



## SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE ELECTORAL COMMUNICATION: FACTORS DEFINING POLITICIANS' USE OF INTERACTIVE MEDIA

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The Internet and interactive social media are not only playing an increasingly important role in people's daily life, but are also becoming a widely used political communication channel which sees a constant growth in the volume of communication content generated by politicians. Due to their features such as easy and free access, social media are available to all politicians, but so far in Lithuania no studies have been done to analyze the extent to which the participants of political process use social media channels for political communication purposes. This paper presents the results of the logistic regression model, which allows forecasting the use of social media by politicians during election campaigns based on different demographic and social-political characteristics of candidates, such as municipality size, gender, age, education, income, political affiliation and institutional position.

**Key Words:** social media, electoral campaigns, use of interactive media, political communication.

During election campaigns, politicians and parties seek to dominate in the general informational environment by any means in order to increase their popularity and the opportunities to win in the election. The number of people using the Internet and interactive media is increasing every year, therefore, nowadays politicians include the Internet and social media in the list of communication channels in order to ensure widest possible dissemination of their messages. With each election campaign, interactive communication media play an increasingly important role in the overall communication process, sometimes even becoming the central field for political fight.

As the number of the Internet users is constantly growing all over the world, with more and more time being spent in a virtual environment, computer literacy and openness to technologies are increasing. Over the past five years, the proportion of people using the Internet in Lithuania has grown from 42% at the beginning of 2006 to 63.6% as of the beginning of 2011<sup>1</sup>, which is nearly the European Union average – as of the beginning of 2011, on average 67.3% of all Community population were Internet users<sup>2</sup>. The growth in the scope of use of the Internet is accompanied by the steady increase in the amount of politics-related information and communication on the web. Studies show that the Internet is becoming the main source of political information for increasing numbers of people<sup>3</sup>.

The majority of the Internet users are active daily users of social media as well. Both globally and in Lithuania, the top three websites that attract the largest numbers of visitors include two social media websites: according to the unique visitor flows, *Google* search engine is followed by *Facebook*, a social networking website, and *Youtube*, a video content sharing portal<sup>4</sup>. In Lithuania, some interactive means of communication have virtually exploded in recent years. For example, the number of registered users of *Facebook* – the world's most popular social networking site – from Lithuania increased from just 50,000 at the beginning of 2009 to over 950,000 in September 2011 (over 30% of total population of the country)<sup>5</sup>.

Furthermore, people are buying more and more latest technology devices such as laptop and tablet personal computers, smart phones, e-readers etc. enabling continuous access to the Internet. These devices often have an integrated social media access so more and more people can use social media at any time and at any place.

In this way, due to the formation and constant increase of the numbers of active social media users, these groups have become an attractive message audience for politicians, in particular during election campaigns. As well as performing the function of a resource of political information, the Internet and social media are changing substantially the ways and forms in which politicians communicate with the electorate. Due to different social media, politicians have wide opportunities for easily accessing large audiences and for communicating with electors directly, without the mass media acting as an intermediary. In addition, new opportunities arise for including potential electors into the electoral communication processes, with social media helping to combine the mass outreach and the personal impact opportunities.

Therefore, there is no doubt that the increasing scope of political and electoral communication in social media stimulates the need for more in-depth studies of these processes that are becoming more active and significant every year.

### Political Communication in Social Media

Internet and interactive social media broadened the usual communication channels, provided much wider possibilities for the politicians to reach society and decreased the role of media as intermediate in the processes of political communication. Unlike traditional media where journalists pick out the pieces of information for publishing, Internet provides politicians with the possibility to reach their electors directly<sup>6</sup>. Furthermore, means of social media drastically reduced expenditure for the action of political communication because now Internet helps to spread information with minimum costs and this information reaches very high number of individuals<sup>7</sup>.

