media. According to a Reuters report, social media served as a news source for 51% of its respondents, and as the main news source for 28% of 18-24-year-olds (Hänska and Bauchowitz 2017, 27).

It is very important to point out the fact that people do not just read the news and get their information, they also engage while doing so. Hänska and Bauchowitz note that social media is not merely a channel for delivering news to audiences. Users share, post and comment on news, and can engage directly with politicians and journalists (Hänska and Bauchowitz 2017, 27). Those engagements have resulted in a lot of significant changes or growing movements.

There has been a change of policies as a result of pressure on social media, a lot of significant political movements started and/or have been coordinated through social media. It is also very notable that with the rise of more politically involved and vocal people on social media, all around the world there have been attempts to censor, block or shut down some social media channels, making them inaccessible to people.

This is also a big issue which confirms that social media has become a major influencer on the current political scene. And this has proven to be very fascinating for scholars, academics, and researchers. According to Kahne and Bower:

> Although numerous studies detail rates of online social media use among youth and adult populations, and although the correlations between such activities and a range of political activities have been explored, scholars are still working to clarify whether and when particular forms of online activity with social media foster political engagement (Kahne and Bowyer 2018).

People have been more vocal about certain issues because of social media, and this has made a significant shift in the political participation which means that the political culture has been through significant changes since political participation is a big part of political culture.As Almond and Verba point out: "In all the new nations of the world, the belief that

the ordinary man is politically relevant – that he ought to be an involved participant in the political system - is widespread" (Almond and Verba 1968, 4). People demand to be taken seriously and to have their voices heard.

In the era of 'post-truth' and fake news, all of these components contribute to the serious changes in the way people participate and understand politics. The political culture as we know it is changing and reshaping right before our eyes. There is no doubt social media have transformed our communication, how we access, and engage with information. Furthermore, the relationship between politicians, citizens, and journalists, how these groups communicate, engage with and relate to each other, has changed (Hänska and Bauchowitz 2017, 27).

The politicians have also recognized the importance of social media and many of them are trying to use social media to their advantage and to promote their policies and to gather new followers and voters. After the Brexit and the 2016 Presidential Elections in the USA, it is clear that social media is no longer only a place to share pictures and videos with family and friends, but it is something much larger, something that affects the overall political landscape.

This paper aims to explore these changes, to find the roots and causes and to try to estimate the further changed that will be seen in this area. The main hypothesis is that social media has become a major influence on modern political culture and participation. The research questions that were posed upon the creation of the hypothesis were:

1) How social media does influences modern political culture?
2) How much have political culture and participation changed since the rise of social media?

The analytical method was mostly used for this paper along with the comparative method as the comparison of political culture before and after social media is inevitable and necessary in order to get the bigger picture and the changes that have occurred.

POLITICAL CULTURE AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION BEFORE SOCIAL MEDIA

The political culture "is one of the most popular and most seductive concepts in political science; it is also one of the most controversial and confused" (Elkins and Smion 1979, 127). The political culture as a concept has been widely debated among scholars and it has been a topic that still causes a lot of debates and discussion, especially in the way one approaches political culture. As Swedlow notes: "at its core, political culture—the shared values and beliefs of a group or society regarding political relationships and public policy—answers the question of how human beings are going to live together"(Swedlow 2013, 624).

Every society has different approaches to different topics and issues within itself, and those approaches are dependent on a lot of factors which constitute the political culture as a whole. Assumptions about the political world focus attention on certain features of events, institutions, and behavior, define the realm of possible, identify the problems deemed pertinent and set the range of alternatives among which members of the population make decisions (Elkins and Simeon, 128). In the political side of the world, there are different assumptions and different approaches to resolving issues and problems connected to the political spectrum of a culture.

To each question and issues, there are different point of views, arguments, and ways of resolving burning issues. And here is where the political culture plays its role. Political culture defines the range of acceptable possible alternatives from which groups or individuals may, other circumstances permitting, choose a course of action (Elkins and Simeon, 131).

According to Almond and Verba, there are three main types of political culture:

1. Parochial Political Culture – People do not have an understanding of the political system, and have no interest in participating in the political processes.
2. Subject Political Culture – People have an understanding of the political system and have no interest (or they are not allowed to have interest) in participating in the political processes.
3. Participant Political Culture - People understand the political system and actively participate in political processes and decision-making (Almond and Verba, 17-19).

Every country is different in its development, which means that different countries have different political cultures. History, circumstances, beliefs are also very important in the development of political culture and it is normal for the world to have countries that have different political cultures and to have different levels of development of political culture.

