



ORIGINAL PAPER

From *The People's Choice* to the Social Media Voting Platforms. The 2014 Romanian Presidential Elections and the Sociological Construction of Voting Decisions

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Abstract

In several studies from the 1940s and 1950s, Paul Lazarsfeld, Bernard Berelson and William McPhee developed one of the most famous and provocative models of the electoral behavior – the Columbia model. Their empirical researches, that were conducted on two different communities, in two different electoral moments, led to similar conclusions, according to which the social context (the group of affiliation) exercises the main influence in the process of forming voters' political options. This paper aims to discuss the theories advanced by the Columbia model, by linking them to the development of the communication technologies in the last few years (especially those regarding the social media). Consequently, the purpose of this paper is to use some of the conclusions advanced by Lazarsfeld and his collaborators based on their theories in order to prove that, even after half a century (period during which the way of making and understanding politics has substantially evolved), the Columbia model remains relevant and is able, in many cases, to overcome many of the limitations of the economical and psychological explanatory models of voting behavior. In order to better articulate our research inquiry, the paper will present a case study – the Romanian presidential elections from 2014. The theoretical framework of the Columbia school will help in showcasing how the rising influence of social media played an extremely important role in forming voting options, while leaving in the background not only the rational approaches, but also the political affiliation. However, in the case of the Romanian presidential elections, the social media effect of unifying political ideas and options did not lead to an increase in the voter turnout in the first round of the elections, whereas the rise of the turnout in the second round could be explained by considering multiple other factors, leading us to the conclusion that although the influence of these new communication channels became extremely visible during major electoral moments, its influence on the political participation was generally modest.

Keywords: *Columbia studies, voting behavior, sociological model, Romania, elections, social media, voter turnout*

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Introduction. The Columbia explanatory model of voting behavior

The Columbia model took its name from a group of researchers at Columbia University, under the supervision of Paul F. Lazarsfeld, who used the polling technique for the first time during the study of voting behavior. The conclusions of the team of researchers presenting the results of the panel studies performed in two local communities, Erie County, Ohio and Elmira, New York, during the 1940 and 1948 presidential elections were published in two pioneering books in this field, *The People's Choice* (Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet, 1944) and *Voting* (Lazarsfeld, Berelson and McPhee, 1954).

Initially, Lazarsfeld intended to analyze the impact of the media and messages delivered through media on voters' choice. However, considering that the necessary funds for developing such a project exceeded his available budget, he later adjusted his research and, using the panel technique, he submitted monthly questionnaires to a group of 600 people in Erie County, Ohio, for six months before the 1940 American presidential elections, in order to analyze their impact on the voters. Specifically, his purpose was to discover "*the way and the reason the citizens decided to vote in a certain way*" (Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet, 2004: 37), to study "*the evolution of the votes, and not their distribution*" (Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet, 2004: 39), therefore to analyze the process determining political opinions and not just their description.

Analyzing the questionnaires pointed out the fact that the voting intention is generally stable, both in time for the same individual, as well as between generations. Thus, 77% of the panel members declared that they would vote for the candidate of the same party in favor of whom they had voted at the previous elections and for whom their parents and grandparents had voted (Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet, 2004: 25). Also, more than 90% of the subjects declared that they had taken their decision to vote for one or the other candidate long before the electoral campaigns began. Moreover, the various personality features used as variables for measuring the respondents' deep motivations did not have the expected outcome during the analysis. These matters determined Lazarsfeld and his team to take into account other variables too, not just the ones related to the individual's personality, relevant in the process of explaining the voting decision. Therefore, the external influences were emphasized, and *the affiliation to a certain group* was identified as the element influencing both the voting intention, as well as its stability in time (Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet, 2004: 25).

