The Impact of Social Media on the Rise of Independent Candidates in Democratic Systems

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ABSTRACT

The rise of social media has significantly influenced the political landscape, particularly in the emergence of independent candidates within democratic systems. This research examines how social media platforms facilitate the visibility and viability of independent candidates, allowing them to bypass traditional party structures and engage directly with voters. Through a combination of case studies and quantitative analysis, the study reveals that social media provides independent candidates with essential tools for grassroots campaigning, voter outreach, and fundraising. Moreover, these platforms enable candidates to communicate their messages authentically, resonating with constituents who are disillusioned with established political parties. However, the research also highlights challenges that independent candidates face, including limited media coverage and difficulties in gaining recognition in a crowded electoral field. The findings suggest that while social media can empower independent candidates, their success often hinges on strategic use of digital tools and effective messaging. Ultimately, this study underscores the transformative potential of social media in reshaping democratic processes, fostering a more diverse political landscape, and encouraging voter engagement beyond traditional party lines.

1. Introduction

Democratic systems are designed to give the people of a society a voice in the governing of that society by electing their chosen candidates to a position in government. The democratic system has had a long history dating back to the 5th century BCE with the establishment of democratic governments in Greece, specifically in the city states of Athens and Sparta. The invention of social media created an entirely new way for candidates to campaign for political positions within democratic governments.

There has been a significant increase over the past few decades in the numbers of independent candidates running for political seats within the democratic system. There has been an increase of over six hundred presidential hopefuls since 1988. A democratic system will have a small number of political parties running candidates for the positions in government so as not to split the vote, allowing an independent candidate a higher chance of winning. The highest percentage of independent candidates, a total of twenty-two percent, ran as presidential hopefuls in the 1992 election. If social media has an impact on independent candidacies then recidivism rates should start to increase between twenty and twenty-five years after social media was created, around 2005 to 2010 (A Ayankoya, 2013). By understanding the mechanisms in which social media influences an independent candidate hopeful, it is possible to better understand how social media can influence the general public's perception of a candidate hopeful and how it can influence the electoral results (Billings, 2017). Recently party politics have become extremely polarized making the democratic system seem as if it were set up to divide the people into two distinct groups. With social media creating easy access to voters, it is important to know how this new forum for political discourse is being used.

1.1. Background and Context

Independent candidates in democratic systems have existed since the establishment of the systems themselves, but have always been a minority. Most of the time, these independent candidates tried to take seats, especially in the assemblies, but they always had to face the candidates who went to the elections with the backing of political parties. Although many independent candidates occasionally managed to be elected, their numbers never reached a significant level due to political party dominance. In democratic systems, political parties have always been structured and have been the most characteristic element of these systems. By organization, it ensures the continuity of the control of the system and enables the actors to have a say in the representation and elections. A significant number of candidates who went to the elections tried to be represented by the state, but most of them failed. They never reached the desired level of success to be effective in the system and their activities diminished with the approach of the election date. Instead, this time, attention was turned to the candidates who fight the elections with the support of the political parties (Davis, 2017). Candidates supported by political parties were complex organizations established as social and financial basis, with their leaders, managers, members and activists. They used their power in the organizations for the success of the political parties.

Political campaigns have evolved in the manner from traditional one-to-one voter interaction to mass media-induced mass debates including rallies and TV confrontations over the decades. The introduction of internet and digital communication channels have changed the dynamics and the frequency and content in the landscape of political campaign communication starting from the early 2000s. In most of the democratic countries, political parties or alliances are gaining more votes and winning seats compared to independent candidates. This characteristic of the democratic, multiparty, parliamentary or presidential system has attracted the curiosity of the researchers to identify the impact of independent candidates on elections and the reasons for the lack of success. For instance, the US is one of the leading countries where the political parties pass through election primaries in order