Most importantly, Internet provides possibilities for the two-way communication between the politicians and members of the society when politicians can have direct reversible connection and citizens can freely create and transmit any type of messages to the politicians. World Wide Web reduced time and space barriers; therefore, the electors can not only observe political discussions but can actively take part in political events.

In today's world the audience of electors becomes more and more fragmentary and different parts of it demand personal communicative messages that satisfy their interests and new forms of information presentation that are specialized for every individual user. Different communities of social media and groups in those communities represent different and specific parts of electorate. Social media allows the politicians to segment personalize messages at the maximum; therefore, they can customize and transmit their messages directly to the target audience through reasonable forms and channels. This creates a sense of personal communication with the electors.

Through social media politicians can reach such audiences that would never search for any information about politicians or politics. One of these audiences that get more difficult to reach is young people. The means of social media are visited by thousands of

<sup>1</sup> Department of Statistics to the Government of the Republic of Lithuania, 'Development of Information and Knowledge Society', Viewed 30 June 2011, <<http://www.stat.gov.lt/lt/pages/view/>>.

<sup>2</sup> Internet World Stats, 'Internet Usage in the European Union - EU27', Viewed 30 June 2011, <<http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats9.htm>>.

<sup>3</sup> Smith, A., Rainie, L., 'The Internet and the 2008 Election', *Pew Internet & American Life Project*, 2008, <<http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2008/The-Internet-and-the-2008-Election.asp>>, 01 04 2010.

<sup>4</sup> Alexa Internet, Inc., 'The Top 500 Sites in Lithuania, 2011', Viewed 17 January 2011, <<http://www.alexa.com/topsites/countries/LT>>.

<sup>5</sup> Socialbakers, 'Facebook Statistics by Country – Lithuania', Viewed 29 September 2011, <<http://www.socialbakers.com/facebook-statistics/lithuania>>.

<sup>6</sup> Kim Y.M., Geidner N., 'Politics as Friendship: The Impact of Online Social Networks on Young Voters' Political Behavior', Paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Communication Association, TBA, Montreal, Quebec, Canada, May 22, 2008.

<sup>7</sup> Kruger B.S., 'A Comparison of Conventional and Internet Political Mobilization', *American Politics Research*, Volume 34, Number 6, <<http://apr.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/34/6/759>>, 27 04 2009.



young and open to innovations people every day. Virtual communication for such people is extremely important; therefore, social media enables the politicians to reach youth through the most acceptable communication channel.

One of the main advantages of the Internet and social media to the politicians is the possibility of personal communication with the electors. The communication style in social media is significantly different from the traditional communication through the means of mass communication. Communication in electronic space is informal and immediate, usually spontaneous, sometimes anonymous. In this space distinctive language is used: stiffness and formal sentence structures, complicated words and terms are avoided. Instead, short phrases, corrections, abbreviations, preteritions, bywords, and unofficial vocabulary are used.

Moreover, the means of social media have an information multiplication feature which helps the politicians in the spread of political information. Active Internet users like quoting interesting or controversial information; therefore, if politicians manage to engage the users, the snowball effect starts when the users of social media voluntarily start sharing the links to the content they like.

The main disadvantage of the use of social media in political communication is that the older electors, who usually are the most active part of the electorate, use the Internet distantly, do not take part in the discussions in social media, and do not look through the content published in social media. Due to this reason, the politicians cannot totally reject the usual communication through the means of traditional media or direct meetings but interactive means have now become the place where politicians have to be otherwise they lose the possibility to communicate with the active and still increasing audience of social media.

### The Forecast of Use of Social Media Channels by Politicians During Election Campaign

When creating the logistic regression model, which seeks to determine the main characteristics of politicians that allow forecasting of the use of social media for electoral purposes by the candidates, the main demographic and social-political characteristics of the candidates were used: gender, age, income, political affiliation, state of power, and size of municipality. The characteristic of education of candidates was not used in the logistic regression model, as the data here is incomplete (as mentioned above, 16.31% of all candidates participating in the election did not declare their education) and essentially distorts the results of the model.