According to Lazarsfeld and his collaborators, those social groups thought to decisively influence the voting option (the political parties, the pressure groups – especially the unions, or the media) are often in the background, while primary groups such as family, friends, co-workers or religious communities can be even more influential. Thus, these groups are frequently used to strengthen a certain political opinion or a belief about one candidate or political party, unlike the media, for example, which, most of the times maintain or even accentuate some political differences. The group influence on the individual's political opinions is not an indirect impact, given that they build and materialize these opinions exactly by means of the contact with the other group members; therefore, the information-selecting mechanisms, and not just political opinions, become similar within the same group. A very important aspect should not be left out: information is never identical for each group member, considering that each individual is a member of several groups at the same time, and the actions of selecting the information and shaping political opinions are achieved according to each group's characteristics.

Therefore, Lazarsfeld explains the changes in an individual's voting intentions in terms of the pressure he experiences as a simultaneous member of several groups (social, ethnic, religious, occupational, etc.) (Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet, 2004: 26). In this respect, he provides the example of a high-class Catholic individual determined to vote in a certain way by his religious beliefs and to go for the opposite choice by his social status. Under such circumstances, that particular individual would have to decide which of the two group affiliations is more important for the voting decision. This situation clearly emphasizes the prospect of him changing his political opinions during different moments in time, according to the perceived importance of a certain group during a certain moment in time.

Another new aspect brought forth by the team under Lazarsfeld's coordination referred to the role of *opinion leaders* in the process of viewpoint formation within a certain group (Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet, 2004: 27-28). They are the ones extracting information from mass media and subsequently delivering it to the other group members, filtered through their own values and principles, applying an overwhelming influence over the process of shaping their political opinions. Therefore, Lazarsfeld's conclusion is that the individual's political preferences depend almost entirely on his social status; in his view, "a person's political thoughts are similar to his social condition; social characteristics determine political preferences" (Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet, 2004: 65).

The study developed eight years later by the team under Lazarsfeld's coordination in Elmira, New York, included a panel of 1000 de subjects who were submitted 4 questionnaires. During this research, Lazarsfeld paid more attention to local organizations of political parties and other political organizations, as well as to the respondents' positions and perceptions on political issues, leaving in the background the elements related to the electoral campaign that did not stand as an essential factor for the voting decision, as noticed in the previous situation. The analyzed data in this new study confirmed the conclusions drawn in the previous research: the social environment influences the individual's voting decision, but Lazarsfeld now offers a few additions to his previous theory, especially by introducing two new concepts, i.e. *the group identification* and *the group perceptions*. Max Visser defined *the group identifications* as "emotional connections joining individuals to certain groups that are not necessarily part of their close social environment and that may have a stronger impact on their vote than the direct group influence" (Visser, 1998: 26). *The group perceptions* refer to "the respondents' perception on voting tendencies within certain ethnic, social and economic or religious groups" (Visser, 1998: 26). Therefore, the closer an individual feels to the group, the more he perceives himself as having identical voting intentions as that particular group or, in an opposite situation, when hostile towards a certain religious or ethnic group, the individual would perceive himself as closer to the party opposing that particular group. Actually, also during his previous research, one of his conclusions stated that during electoral campaigns "social groups instill the political ideology accepted by the group into their members [...] [and that the individuals – A/N] vote not only *with* their social group, but *for* it too" (Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet, 2004: 196-197).

The main new element provided by the second research developed by Lazarsfeld is that, unlike the previous situation, the individual is no longer perceived as having no contribution in the process of creating his political preferences, but as an active agent. In other words, he no longer appears as complying with the social environment and his decisions as a direct and unmediated result of the group, but the idea of a mutual influence

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is brought forth, where the individual and the social environment represent a “system of mutual influence” (Visser, 1998: 26). The main purpose of this paper is to analyze, using the Columbia model framework, the Romanian presidential elections from 2014, in order to show that, even if the group affiliation (seen mainly through social media interactions) played an important role in forming voting options, this effect of unifying political ideas did not necessarily lead to the increase of the voter turnout.

