

Social Networks' Influence on Voting Behavior and Involvement of Cypriot Voters



Harry Sophocleous, Sofia Anastasiadou, Androniki Kavoura ,
Victor-Alexandru Briciu , Andreas Masouras, and Arabela Briciu 

Abstract Digital media and social networks in particular are increasingly influencing voters and penetrating the range of political products aimed at them. For years we have seen established mainstream political forces progressively using social media in their election campaigns and their wider political marketing. At times, unpolitical individuals with influence and high impact on social media, may promote themselves as a political product even if the political agenda is missing. In the context of the 2024 European elections in Cyprus, this paper examines whether this increased influence of social networks on the electorate represents a democratization, a popularization, or simply a depoliticization of the political product. In this specific context, the paper provides a historical indication and a theoretical analysis of the way in which the impact of social networks on electorates has evolved. Quantitative research was used with a convenient sample of 247 voters to measure the impact of social media (and specifically YouTube) upon voting behavior, as well as the extent to which the particular impact is influenced by the level of voters' political involvement and the shift towards a more depoliticized voting behavior. Findings highlight that the use and therefore the impact of social media, it's a major differentiator of voting behavior. In a rather similar manner. Finally, the paper discusses management implications and suggests further research.

Keywords Voters' Behavior · Social Networks · Depoliticization of the Political Product

H. Sophocleous (✉) · A. Masouras
University of Neapolis, Paphos, Cyprus
e-mail: c.sophocleous.1@nup.ac.cy

S. Anastasiadou
University of Western Macedonia, Kozani, Greece

A. Kavoura
University of West Attica, Aigaleo, Greece

V.-A. Briciu · A. Briciu
Transilvania University of Brasov, Brasov, Romania

1 Introduction

Digital media, especially social networks, are progressively shaping electorates and penetrating the choice of political submissions targeted to voters. For years we have seen traditional and conventional political forces and recognized political personalities, progressively practice social media in their pre-election operations and their broader political marketing [1–3]. More lately, nevertheless, we have perceived personalities with influence on social media using that influence to promote themselves as a political product, even when the political agenda is absent. In the context of the 2024 European elections, this study examines the case of the Cypriot YouTube presenter Phidias Panayiotou, who, without a political agenda and under the pretext of reacting to the political system, used his influence on social networks to achieve the impossible and be elected as a member of the European Parliament for the next term, with the result of 19%.

Is Phidias Panayiotou really a phenomenon, as is often said, this Phidias with 19% and something? Or is he simply a new, fresh person who has absorbed the devaluation of the political system in a syncopated and monopolistic way? If there were 10 Phidias, would it be impossible for them to get 19% each? The question is by how much would they be outvoted, or would they each get 1.9%; similarly, if there were 100, would they each get 0.19%? Is it possible that the rapid and blatant spread of the non-party/alternative vote and the rise of the far right is, apart from the defeat of the party system, also a direct and profound reflection of the electorate?

In answering these questions, we may provide more insight into the impact of political promotion as an element of political marketing [4–6]. In addition to the constructive timing, and the phenomenon of Phidias Panayiotou, another reason for choosing the Cypriot case is that there is a promising ground for the particular case is projected to fulfill the existing research gap by congregating on the impact of promotion and social media and the role of the political involvement.

2 Literature Review

2.1 *Social Media and Political Agenda Setting*

Previous research argues that social media as a communication platform creates new challenges and opportunities for political agenda setting. Social media are not just adding complexity to agenda-setting dynamics. They may be reshaping its essence. While these changes have been acknowledged in the previous research, their implications are not fully captured. Social media has become an increasingly important tool for political communication [4, 5]. Candidates and politicians use social media to correspond with the press and the community [6] and to engage with (or even attack) their political opponents [7]. Politicians are less constrained in expressing their views than, for example, in parliamentary speeches or parliamentary questions [6, 8, 9].