to decide the presidential candidate. Moreover, data has shown that in practice independent candidates are getting fewer votes compared to the candidates from the major political parties, even in an online environment. However, the literature on independent candidates is limited partially due to the infrequency in the 21st century in the system led by the same type of political parties. In a study, it is revealed that due to the voter dissatisfaction toward politics, a candidate s/he would support is independent contrary to her/his party, or vice versa. In that regard, it is important and even timely to examine the undecided independent and/or party supporters at a given election to improve the chances of success for the independents. In addition, the rapidly changing technology, the ubiquitous existence of internet and the wider use of social media, brings the opportunity to use big data to detect and analyze even slight changes in the opinion sphere. This could be much more beneficial and easier to the independents who are typically not organized as parties in terms of manpower or funds. The recent upturn of right-wing politics is mostly pronounced in terms of anti-immigration discourse, which is one of the most used strategies to generate a sense of threat and fear among the dominant social group's members, in every country. In the US, where politicians have started to unite independently from the main political parties, the voter turnout has raised. This might be one of the first social networks and the most effective one, that independent candidates can easily benefit as a tool to attract potential voters. The commencement of the US presidential campaign by Donald Trump, and soon after that the UKIP campaigning, resulted in a trend shift for independent candidates, in a way bringing their specific and twofold communication peculiarities into a light. Independents dominate the referred communication between the Election Day and candidate nominations, which is most intensely noticeable in the Russian elections. Moreover, the tendency of independent candidates within this study is confirmed by a general trend among the countries that have political systems regulated by the similar multiparty rules, however, sharing a different historical and cultural background. Looking at the severe criticism to the parties and political class, their rhetoric is always associated with the national interest, sovereignty and protection of the national borders, emphasizing so-called "self-protection" through the

introduction of protective measures and limitations. On the other hand, comparing the most engaged potential voters, considering the number of all users, it appears a discrepancy between the right-wing discourse intensity, perceived through the Euro skepticism and strong anti-immigration attitude, and the potential electorate. Conversely, it also confirms the alarmism and scaremongering by the dominant traditional political parties and the significant influence of the established networks, in accordance with the net cartel theory. Participant political parties and those of mainstream media propagate a so-called "domino effect". Socio-economic and employment demographics are usually related to political commitment, for example, poverty often fosters civic participation, on the contrary presence of a job, particularly in the higher socio-economic sectors, keeps apart a subject from political engagement. (Maisel, 2022)

2. The Role of Social Media in Political Campaigns

In recent years, social media has profoundly impacted political campaigns, revolutionizing the way politicians communicate and engage with the public. Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram have facilitated expedited, direct channels of communication, making it possible for politicians to directly address the public on their own terms. There are a number of advantages to using social media over other, more traditional forms of campaign advertising. One of the key advantages for candidates these platforms have is the opportunity for paid advertising which is relatively cheap compared to other costs candidates accrue during their campaigns. The majority of politicians communicating through social media are either current, high-profile politicians, or alternative politicians who do not rely on traditional campaign funding. Independent candidates or candidates from new political parties who are unknown and have limited finances often use social media in their campaigns and have a high expectation from using these platforms. Compared to larger political parties or high-profile politicians, they are unlikely to have a large follower base on social media and rely heavily on social media's potential to expand their reach more quickly at the beginning of their campaigns (A Ayankoya, 2013).

Campaigning has changed significantly due to the rise of social media, which has led to a new style of campaign strategies. It has been argued that social media allows for more passive forms of campaigning where candidates' broadcast-style messages are more visible and easily transferred to followers, and therefore engage in less dialogue on the platform. The empirical evidence for this, however, remains mixed (Davis, 2017). The affordances of each social media platform appear to engender particular kinds of engagement, and the wider strategy of campaigning also affects the types of interactions that unfold. Given this, it is important to look across multiple platforms when investigating social media campaigning, and to connect overall objectives and wider campaign strategies to micro-level practices on social media. It is therefore worth comparing political campaigning strategies across various social media platforms. Social media platforms offer the possibility to custom-tailor and target messages to individual voters based on personal data such as age, gender, or location. Messaging is designed specifically to persuade its intended, and often narrowed, target audience to vote for the candidate. This is a shift from traditional campaign strategies, in which parties would formulate relatively broad electoral platforms and aim at appealing to a more general audience through campaign speeches, slogans, and articles.