Elections and social media. The Romanian case

In recent years, the advent of social media has created new opportunities for political expression in the public sphere. Two areas of civic engagement where social media appear increasingly to play a bigger and bigger role are protests and elections. So far, the intersection between the new technologies and social media is thought to possess “the capacity to strengthen civic society and consolidate democracy around the world” (Diaz Romero, 2014: 30). In the case of Romania, we have also witnessed a rise in the use of social media especially where political mobilization was concerned both in terms of protests (2015, 2017) as well as during elections and electoral campaigns with a focus – for now at least – on presidential elections. In this paper, we are interested in addressing whether the rising influence of social media played a role in forming voting preferences or if on the contrary, the tendency of social media towards the consolidation of particular political ideas and options did not translate into an increase in the number of voters.

Until the 2014 presidential election we cannot talk about a coherent online grassroots movement coalesced around a political figure though politicians like Traian Băsescu had made earlier inroads in terms of online presence. In 2014, both the current president Klaus Iohannis, candidate of the Liberal National Party (PNL) and the independent candidate Monica Macovei benefited from online support, in particular on social platforms like Facebook – which registered at the time of the election around 7.5 million Romanian users (Covaci, 2015: 85). Previously, as Camelia Cmeciu remarks, former president Traian Băsescu had been “the first Romania candidate to exploit the internet as a political communication tool during the 2004 presidential elections” (Cmeciu, 2016: 233).

There have been several studies which found social media to have played an essential role especially in the second tour of the presidential election, most notable of which has been an IRES study (Romania Institute for Evaluation and Strategies) regarding the voters' preferences. This post-electoral analysis identifies the phenomenon of media convergence as a decisive characteristic of the second tour, arguing that the convergence between Facebook, TV, and mobile communication formed a network that led to a high degree of electoral mobilization. Citing Chesney's book on *Corporate Media and the Threat to Democracy* (1997), the authors define “media convergence” as a phenomenon where various media amplify one another, where television can become a sounding board for Facebook and vice versa (IRES, November 2014). The authors attribute the electoral turnover from the second tour of the presidential election to a combination of factors revolving around a negative campaign against the liberal candidate run by his opponent and more importantly, around the poorly organized electoral proceedings on the part of the Socialist Party (PSD) – especially where the voting conditions for the Romanian diaspora were concerned.

In terms of voter turnout for presidential elections and its variations between the first and the second round, the Romanian post-communist democratic history can be divided into two periods. In the first period between 1992-2004, during each election

(1992, 1996, 2000 and 2004) the voter turnout decreased during the second round by an approximate average of 3 percentage points (the lowest drop recorded during the 2000 elections) (Romanian Permanent Electoral Authority). The second period between 2009 and 2014 included a reversed tendency, where the voters rallied more during the second round (Romanian Permanent Electoral Authority). With respect to this aspect, Ovidiu Gherasim-Proca even states that hyper-mobilization is a “trade mark of the 2014 presidential elections” (Gherasim-Proca, 2016: 120), considering that the voter turnout grew by 10.93% during the second round as compared to the first round (Romanian Permanent Electoral Authority).

A short review of the last two presidential campaigns reveals a consistent pattern in terms of the electoral behavior of the Romanians in the context of presidential elections with high degrees of correlation between the second tour of the election and the decisive role of the diaspora in determining the outcome of presidential elections. In other words, the electoral behavior over the course of three presidential elections cycles has tended to follow a particular pattern: the centre-left wing party has tended to be the main favorite in the first tour of the presidential election (coming in first in two out of three cases) while the centre-right votes have been split among different candidates. Meanwhile, in the second tour, the former tends to maintain its vote share from the first round while other parts of the electorate including the diaspora vote preponderantly for the centre-right wing candidate perceived to have the highest odds of winning.