#### The results of the logistic regression model foreseeing the use of social media channels for electoral communication by the candidates

	B	p	Exp(B)
Gender	0.2739**	0.0313	1.315**
Age	-0.0602**	<.0001	0.942**
Income	0.0156**	0.0345	1.016**
Institutional position	0.3066	0.2848	1.359
Political affiliation 1 vs 3	0.6553**	<.0001	1.926**
Political affiliation 2 vs 3	-0.0830	0.6528	0.920
Political affiliation 1 vs 2	0.7383**	<.0001	2.092**
Size of municipality 1 vs 4	2.1865**	<.0001	8.904**
Size of municipality 2 vs 4	0.7344	0.0502	2.084
Size of municipality 3 vs 4	-0.1627	0.7300	0.850
Size of municipality 1 vs 2	1.4521**	<.0001	4.272**
Size of municipality 1 vs 3	2.3492**	<.0001	10.477**
Size of municipality 2 vs 3	0.8971**	0.0207	2.439**
<b>% correct 81.5</b>			
<b>N 2753</b>			

B – model coefficient with the respective independent variable; p – the p-value of the independent variable, which shows that when  $p < 0.05$ , B significantly differs from 0; Exp(B) – the expression indicating how many times the likelihood that one dependent variable is equal to one increases (decreases), when the value of the independent variable changes.

Dependant variable: 0 = the candidate did not use a social networking website for electoral communication; 1 = the candidate used a social networking website for electoral communication. Independent variables: gender: 0 = female, 1 = male; age – the age of a candidate in years; income - annual income of a candidate (measurement unit - 10 thousand Litass); institutional position: 0 = the candidates seeking to get in power, 1 = the candidates already in power; political affiliation: 1 = the candidates of the parties represented in the Parliament, 2 = the candidates of the parties represented in local governments, 3 = the candidates of non-represented parties and non-affiliated candidates; size of municipality: 1 = municipalities of major cities, 2 = large municipalities, 3 = medium municipalities, 4 = small municipalities.

The results of the logistic regression model indicate that all forecasting variables, except for the institutional position, are significant in forecasting the use of social media channels for electoral communication by the candidates. The strongest forecasting variables are the size of municipality and political affiliation.

The essential forecasting variable is the size of municipality, which indicates that the use of the means of interactive media for electoral communication by the candidates of the municipalities of major cities is considerably higher in comparison to large municipalities (Exp(B) = 4.272), medium municipalities (Exp(B) = 10.477), and small municipalities (Exp(B) = 8.904).

The variable of political affiliation indicates that the likelihood of use of social media channels by the candidates of the parties represented in the Parliament is nearly twice as high in comparison to the representatives of the parties in local governments (Exp(B) = 2.092) and of small parties and non-affiliated candidates (Exp(B) = 1.926).

The forecasting variables of gender, age, and income indicate that it is more likely that the means of social media would be used for electoral campaigning by male candidates more than female (Exp(B) = 1.315), interactive technologies would be used by younger candidates more than senior candidates (Exp(B) = 0.942), and social networking websites would be used during election by the candidates receiving higher income more than by those receiving low income (Exp(B) = 1.016).

### Conclusions

Knowing specific demographical and socio-political characteristics of politicians, it is possible to project the probability of their use of social media for election purposes by means of the logistical regression model. Size of municipality and party affiliation are the most important criteria in forecasting such use. Being a candidate in the municipality of a big city and a member of a party represented in the Seimas (Parliament) considerably increases the probability of the candidate's use of social media for election purposes.



Gender, age and income are also important characteristics, although of lower significance, that allow projecting the use of interactive media. It is more probable that men and not women, older and not younger candidates, and candidates receiving higher and not lower income will use social media in electoral communication.

The characteristics of institutional position of candidates are not significant for the forecasting of the use of social media for electoral communication. This means that there is substantially the same probability that interactive channels will be used for election by both politicians in government positions and candidates just applying for such positions.

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