



**PhD Program in
Political Science**

BOOK OF THESES

Bene Márton

Viral Politics: Political Communication on Facebook

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Budapest, 2019

Corvinus University of Budapest Institute of Political Science

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I. Background and justification of the research

Social network sites have become important spheres of politics. Parties and politicians actively adopt these platform, most notably the most popular social network site, Facebook, for their communication. However, the mainstream literature on political actors' social media use suggest that the emergence of social media does not result in major changes in politics. The diagnosis is "politics as usual" as it had been argued by the early literature on the connections between internet and politics (see, Margolis – Resnick, 2000). However, the dissertation argues that this conclusion is due to the fact that the empirical focus of the mainstream literature is too narrow, and the phenomenon under scrutiny is investigated in isolation from the wider context of and literature on political communication.

Therefore, the starting point of the dissertation is that the role of social media in political communication should be approached as a part of the wider political communication universe. If political actors' social media use is interpreted in light of the wider context of political communication, previously unnoticed aspects and stakes may rise as relevant. Based on this approach, the dissertation argued that the emergence of social media has changed the structure of political communication universe since it made citizens' communicative activities crucial elements of political communication network. Strategic communication is forced to conform to the existing structure of political communication, thereby the pursuit of influencing citizens' communication has become an important feature of contemporary political communication.

Political actors' messages are able to reach the wider segments of citizens on social media if they trigger reactions from social media users. Citizens' reactions, i.e their likes, comments and shares, can spread the message as social media communication is driven by the logic of virality (Klinger – Svensson, 2015). However, citizens' communication presumably work differently than mass media that dominated the political communication network thus far as the main information resources of voters. This fact is expected to significantly change the form and

content of political communication and thereby the working of politics. However, we have hardly any knowledge on the way citizens communicate about politics, and in the lack of this knowledge the transformation of political communication cannot be properly understood.

While in case of mass media it is comparatively easy to find some prevailing principles based on commercial interests and professional norms that lead their communication, and thereby to identify its logic, when it comes to citizens' communication the same is very challenging. The dissertation argued that one possibly common feature of citizens' political communication can be the presence of expressive motives.

Based on this idea, I extended the theory of the logic of connective action proposed by Lance Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg (2013) for explaining contemporary political movements' communication to the wider sphere of citizens' political communication. According to this theory one of the main purposes of political communication on social media driven by expressive motives is performing the individuals' personalized political identities. Users seek materials for these performances, and they connect to political contents that can be effectively used to express personalized political identities. Bennett and Segerberg argued that those materials fit the most to these expressive needs and become the object of connective actions that are open to different interpretations and narratives, and the connections to them involve less burden of identification. In contrast, collective action-based communication that dominated movement activities over the last few decades, is designed to mobilize individuals' collective identities: in this case individuals perform their identifications with large political groups rather than expressing complex personalized identities.

The empirical investigation of this dissertation is designed to uncover how citizens react to politicians' communication on Facebook, and what effects of these reactions have on politicians' electoral performances during the 2014 general election campaign in Hungary. The research questions of the research were as follows:

RQ 1a How do politicians communicate on Facebook

RQ 1b How do politicians' communication vary according to their party affiliation? Is there any widely shared communication pattern on Facebook, or communication is largely explained by party affiliation?

RQ 2a. What types of contents can most effectively trigger followers' reactions

RQ 2b What types of contents can go viral on Facebook?

RQ 2c How do these contents get viral?

RQ 2d To what extent do politicians' communication reflect to the patterns of citizens' reactivity?

RQ 3 How do politicians' viral performances affect their electoral results.

Beyond the empirical investigation, the dissertation thoroughly discussed and conceptualized several key concepts related to political communication and social media, worked out the networked model of political communication, and introduced the thesis of the viralization of politics for capturing political communication that increasingly fit to the logic of citizens' communication.

II. Methodology

The dissertation examined viral politics in the campaign of the 2014 Hungarian general election. The specificities of the case under investigation strengthened the generalizability and validity of the findings. The 2014 campaign in Hungary is considered a least likely case from the perspectives of the community-free patterns of citizens' reactivity, the existence of connective action, and the effects of Facebook performance, due to the highly party-centered nature of political culture in Hungary.