Political participation in the simplest sense of the term is the participation of citizens in decision-making processes and political issues. Rosenstone and Hansen point out that political participation is the action that has an influence on the distribution of social goods and values (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993, 4). Still, the concept of political participation is very wide: it can be people commenting on political issues, taking a stand on certain policy, protesting, voting, running for office, getting involved in campaigns (electoral, political, etc.) and much more.

Before the rise of social media, political participation was mostly identified as participation through elections, protests, lobbying, etc. With the rise of social media, the understanding of what political participation has significantly changed.

THE POLITICAL CULTURE AND PARTICIPATION IN THE ERA OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Before social media, the landscape of the political culture and participation was fairly limited and usually within the borders of a country. The internet has made this more global and interconnected, where everyone can follow and give opinions on the situation of other countries, so in a sense, even the national policies and politics became part of the process of globalization and on a completely different level. According to Nowak, the 21st-century internet is very different from the internet from the late 20th-century. It is more participatory and more oriented toward social networks (Nowak 2013, 4).

The social networks created a trend where people actively read and digest the news and use the comment section to raise their voice on certain issues, whether they are political or not. Social networks are created in a way through which people can digest the news but also participate in creating content, in the sense that they could share news and add their comment or their own analysis of the subject, engage in discussion with their on-line friends and strangers as well, especially when commenting on the pages of news outlets, politicians, journalists, celebrities, activists, etc.

The social networks provided a platform on which people could share a lot of things from their life. Politics and opinion about political issues is also a big part of a person's life, so it is quite understandable that people would share some of their thoughts and ideas on certain political/social issues.

However, the rise of social media led to making these platforms an integral part of our everyday lives, and its influence and significance became more visible and notable. Most of the news outlets started using social networks as the quickest way to share their breaking news, journalists use social media to promote their stories and to interact with readers, political parties are developing whole communication strategies for interaction with voters, and even politicians use their social media accounts as a platform to interact with people.

Hänskaand Bauchowitz notes that with more citizens using social media, and now they are a more important source of information, social media became an obvious channel to reach them. To some extent, politicians, like journalists, are cutting out intermediaries and reaching their audience directly (Hänska and Bauchowitz 2017, 28). This also creates the notion that politicians are more accessible to their voters and to people in general and it gives a certain human touch to the overall political communication.

Furthermore, social media has become an indispensable and powerful part of electoral campaigns. Social media has changed the nature of political campaigning and will continue to play a key role in future elections. As more people spend a significant time online, social media has become a powerful force to influence the spread of political ideas and messages (Polonski, 2016).

One of the first examples of using social networks to gain more followers and to engage more people in an electoral campaign was the 'Yes, we can' campaign for Barack Obama in 2008. Barack Obama was the first presidential candidate who understood the influence and power of social media and his approach in using social media as a tool of engaging young people was revolutionary and completely changed the landscape of electoral captains. During the campaign, perhaps the most marked innovation was the rise in user-generated content, as citizens used websites, blogs, video-sharing sites, social networking sites and podcasts to take part in the public campaign (Owen 2009, 9). The social networks and online campaigning proved to be the next big thing and most people went online to find out more about what was going on with the campaigns. 59% of voters used the Internet for campaign information or to engage in some sort of communication about the elections, with 36% treating online news as the main source (Owen, 26).

In an era when it seems that young people are not particularly interested in elections, the social networks proved to be a very useful way for politicians and electoral candidates to get back in touch with young people. Videos, blogs, comments, pictures, social media presence, all of these things were appealing to people and introduced a more human touch to the campaigns. Young people were at the forefront of these innovations, which contributed to their increased engagement in the elections (Owen, 19). This proved to be a great strategy for Barack Obama, and soon after him, politicians started using social networks more and starting adapting to the new era of social media.