Legislative and in general political activity is often regulated, for example, through rules on speaker selection [10], limited speaking time or top-down control by party leaders. In social media, though, candidates do not face these restrictions. Therefore, social media channels are an ideal tool for politicians to structure their own profile and establish their knowledge in specific areas of high interest to them [11]. Thus, we deliberate social media messages as an appropriate substitute for candidates' issue focus during the legislative cycle and during election campaigns [12]. Through social media, political actors can potentially reach audiences far beyond social media users. The fact that journalists rely on Twitter to decide which events and voices are newsworthy is well established in the literature. As previous research states: [13] "...Journalists use social media in a variety of ways in the course of covering political contests, from documenting public reaction to media events to evaluating the performance of candidates". In an experiment, [13] found that journalists rate the newsworthiness of tweets on a par with associated press headlines. Therefore, political actors can realistically hope to influence the traditional media agenda through social media. Social media are changing the dynamics of political agenda-setting for three reasons: first, they are a relevant channel for political communication; second, they expand the number and types of actors who can potentially shape the agenda; and third, through social media, political actors can potentially reach the wider public through traditional media.

2.2 The Concept of Depoliticization

If the twentieth century is considered as the era of liberal democracy's accomplishment, the twenty-first century is, for many, the era of its collapse. Narrow-mindedness and mistrust of the political classes is growing, as is the distance between citizens and institutions. New populist political actors are appearing, and they are changing the sense of how we get elected. The same social movements that used to be aggressive, identifying an opponent in the political elite, now generate conflict regardless of the structure of political possibilities. In this overall picture, we have decided to devote our thinking to the key concept of depoliticization. Among scholars of governance and public policy, depoliticization has become a topic of growing interest. As previous research [14] stated, there is a need to explore the relationship between depoliticization and its context, agency, structure and impact on the wider context of representative democracy. As stated in previous research [14], there is a need to explore the relationship between depoliticization and its context, agency, structure and impact on the wider context of representative democracy. Depoliticization describes "the set of means, processes and institutions through which politicians can endeavor to build an intimate relationship with the state", in the words of [14]. This research aims to shed light on this relationship.

3 Methodology

The study aims to investigate how and at what extent Cypriot voters are influenced by social media and how this is influenced by the level of political involvement. The specific research examines the phenomenon of the Cypriot YouTuber Phidias Panayiotou within the circumstances of the 2024 Cypriot European Elections, who succeeded to be voted as an M.E.P. with the remarkably huge percentage of 19%. In this particular context, this paper discusses this fact and tries to answer whether this increased influence of social networks on the electorate represents a **democratization**, a **popularization** of social networks, or simply a **depoliticization** of the political product and a lower level of political involvement, for at least a particular segment of the voters. Furthermore, the paper measures the impact of social media on the Cypriot electorate in general and compares it with the impact of social media on the segment of voters who voted for Phidias, as well as to associate the scale of political involvement with the particular impact [3]. To facilitate the interpretation of well-defined aims and objectives, and thus enable the proposed research to be carried out, the following specific hypotheses could be identified from the above indicative overview. Hypothesis 1. The candidate's promotion and in particular the use of social media, has an extensive impact upon voters. Hypothesis 2. The level of the political involvement and its association with the voting preferences of Cypriot voters. The research population of the survey was the Cypriot electorate, of a convenient sample of 247 Cypriot citizens between 19 and 25th of May 2024, just before the European Elections [15] ensuring that only voters were accessed and that the influence of social media could be monitored.

4 Results and Discussion

From the element of Promotion, sub-element of the broader political marketing scale, the meetings and the public appearance of the candidate are likely to have the higher impact on voters with a mean value of 3.03, followed by the central slogan of the campaign and the use of social media with mean values of 2.47 and 2.24, respectively (Fig. 1).

In addition, the posters and banners of the candidate, along with the candidate's music, reported mean values of 1.93 and 1.92, respectively. This may suggest that social media reflect a basic impact upon the general voting segment. However, it may be worth noting that among voters who claim to vote for Phidias Panayiotou, the use of social media reported a significantly higher mean value of 3.38, while the remaining elements of political marketing promotion reported slightly lower mean values than the general sample of Cypriot Voters. Social media's role [16] is evident (Fig. 2).