To answer the research questions, the empirical research drew upon three unique datasets. The first database included all Facebook posts of three of the most voted-for candidates from all single-member districts. These posts were coded based on their formal and content characteristics. The second database is an aggregated version of the first dataset where the data is summarized in the level of candidates. This dataset was supplemented with other candidate-level data. The third dataset contains the publicly available shares of the most successful, viral posts from the first dataset (1822 shares of 23 viral posts). Research questions were answered using quantitative and qualitative content analysis.

Consequently, politicians' communication, followers' reactions to their posts, and the effects of Facebook performance on electoral results were tested on the largest sample in the literature to date as 7197 posts from 184 candidates were included in the datasets.

Moreover, it is not only the sample, but the methods applied are also unique in the international literature. First, no study tested the effects of as many elements of the posts (37 variables) as this study did. Second, qualitative investigation of viral contents is also a novelty in the literature. Third, the effects of indicators of Facebook performance on electoral results were not addressed either by previous works.

For each post its structural features (whether it contained text, picture, video, meme, share, emoticon), emotional tone (whether it included positive or negative elements), character (whether it contained information piece, mobilization elements, asked followers for Facebook activity, included personal elements or humor) and orientation (whether the post focused on local or national issue and presented friends of foes) were recorded. When it comes to candidate-level data, the politicians' age, gender, political position, positions from the past, and the level of presence in offline media were collected.

RQs related to politicians' communication were answered by descriptive analysis of the first dataset. Citizens' reactivity were discovered using quantitative and qualitative content analysis. The quantitative content analysis drew upon the first dataset. In this case the units of analysis were the 7197 Facebook posts published by 184 candidates. Their numbers of likes, comments and shares functioned as dependent variables, and their 37 formal and content elements were entered as independent variables. The regression models controlled for the date of the post, the number of posts particular candidate published during the same day, highlighted contents and the general level of followers' activity on the given page. Next, I collected those viral posts whose high number of shares are independent from the individual characteristics of the candidates who posted them. These posts were scrutinized by qualitative content analysis. To understand how these viral posts spread, the characteristics of their publicly available shares were also quantitatively and qualitatively investigated.

To test the effects of Facebook performance I drew upon the aggregated dataset (second database). In the linear regression models, the unit of analysis was the individual candidate. The dependent variable was the share of the votes particular candidate received in her single-member district. Three indicators of Facebook-performance functioned as independent variables, the numbers of likes, comments and shares the given candidate triggered by her posts during the last two weeks of the campaign. The most important control variable in these models

is the vote share of the candidate's party on list in her single-member district as controlling for this aspect allowed us to capture the amount of personal vote that is independent from the candidate' party affiliation. The models also controlled for the age, gender, political position, past positions, party affiliation, offline media presence of the politicians and the number of posts posted by the given candidate during the campaign.

III. Results

- As a theoretical contribution, the dissertation worked out the networked model of political communication with key concepts such as informational capacity and informational character.
- Based on existing literature the dissertation showed that the relevance of citizens' political communication has remarkably increased in the political communication network owing to the emergence of social media.
- In line with the concept of the mediatization of politics, the dissertation introduced the idea of the viralization of politics to capture the transformation of political communication due to its adaptation to citizens' communication.
- The dissertation extended Bennett and Segerberg (2013)' theory of connective action that was originally proposed to describe current trends of movement communication, to the citizens' political communication in general.
- Turning to empirical findings, the result showed that the majority of candidates used Facebook in the election campaign of 2014. However, there are significant variances among candidates in terms of their reach and the number of reactions they triggered by their posts.
- Left-wing oppositional party coalition (Kormányváltás) was the most successful on Facebook as its candidates had more followers and triggered more reactions than politicians of Fidesz or Jobbik.
- Parties' campaigns were rather similar, only a few differences could be detected between candidates of different parties.
- The campaign was characterized by heightened presence of visual and textual elements, while shared contents were also popular. Memes and emoticons that are inherent parts of digital communication context were rarely used tools in politicians' communication.