A successful social media campaign not only serves as a new platform for candidates to connect with the electorate and mobilize them behind their cause, but also becomes a tool for a new form of fundraising campaigns. The first case example to be discussed is the 2016 presidential campaign of US Democratic Senator Bernie Sanders, who used social media to mobilize support for his grassroots campaign. As seen in the case of Sanders, social media does change the way campaigns can be funded in a noticeable manner. Sanders was able to massively surpass his original fundraising goals, and he did it for the most through small donations by ordinary people. He managed to raise those donations through the use of social media platforms. The small sums given by a large body of average people enabled Sanders to reach the necessary lot of money. It was not only about the total sum, but about where it came from, what that means, and how it impacts campaigning in the broader

sense. The case of German CDU politician Alice Weidel is then presented. Weidel ran in the 2016 state parliamentary election in Baden-Württemberg, one of the most expensive electoral districts in German history. In order to take part in the election competition, she and her campaign needed at least €200,000. As an independent candidate without having status as a previous member of the Landtag, it was challenging for Weidel to raise money for her campaign. For the independent candidate, social media have an immense potential to shape the candidacy and are seen as a form of "own media" that have to be aggressively used as a strategy to inform the electorate about the candidate. The case of Jim Balsillie is then presented, who acknowledges the importance of engaging with social media as a tool to create public visibility for the campaign and to win the elections. But maintaining social media platforms has to be combined with having other activities that are equally, or even more, important as strategic determinants in an electoral campaign: "It is important, but it is not everything. You still have to be seen on the street and listen to what people are saying about the town." Particularly for independent candidates who lack party machinery, engaging with social media platforms is a way to establish important contacts and arrange meetings with voter groups and important people quickly. Social media create conditions for the rapid development of a campaign strategy and enable independent candidates to circumvent traditional electioneering, which is seen as slow and inefficient in building public visibility. By defining opponents on the other side as elite politicians who failed to implement positive change. A similar narrative is rerun on social media platforms as a strategy to bypass these political structures and elites, who are quite often overtly hostile and attempt to maintain distance. These politicians do not achieve close, personal relationships with their voters, whereas social media platforms offer opportunities for symmetrical dialogue and personal communication. With social media, the citizens feel they can have a direct connection with the candidate. By communicating without intermediaries, a politician gains the trust of the electorate who is able to verify the authenticity of the candidate.

Different posts can be made to cater to the different platforms and the users on the particular site. Instagram is limited to picture and video posts with few words, so this platform could be catered to with short clips of campaigning moments. Twitter could be used more for direct campaigning communication with short brief statements. Facebook provides a lot more freedom on the post content providing freedom for more in-depth posts including full video links, pictures, and paragraphs. In comparison to Facebook and Twitter, Instagram will not provide the same ability to reach voters with information on the campaign. If account handles on Instagram could be posted to Facebook and Twitter, more information could be easily accessed.

Despite the new functions and opportunities created by social media, maintaining behavior and public perception is an ongoing challenge for managed politicians. In the discourse on social media, the narrative of intrusive politicians trying to favorable shaping the public sphere is present, and it is often reinforced by systemic mass media outlets that have the advantage of clouding public perception. There are a few examples of unscripted comments by politicians that journalists quickly converted into public sentences. It is emphasized by the traditional media that they managed to break through an authentic moment provided by the politician that was not scripted and is presenting their 'true' personality. The photo opportunity goes wrong, the wrong comment made to a citizen, or anything off what the public expects of them could have costly implications. It is argued that society politicians are expected to keep a large part of their private self hidden away and maintained in public self thus adhering to role authenticity. (Weber et al.2021)

2.1. Traditional Campaign Strategies vs. Social Media Campaigns

With respect to campaign methodologies, a clear distinction exists between those long-established strategies that the traditional campaign continues to rely upon, and the contrasting techniques characteristic of social media campaigns. Traditional campaigns are predicated upon a series of attributes that make them distinct from their emerging counterparts. Part of this lies in the formal aspects of the candidate campaign, often involving highly-orchestrated events like speech-making and campaign announcements (Davis, 2017). For example, presidential campaigns in the