A second great example of the influence of social networks was Brexit in 2016. The battle for Brexit was also fought and won on social networks. The post-Brexit analysis suggests that the team for Leave won the battle long before the day of the voting. Team Leave worked very hard on their online presence and they worked the field in terms of swaying the people to vote for Leave. The presence of Leave on social media was consistent, yet many Remainers ignored this as something that has no connection with the real political world. They believed that Britain would never vote to leave the EU and disregarded social media as a haven for trolls and teenagers (Polonski, 2016). It turned out that this was a great understatement and it came back like a boomerang. While the Leave supporters were very vocal in their expressing their arguments, the Remain supporters remained passive until it was too late. What was also very notable was the difference in the behavior on social media between Remainers and Leavers. In an analysis of the impact of social media on Brexit, Polonski writes:

> We found Leave users tended to be less open, and mostly engage with other Leave supporters, indicating important hallmarks of an echo-chamber. In contrast, Remain supporters were much more open. Specifically, 83 percent of interactions initiated by Leave supporters were with other Leave supporters. For Remain supporters this figure drops to 46 percent. Remainers replied to,

retweeted or quoted Leavers 49, 39 and 50 percent of the time, respectively. Contrast this with Leavers who replied to, retweeted or quoted Remainers only 19, 8 and 11 percent of the time, respectively (Polonski, 2016).

The Presidential Elections in the USA in 2016 took the influence of social networks on a whole new level. Their elections introduced us to 'fake news' which were spread everywhere on social networks, especially Facebook, and usually through fake accounts and fake pages. And while a lot of people denied the influence at first, leaving them out as provocations from trolls, after the elections it was very visible, that it had a great impact on the outcome of the elections.

According to an analysis by Buzzfeed, by using a social media assessment, it claimed that the 20 largest fake stories generated 8.7 million shares, reactions, and comments, compared to 7.4 million generated by the top 20 stories from 19 major news sites. (West, 2017)There is a possible correlation since it seems that people are not trusting traditional news outlets anymore, so they are turning to other sources, and this is the point where fake news found their ground to prosper. A big portion of these fake news was spread through "bots" and fake accounts.

As West writes, analysis after the 2016 election found that automated bots played a major role in disseminating false information on Twitter (West 2017). The main point is to spread the news as quickly and wide as possible and to generate buzz as much possible and in that way to reach more people who oftentimes unknowingly will continue spreading the fake news. Also, in terms of social media, Donald Trump and Hilary Clinton both used their own personal social media accounts to engage with people and to reach their target groups.

These three examples show that in a lot of ways, social networks indeed influence political culture and no one is immune to its influence. The underestimation of that influence proved to be very dangerous and showed that underestimating the social networks could come back to haunt those who underestimate it.

The social networks do influence political culture and participation as well. There is a significant difference between online and offline participation because just because people are vocal on social networks or signing online petitions, it does not mean that they will go out and protest or vote, or engage themselves politically in any other way. However, social networks make people more prone to take part in all of the important discussions concerning politics and to also form opinions on different topics. What is also very important is that political culture shifts significantly especially in the way people perceive their role in society. The power of individuals who constitute the society shifts from strictly electoral roles to new non-institutional forms of new political culture (Nowak 2013, 3). Instead of waiting for elections to have their voice heard, people use social networks to organize themselves, to raise petitions, to organize events or protests, to start movements and in that way influence

decision-making processes, to engage or persuade politicians and to be active members in the community and not only passively waiting for the elections to come up. This is one the most positive sides of the impact that social media has on the political culture. As Bjornsson (2017) points out:

> These trends reflect a global digital culture that is wreaking havoc on political systems worldwide, regardless of how prone they were previously to division and distraction. Social media has a tremendous impact on political landscapes: politicians and parties have new, easy ways to draw attention to themselves; advertising is more pervasive and has lower standards, and there are fewer and less stringent barriers to entry into public political discourse.

And on one side, this is good. The barrier between people and politicians is falling down and people can express themselves and participate in the public discourse and try to influence the policies.

However, the negative sides cannot and should not be ignored. On social media, there is always a lot of noise on a lot of different topics, but rarely there is any substance. Instead of debate and discussion, social media is turning into a rather hostile place where everyone shouts, and rarely anyone listens. And this has to be on for quite some time. According to Allcott and Gentzkow, in the early 2000s, the growth of online news prompted a new set of concerns, among them that excess diversity of viewpoints would make it easier for like-minded citizens to form "echo chambers" or "filter bubbles" where they would be insulated from contrary perspectives (Allcott and Gentzkow 2017, 211).

Also, with the rise of fake news and fake accounts, the real debate is completely distorted, along with the truth and it creates parallel realities for people. Those fake accounts and 'bots' have only one job and that is a distribution of the fake news, and they do that through series of channels and in the same time are trying to pose as normal and ordinary citizens. As West points out, they can magnify their influence and affect national or global conversations, especially resonating with like-minded clusters of people and they can do this through designated keywords and interactions with influential posters (West, 2017).