The wider construct of political involvement reported a value of 3.18. From the specific sub-elements of political involvement, systematic participation with 3.84

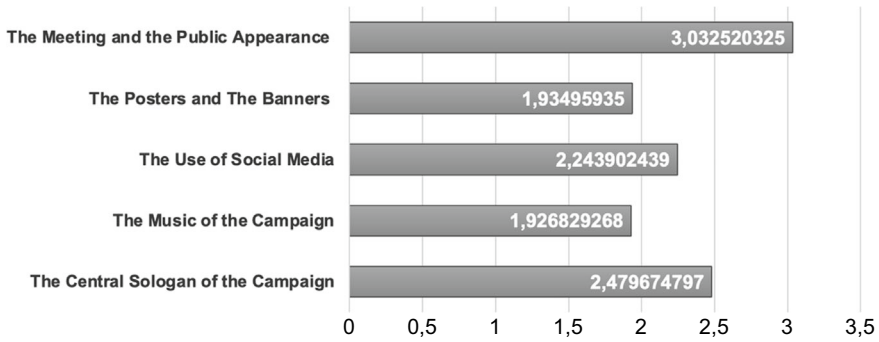


Fig. 1 Political marketing promotion

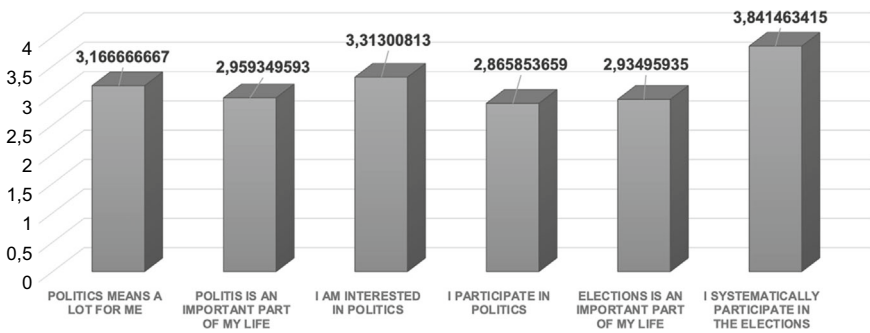


Fig. 2 Voters Involvement

and general interest in politics with 3.31 reported the highest mean values, while the rest of the sub-elements reported around the same level as the main value of the wider element of political involvement (Fig. 3).

It might be noteworthy to point out that the political involvement of the voters that claimed to have voted for Mr. Panayiotou reported as the notably lower mean value of 2.55. The general sample's broader element of subjective knowledge reported a mean of 2.97. With this level of subjective knowledge about politics, the highest mean value of the remaining sub-elements of the specific scale was reported. At the same time, the specific sacrament of waters that claims to vote for Phidias Panayiotou reported a value of 2.9 for the wider element of subject acknowledgment (Fig. 4).

The third construct examined by the survey was political opinion leadership. This particular construct included five sub-items that represented equivalent statements and presented a range of mean scores between 2.67 and 3.978, and an average mean score of 2.97: I spend a lot of time talking about politics, I am considered a good source of information, People come to me for information about politics, I sometimes influence friends, and Friends ask me about politics. At the same time, voters who