Consequently, in the first tour, the center-left wing candidate Victor Ponta obtained 40.44% of the votes while Klaus Iohannis scored 30.37% of the voting share, followed by former liberal prime-minister Călin Popescu Țăriceanu with 5.36% of the votes, Elena Udrea (president of the Popular Movement Party) with 5.20% of the votes and Monica Macovei with 4.44% of votes (Romanian Central Electoral Bureau, 2014a). Meanwhile in the second tour, Klaus Iohannis obtained 54.5% of the votes while Victor Ponta registered 45.49% of the votes (Romanian Central Electoral Bureau, 2014b). By comparison, in 2004, the candidate of the Socialist Party, Adrian Năstase obtained 40.97% of the votes in the first tour and 48.77% in the second tour, while his competitor Traian Băsescu, from the Democrat Liberal Party (PDL) scored 33.92% of the votes in the first tour and 51.23% in the second tour (Romanian Central Electoral Bureau, 2004). A similar situation was repeated in the second tour of the 2009 presidential election where the incumbent president Traian Băsescu won 50.34% of the votes and his opponent, socialist Mircea Geonă registered 49.66% of the votes. Moreover, as mentioned earlier, the votes of the Romanian diaspora proved decisive both in 2009 and in 2014: in 2009, 78% of the Romanian voters living abroad voted for Traian Băsescu while in 2014, 86.9% voted for Klaus Iohannis.

All things considered, analyzing the role of social media in shaping electoral behavior can help us better understand how segments of the electorate formulate their voting choices especially where younger demographics are concerned. In her analysis on the impact of electoral debates in the 2014 presidential election, Camelia Beciu observes that in terms of the new media, studies have focused on the influence of social media – regarded as hybrid communication environment – on the public. The “viewertariat”, for example, represents a phenomenon that takes place in real time and presupposes the live participation of citizens on social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter, commenting and reacting to the presidential debates (Beciu, 2015: 260). By facilitating this behavior, the new media and the traditional media enable new practices associated with hybrid political communication. These are tied to the larger issue concerning the role of the

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Internet on the political participation of the citizens and range from actions like raising attention to various political topics to shaping different forms of civic engagement and political participation (Beciu, 2015: 260). How do these aspects translate into practice? Andreea Iancu and Cornelia Stan hypothesize that when online interaction is high the individuals are more predisposed to develop a commitment towards political participation through online channels of communication. Moreover, the authors also posit that the more the electoral campaign is present in the online sphere, the more important the social media apparitions of the candidates become in defining a voter's political option (Iancu and Stan, 2010: 19).

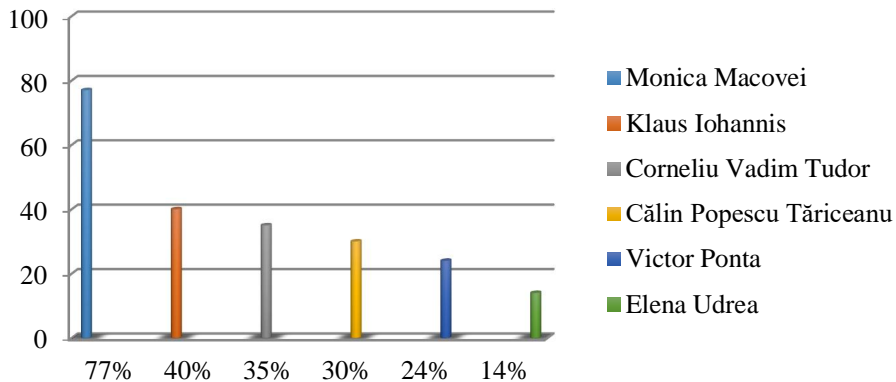
Though it is undeniable that social media provide a platform for information and civic participation, it remains to ascertain to what degree do social media effectively create new voters or persuade voters to change their political options. Otherwise, we would not err too much on the side of caution to posit that social media like Facebook and Twitter create in fact an echo chamber for like-minded people. For example, the IRES survey was conducted on 1271 participants where more than half (54%) declared that they use the Internet as opposed to 46% who stated they don't. Of these 54% Internet users (cca. 686 respondents), 58% (cca. 397 respondents) declared that they have a social media account, as opposed to 42% who don't. In addition 70% (cca. 480 respondents) of those who use the Internet declared that social media and the Internet influenced the electoral turnout. Paradoxically, 87% of this group did not personally engage in transmitting or forwarding electoral messages, nor did they gave a like to the candidates' pages or messages on social media (76%) (IRES, 2014). Social media provides an opportunity for political discussion but it is not the decisive factor in shaping electoral behavior on a scale greater than the users online social network. In the 2014 presidential election while it is undeniable that the candidate Klaus Iohannis had an effective social media presence, "off-line" factors still took precedence. Case in point, according to the IRES survey, 69% of the respondents declared that they had already made up they mind about their choice for the second tour even before the start of the electoral campaign while only 30% had initially been undecided (6% decided during the campaign for the first tour of the election while 24% decided in the period between the two electoral rounds).