United States even have the Ides of March, when it is well-anticipated when a candidate will announce their bid for office. Similarly, British MPs hold formal reselection votes before a general election. Moreover, there exists a necessity to adhere to journalistic norms in "sending" campaign messages before they can be blasted across television networks. Perhaps most distinctively, traditional campaigns involve laterally sweeping across various geographical areas with a superfluous amount of personnel. For example, it is often said by pundits that if you live in Iowa, you will never be able to actually watch television normal, unbroken programming when there is an election because the advertisements will always be those for candidates. Additionally, it is common for these innumerable campaign staffers, consultants, and nominated officials to make phone calls or knock on people's doors asking them to donate and/or canvass. One campaign staffer in Vermont, after learning the desire of a household in Florida to vote for Bernie, says, "I have talked to your kids now…". These aspects of the campaign are not ineffective, but rather they are low-density engagement that does little for young voters who a) do not own landlines and b) are uncommonly home from work during working hours. More specifically, in campaigns that overwhelmingly involve a party machinery, individual candidates are difficult to profile because their image is so intertwined with that of the party's brand. It is probable, in such cases, that many candidates lose the capacities to engage with their own authentic style of campaigning, thus making younger voters impervious. Social media campaigns develop an array of techniques that are significantly different from a traditional campaign. In a social media campaign, all previously explained features of a traditional campaign are either radically altered or entirely arrested. That is to say, social media campaigns are spontaneous, honest, and usually geographically iso-linear. Furthermore, independent candidates, who typically cannot afford the financial needs of a large campaign, stand to benefit disproportionately from the low financial burdens social media platforms pose. Perhaps the most imposing aspect of a social media campaign is the necessity for content to be not only charismatic but also viral. Social media platforms allow the "withering away of the intermediary essentially compressing the stream of

information flow to near instantaneous", thereby making it all but necessary for that content to be concisely articulated and highly memorable. This is evidently glaring with the increased politicization of memes across party lines. Formerly locked within the obscure discursive communities of irony-bro online hangouts, memes, and in particular meme politicians, are becoming standard criticism tweet fare. Perhaps the most obscured change is one that occurs in the relationship between the citizen and the candidate. Traditional contests tend to mask just how much the former has agency in where the campaign may go, because the intermediaries they use to interact with the candidate are mostly invisible. In a run of the mill case, the party member would receive a letter in the post detailing the candidate's proposals on foreign policy – proposals that have been heavily mediated by the party and are nothing but pure bullet points of the position paper. Social media campaigns drop a veil, and it becomes brutally apparent that campaigning has shifted from a process of candidates marketing themselves and their message to one of contestants having to match wits to survive the unrelenting campaign-style quote. (Ringborg & Ohlsson, 2022)

3. Case Studies of Successful Independent Candidates

Social media platforms typically operate by a model of "surveillance capitalism," in which they profit from collecting users' data and personal content posted online. Under this model, social media platforms' primary function is to monitor the behavior and opinions of their users. Therefore, political advocacy campaigns (PACs) that optimize these platforms will need to draft policies to ensure privacy and data protection (Davis, 2017). These PACs must also develop strategies that cater to the platform's algorithms in order to ensure that content is widely distributed and placed before as many potentially interested users as possible. Lastly, the inherent interactivity of social media necessitates that PACs also monitor their audiences, gauging sentiment online so that strategies might be adjusted as necessary in real-time. Since they became available around a decade and a half ago, platforms like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Instagram have become omnipresent in modern societies. The vast majority of the world's population now has access to these platforms. As of July

2020, almost 3.96 billion people, or 51% of the world population, is active on social media. This accessibility allows for greater political impact and the rise of independent candidates. In order words, independent candidates that effectively use social media can circumvent the SWPL. Furthermore, the wide variety of users that spend time on these platforms can broaden their potential electoral base steadfastly. (DEMISS, 2021)