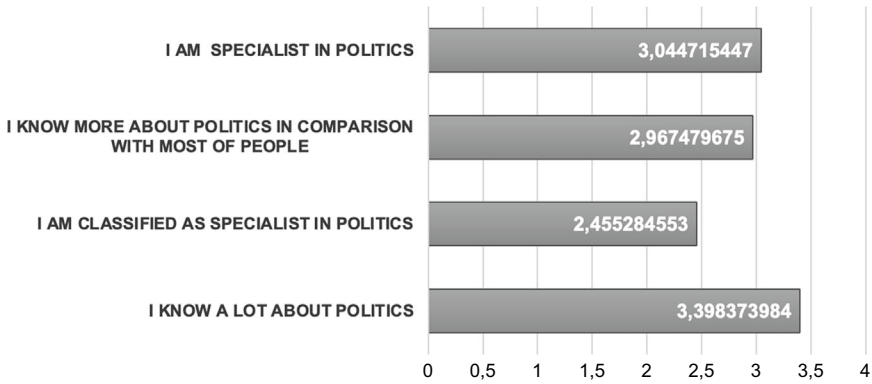


Fig. 3 Subjective knowledge

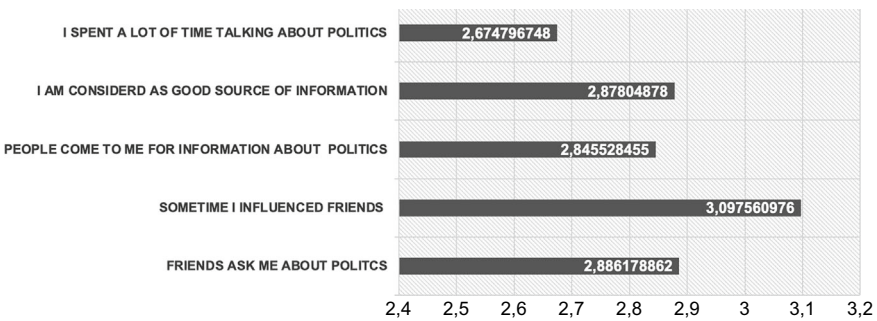


Fig. 4 Political Opinion Leadership

said they voted for Phidias Panayiotou showed an even lower level of political opinion leadership with an average mean score of 2.6 (Fig. 5).

5 Research Implications and Conclusions

The key research implication, and therefore the principal conclusion of the particular research, is the fact that the particular segment of voters who claimed to have voted for Phidias Panayiotou [17], presented a slightly different and rather lower level of political involvement with lower main values on one of the three constructs of the particular scale. This fact indicates that the main reason for the particular diversification of voting behavior along the particular segment of voters is their lower level of political involvement. Another implication of the particular research is the different ways in which the particular segment of voters perceives the political promotion of candidates. More specifically, the particular segment presents a significantly higher

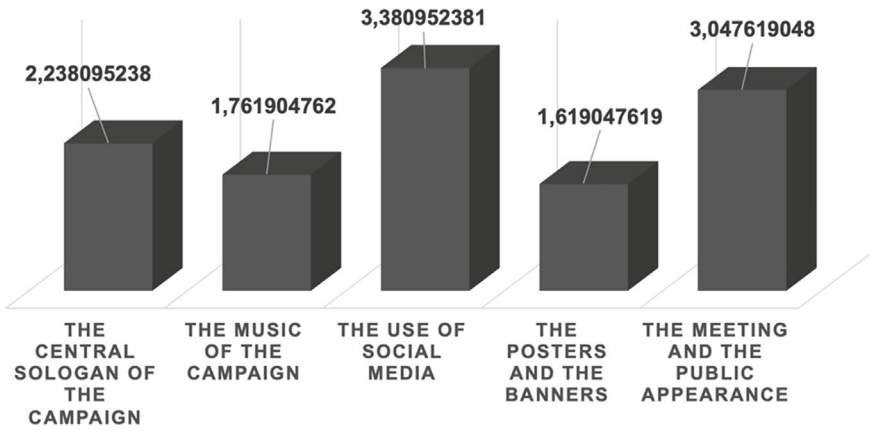


Fig. 5 Promotion as perceived by Phidias' voters

level of use of social media, while the particular segment presents a lower level of influence in the 45 swap elements of the particular construct. This particular fact may suggest that the use and therefore the impact of social media, it's a major differentiator of voting behavior. Results of similar research [18] show both that the EU needs to be seen as a composite, and that different grounds, including media and in particular social media, tend to perceive the EU differently and therefore shape different voting patterns [18]. Apart from the apolitical tendency, another trend that is rocking Europe is the tendency towards the far right. This fact, in particular, is reflected by the results of Austrian Elections. This is part of the broader context of European questioning of the traditional frameworks that have been in place until now but are changing because of diverging and inclusive issues that have been recently raised. Additionally, the occurrence of similar phenomena in different country cases, may suggest that the European Union Institution is not believed to be so significant. Moreover, the literature stress that the particular phenomena of different voting patterns from the users of social media is not only a European matter but exists and in other cases such as in Pakistan [19, 20], India [21] and Turkey [22]. Last but not least, issues of diversity and inclusion emerge in the interdependent world we live [23].

Even though the reported research outcomes respond to the accomplishment of formulated aims and objectives, it can be argued that a number of research limitations have emerged, even though the reported research findings are consistent with the accomplishment of the specified objectives and mostly verify the basic hypotheses of the project. It is beyond the scope of this study to further apply the findings on "voter participation", "information seeking" and "stability", and the data collected may not be as representative and may not reflect the actual impact of social media on the electoral process.

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