As pointed out by Ovidiu Gherasim-Proca, even though the Romanian 2014 presidential elections in Romania could be considered the first elections where the social contribution of the media was essential for shaping the victory of a candidate, a number of other elements – such as the tensions on the political stage or many social and constitutional crises – may represent equally reasonable explanations for the elections result (Gherasim-Proca, 2016: 118). Moreover, the deficiencies in the management of the voting process abroad (especially in the areas with a high number of Romanian citizens, such as Italy, Spain, United Kingdom, France) became a clear shortcoming for Victor Ponta, the PSD [*Social Democratic Party*] candidate. He was the Prime Minister and held as main responsible for the poor election management in the voting stations abroad. The Romanian researcher's pertinent remark is that during the last decade and a half, the Romanian political system was "under the sign of exception" (Gherasim-Proca, 2016: 118) and the 2014 presidential elections fit into that pattern.

According to a survey of Mediafax Research & Monitoring, on 2 November 2014, Victor Ponta had 625,780 Facebook followers, whereas Klaus Iohannis had 404,003, but an important aspect is that Victor Ponta was active for a longer time, while Iohannis had a major increase during the last few weeks before the elections (Mediafax News Agency, October 28, 2014). Therefore, even though in terms of absolute rates Victor

Ponta’s messages reached a larger number of followers as compared to the number of Facebook followers, Klaus Iohannis’s efficiency was higher, and the most efficient of the main candidates in terms of message delivery was Monica Macovei. Even though she had less than 100,000 Facebook followers, her posts reached an engagement rate of 77%, as pointed out in the figure below.

Figure 1. The Engagement Rate, week 20-26 October 2014

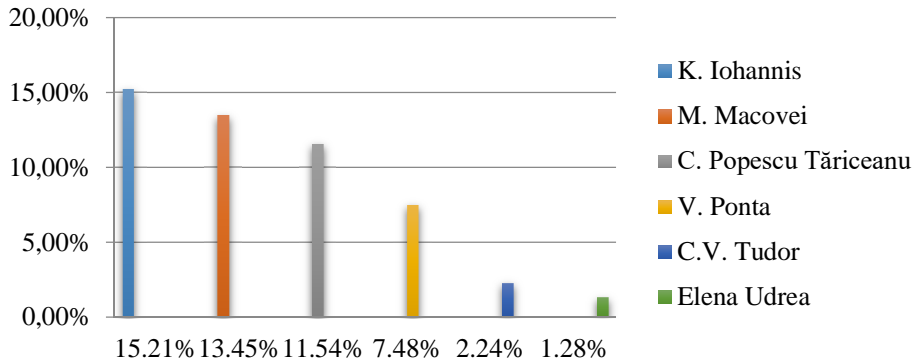


Source: Mediafax News Agency, October 28, 2014

The engagement rate = the rate between the number of unique individuals interacting with the page content (link, comment, share) and the total number of followers.

As far as the evolution of follower number is concerned, the week prior to the first round of the presidential elections displayed increases for all the candidates. If we carefully analyze the weekly increase of “likes”, it is noticeable that Victor Ponta has a lower growth than Klaus Iohannis, where the latter exceeded his follower number right after the elections.