- Regarding the content, the Facebook campaign was dominated by information- and mobilization-focused, and neutral communication. Politicians rarely posted personalized or humorous contents, or asked their followers for Facebook activity.
- Beyond the similarities, Fidesz's candidates run a moderately positive campaign strongly based on event reports, Kormányváltás's candidates had a more negative and opinion-lead campaign, and Jobbik conducted a more mobilization-centric campaign.
- The patterns of reactivity showed little variances between political communities. This finding indicates that it makes sense to talk about citizens' reactivity in general as its patterns are independent from political sympathies.
- Users were more likely to react textual contents, memes, emotion-filled, most notably negative emotion-filled posts, and they performed the candidates' requests for liking or sharing their posts.
- There were some widely shared patterns that are related to specific reaction forms. People were more likely to like photos and personalized contents, comment posts where enemies of the candidates appear, and share videos and contents aimed at mobilizing followers.
- The most common element of viral posts was negativity. Viral posts were predominantly negative as they mostly criticized and attacked political opponents
- Negative viral posts were most often filled with high-arousal emotions such as anger and outrage, and they were usually framed with moral-based arguments. The issue of corruption was a recurring theme in these posts. Negative viral posts were often targeted: they named the enemies. Moral counter-points rarely appeared in viral posts, and these rare occurrences were always related to right-wing politicians.

- Although personal opinion was rarely used communication tool in the total sample, and it had no significant effect on Facebook reactions, most negative viral posts were personal opinion.
- The small number of non-negative viral posts were predominantly mobilization-focused contents. All but one non-negative viral posts encouraged users to vote or attend to offline events. This finding implies that the motive behind sharing a political content is not limited to expressing personal identities, it sometimes serves really instrumental goals such as exerting influence on peers.
- Only a few policy contents could be found among viral posts, and most of them focused on morally-framed political issues.
- Personalized and humorous contents were also rare among viral posts.
- Several findings on the patterns of reactivity can be explained by the concept of connective action. These include the reaction-triggering roles of negativity, memes, and enemies appearing in posts, and the lower level of reactivity of information-centric contents, shared posts and posts containing policy promises. The minor share of policy contents and the dominance of morally-framed political issues among viral posts are also in line with the logic of connective action.
- However, some findings contradict the hypotheses deducted from the logic of connective action. For instance, national-focused posts did not trigger more reactions than locally-focused contents, and mobilization posts were highly shared by followers despite the fact that they usually indicate strong identification with existing political communities and actors.
- The two communication logics co-exist on social media. This findings is in line with Bennett and Segerberg' theory as they argued that in case of movement communication the emergence of the logic of connective action does not eliminate the previous logic of

collective action. However, the findings support the thesis of the rise of connective action-based communication which fact indicates a major transformation in the context of political communication.

- Politicians did not fit their communication to the need of citizens' reactivity, there is a large gap between the types of contents posted by politicians and those that are highly reacted by the followers.
- Being viral did not imply the distortion of the original content. Shares did not modify the main messages, they could reach the wider Facebook public in their original forms. People usually shared these posts without individual contribution. They transmitted the message to their peers rather than used them for expressing their own political opinion and self substantively.
- For politicians, being viral is a huge challenge as most shared posts triggered only a few extra reactions in the followers' networks.
- Highly followed Facebook pages were able to boost the virality of politicians' posts when they shared them. They played an important role in achieving virality.
- The number of shares politicians' posts triggered during the last two weeks of the campaign had a small, but significant effect on politicians' electoral performances.
- Facebook is not a silver bullet for electoral success; one cannot expect a great amount of extra personal votes from a successful Facebook-campaign. However, it is not ineffective either: Facebook-campaign is one of the most important predictors of personal votes within the model, while most control variables, including age, incumbency, number of elections candidates run, local mayor or party leader position, media presence or number of posts posted during the campaign have no significant effect on electoral outcome.

- These findings suggest that a social media campaign can result in extra votes through a two-step flow effect: the extra votes are likely to come from voters who get candidates' messages mediated by their friends and who otherwise would not see the given content.

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