The amount of hate speech is on a very high level, and spreading and sharing fake news is not contributing to making the situation better. The truth is being entirely twisted and re-written, and on social networks there are several parallel universes where everyone lives in their own bubble and reality, and those realities do not intersect, so actually the debate is nearly non-existing, instead people are just shouting their version. There is no dialogue, there are only monologues. And this could be potentially very dangerous for democracy and making informed decisions. And in a lot of ways is changing the political culture and it is eroding the foundations on which political culture is built.

THE FUTURE IMPACT OF SOCIAL NETWORKS ON POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Almond and Verba (p. 4) seem to have predicted the outcome of the development of technology: "what is problematical about the content of the emerging world culture is its political character. Although the movement toward technology and rationality of organization appears with great uniformity throughout the world, the direction of political change is less clear. But one aspect of this new world political culture is discernible: it will be a political culture of participation. The social networks have indeed shifted the political culture in another direction, which is more participatory. What is more interesting is that in lot of parts of the world, the percentage of people who go out and vote is getting lower, but in the same time, people all over the world have become more involved in everyday political issues, have engaged in movements, protests, petitions, campaigning for a certain causes, etc. Almond and Verba (p. 4) predicted that if there is a political revolution going on throughout the world, it is what might be called the participant explosion. In a sense, on global level, there is kind of a participant explosion, but it needs time to get into balance, especially now with fake news and the oversharing of information which makes fact-checking obsolete, because by the time people fact-check the information and deny the falsified news, that information has already reached thousands of people and a big percentage of those people might be influenced by it. On the other hand, Kahne and Bowyer (2018) claim that:

> Online social networks, might lead youths to be exposed to political discussions that peak interest in and engagement with political issues and they might make political mobilization by others more likely. Consistent with these expectations, online political discussion enables the development of young people's capabilities as citizens and thus leads to greater political participation.

If young people are more exposed to political discussions, that means that it is more likely for them to engage in those discussions, which might lead to greater political participation both on-line and off-line, which would not be only limited to discussion and debate on posts connected to politics. Studies have shown that political mobilization through social media leads to greater participation in a variety of offline political acts, ranging from voting to protest demonstrations (Kahne and Bowyer 2018). One must keep in mind that media literacy is very important to political participation both online and offline. And not all people have access to internet, so the political participation cannot be looking solely on its performance and percentages on-line. There is correlation, the offline political participation is very important and those battles have to continue to be fought off-line, without dismissing the online component which is very important. On-line participation without any back-up in the off-line world, may not produce the desired changes, whether is online or offline.

CONCLUSION

The social networks have proved to be a major factor that could influence a lot of political events, such as political movements, elections, referendums, electoral campaigns, and political activism. This is correlated with political participation as well since all of the above require a certain level of political participation.

The positive aspect of the rise of social networks is that it contributed to the involvement of more young people in political discussions. Social networks provided a platform where people could express their concerns, organize themselves and be more active in the discussions that are important to them. The on-line political participation and activism of people have started a lot of important discussions, social movements that had great impact on creation of policies, changing laws, and there were a lot of political resignations and firings because some news broke on social networks.

To a certain degree, social networks are watchdogs of the overall politics and it is very easy for news to become viral and to spread political messages easier. Even politicians are bringing down their walls and communicate directly through their social media accounts, and more often, they are the ones behind the screen, not only their PR team. This makes an atmosphere where most of the communication is direct and where people could actually directly confront or give support to certain politicians or candidates.

On the other side of the coin, the fact that news and information could be spread viral and in a matter of minutes, leaves a lot of space for creation of fake news, fake accounts who spread false information, hate speech and 'trolls' whose only aim is to create misunderstandings, division and to create parallel universes. This might seem as something benign in the beginning but actually is very dangerous for democracy everywhere. It creates big gaps between the understandings of what truth is and creates different parallel universes where people live in bubbles and interact only within their bubble. This path could not lead to progress and development, but could only lead to creation of different truths, completely different realities, and parallel existence and greater division. This path is not inclusive, it is divisive and on the long term it has potential to erode deliberative discussion.

For the sake of democracy, it is always better for people to live in the same reality, reality which is chaotic and where there are big differences in beliefs and ideology, but where everyone actually participates in the same discussion, instead of having a lot of small bubbles in which people from that bubble agree with each other and tap their shoulders, completely unaware of the other bubbles that exist around them.

There is a significant change in political culture, and there is a possibility of even greater changes. The political culture has been reshaping for a while now, but it is up to the societies and people to see that those changes and the reshaping won't hinder the progress made so far.

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