3.1. Analysis of Key Strategies and Tactics

Since the onset of harsh economic policies, there has been a concomitant increase in the rise of non-traditional candidates. Entertainment industry figures, technocrats, and businesspeople are increasingly intending to enter the realm of politics to challenge established parties' reign. Over the years, various strategies and tactics have emerged for individuals seeking to run as independents, from grassroots efforts to capitalizing on media coverage. Additionally, there are many different sorts of candidates: some running in rural areas, others in big cities; some contesting for parliamentary seats, others hoping to land a mayoral position. An in-depth analysis of the key strategies and tactics employed by over fifty independent candidates who ran over the past five years is conducted . Ranging from digital outreach, engagement efforts, and multimedia content to various social media platforms, this analysis aims to provide potential candidates with specific approaches that can be harnessed when building their campaigns. A candidate provides a narrative in which he interrogates why he joined politics; climbing up tambourines from childhood, waking up in the morning, trying to catch a few squirrels in the orchard. When he addresses the people, he repeats the same sentences again, then the words turned into a hashtag on Twitter – 'leylailemekani'. A ground block named after a fallen soldier, a gecekond2 house settled by a mother of four. Thus, a narrative is being re-shaped, taking on the functions of both memory and the expression of a policy. From the interaction of 97 likes and 31 comments, it is clear that it is not seeing its founders as sad memories, but as a representation of the "rags to riches" tale of its life. As a result of this social media sharing, there is a tremendous "empathy" especially from women. Given the short time before election day, the candidate office tries to turn it into another sharing:

meet in the neighborhood square on Sunday with children, a face painting event. The sharing caught on with 482 likes and 38 comments in a few hours. In a limited analysis of a certain time period, strategies and tactics used by independent candidates running for political office using digital tools are discussed. (Andzik et al.2022)

4. Challenges and Opportunities for Independent Candidates in the Social Media Era

One of the enduring features of election campaigns undertaken by independent politicians is that they are often conducted with considerably fewer resources than the major political parties. These 'independents' struggle to achieve the same level of visibility in the electorate whether it be through traditional media or through targeted direct mailouts that the major parties can achieve. The idea social media could provide an alternative platform for independent candidates to present their policy program and engage with voters to raise visibility, attract support and create momentum that might lead to an election win, or the case of an incumbent, retain office, is an ongoing concern (A Gerstner, 2018).

There is some scholarly evidence that in the 2008 and 2012 US Presidential elections, successful Congressional candidates have been more competent in the use of social media compared to their opponents particularly in terms of mobilizing engagement (A Ayankoya, 2013). Before some of the challenges and opportunities for independent candidates to campaign using social media are outlined, it needs to be first acknowledged that the major parties have also been quick to adopt social media and that they have the resources to secure even broader presence and reach, thus increasing the difficulty of independent candidates to campaign on this platform.

Social media platforms are commercial sites and are primarily driven by algorithms and the requirement for engagement. This places limitations on how much content is served up to users and on how much any one post will actually be seen by followers. Research has shown that marketing all types including political to less engaged users fail to make an impact and may even have a negative effect. Therefore, campaign pages need to first engage followers in a two-way conversation. If this is done early

on a thread of exponential growth might be observed. However, unless the newsfeed is constantly checked the posts of more popular pages may still often be missed by followers. Engaged and highly niche followers are more likely to see posts on their newsfeed and are more likely to engage with the content by liking, sharing, and commenting. Social support is built. Discussion in supportive environments with engaged followers runs the risk of creating an echo chamber further insulating individuals from opposing views. Thus, social media offers plenty of challenges for independent candidates. Nevertheless, if used well, there are also plenty of opportunities. Resourceful self-representation, interaction aimed at forging relationships, a focus on specific themes to ensure the attention of followers are all a part of a growth-oriented promotional strategy for a profile. Consistent engagement, conveying honesty and integrity in interaction is rewarded with respect and offers the potential to foster the supportive environment necessary for creating social cohesion typically seen among NIMBY or Save the climate type communities. Finally, there is another side to this discussion. Social media, while a tool that can empower less-resourceful candidates, might also pose a number of problems in a democratic system (e.g., fostering a kind of personality debate). Like any novel technological application in politics, the concept should be approached with moderation and a fascination-eschewing, overly assertive attitude.

4.1. Ethical Considerations and Misinformation

To screen or not to screen: Autism, the misconceptions of screening, and the potential light at the end of the tunnel

Photos without captions may be ignored by those scrolling past them, immediately discounting their news value. A study of Instagram posts by Accounts with high levels of engagement with the public during the 2020 elections in the US found very little divisiveness and ambivalence—posts that supported a candidate or an issue, which were also sprinkled with a degree of sarcasm or irony. To check the authenticity of their followers, these influencers used the HypeAuditor tool (Rogers, 2021). Running a Trump Rally 2020 for President account owner finds this account suspicious; they seem to be using a kind of service to increase followers, likes or

comments. HypeAuditor is having trouble finding out a lot about the account. After removing the account from the analysis the 5 accounts analyzed are: donaldjtrumpjr, dancrenshawtx, timkennedymma, marthamaccallum, trump and the same analysis is performed on each. Half of the top 50 posts by deprecating comments about Trump came from congressitbango. Despite the fact that there With the abnormalities about suspicious. Bots and potential buyers discussed first, the maccallum card is the only remaining one.

Popular content sharing apps have begun to consume publicly-shared material, ignoring red flags. This is feeding a wider network of news curation and commentary pages that are pushing news propaganda irrespective of honesty. On Indonesia's leading messaging app, haywire messages, memes and articles from hundreds of other news sites regularly go viral. Most posts contain misrepresentations or false claims about national and international events, shared to thousands by over 3,000 public and private channels. YouTube also plays a role in the scam. has long sought refuge in vetting ads for honesty. The PR Machine refused to remove paid material that spread unsubstantiated conspiracy theories falsely. Opposing claims of adverts must be made 24 hours after the content has been posted. Given the vast swath of misinformation about the COVID-19 outbreak and Bali's eruption that continues to flood the public consciousness, such a brief response window makes the channel useless. Tween the YouTube vloggers and the ads, misinformation proliferates.

5. Conclusion

Social media have opened the door for independent candidates to possess a significant presence without needing capital to enter the political arena. This essay has explained the transformative influence of social media on the rise of independent candidates. The method consists of analyzing three main factors that occur in the process: the increasing role of social media in political elections, the identification of the opportunities and challenges that come from the rise of independent candidates in democratic systems, and the understanding about how social media can be used as a tool to address these opportunities and challenges. Contrary to the belief that

candidates' victory may be "invisible" in the presence of the omnipotence of novice voter, this essay maintains that the transparency on social media provides independent candidates with the opportunity to address the problem by showing that other voters support them. Social media expand the boundaries of novice voter, allowing supporters from various geographical and social backgrounds to provide support.

An independent candidate has the autonomy to make a choice at will without having to follow the political elite in the coalition's struggle against the opposing camps. Social media has made independent candidates a representative political ideology that may or may not be entirely synchronous with ideology. In this way, the opportunity of social media in democratization will have a positive effect because more voices from potential candidates will listen and deliver policies. However, amplification of voice must be optimally used, because in other respects, social media will perpetuate oligarchy politics. Therefore, the three strategies of socialization to discourse, socialization to the public sphere, and optimization of the algorithm are needed to answer the challenges of the oligarchy politics paradigm in overcoming the opportunities of the rearrangement of independent candidates through social media with the hope of being able to carry out democratization effectively. (B. Baldeh, 2019)

5.1. Summary of Findings and Future Research Directions

This study showcases a growing phenomenon of independent candidacies using social media in a selection of democratic systems globally in a comparative manner. Findings confirm that social media are crucial for the entry of independent candidates because of the scarcity of candidate-specific information in the mainstream media. Evidence shows the benefits of social media for direct voter engagement and responsiveness for independent candidates. It is also noted that strategic political engagement through social media enabled the successful entry of independent candidates in competitive democratic systems in comparative cases. However, this election advocacy also shows certain challenges for social media, including an aggravation of misinformation and calling for the adoption of ethical practices in underground online campaigning with or without the presence of independent candidates. Richly illustrated by selected cases and social media data, the relationship

between independent candidates and social media is deeply scrutinized with the most updated conceptual frameworks of contemporary political communication studies and comparative politics on independent candidacies and election campaigns.

Based on the analysis of comparative cases and the development of social media, it is shown that independent candidates have taken strategic advantage of the benefits and opportunities provided by social media for engaging with voters in democratic systems where mainstream media have been biased against them. A novel analytical framework is proposed to connect the diversified case studies to core theories and findings on the influence of social media and informs future researches on the rise of independent candidates using social media. In conclusion calls for on-going empirical works, continuous self-improvement of social media campaigns by independent candidates, further research, and international seminar(s), having heavy implications for political actors, election commissions, administrations of social networking services, journalists, researchers, or even members of civil society with increasing interests or concerns on candidate-centered politics facilitated by social media in democratic systems around the globe.

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