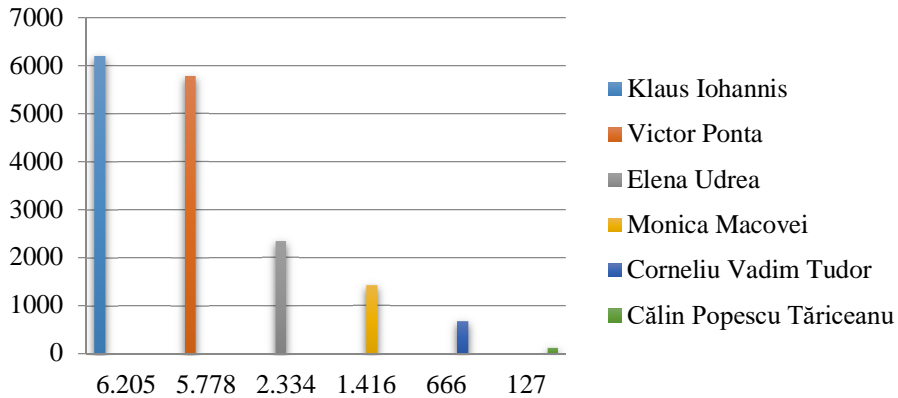
Figure 2. Registered growth in the number of fans, 20-26 September vs. 13-19 October 2014



Source: Mediafax News Agency, October 28, 2014

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Figure 3. Average number of likes per posting, week 20-26 October 2014



Source: Mediafax News Agency, October 28, 2014

An interesting comparison connects Facebook “efficiency” and the election results, showing that only two of the main candidates, Klaus Iohannis and Călin Popescu-Tăriceanu, reached a higher election rate than the social network rate. As for the other candidates, the election rate was lower than the Facebook rate by approximately 2-3%. Elena Udrea represented a special case (confirming the theory that online mobilization did not necessarily lead to an actual voting mobilization or to a higher voter turnout), who, even with a Facebook rate of over 16%, she got only 5.20% of the votes, therefore a negative gap of more than 10% (Data source: Mediafax News Agency, October 28, 2014).

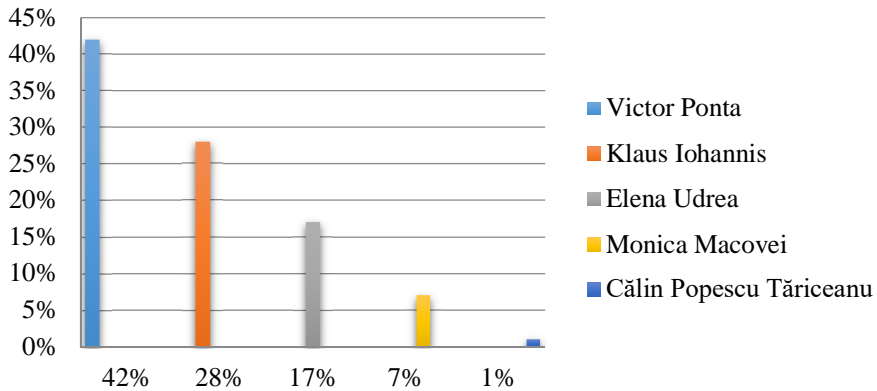
Some analysts and political advisors consider that one of the weak points of the Romanian politicians in the process of advertising on social media networks is the lack of constant posts (Roșu, 2015). During electoral campaigns, Facebook users are actually bombarded with messages and articles, while the rest of the time few politicians maintain communication to a satisfactory level. The candidates with less supporters or with a lower notoriety failed to efficiently use this communication channel, in the sense that they should have started sooner their informing campaign on Facebook. Without it, they had even more to lose as opposed to certain “already famous” characters on the political stage with a notoriety that brought them a higher number of followers in a shorter period of time and thus, a faster and more efficient distribution of their electoral messages.

Conclusions

Despite all the debates related to the major role of social media in voter turnout and creation of political options, the Romanian 2014 presidential elections proved that no matter how aggressive and well-built, an online electoral campaign cannot replace the traditional campaign. The best relevant example is Monica Macovei who, with an electoral campaign developed almost exclusively online and with an engagement rate higher than any of her counter-candidates (as shown above), collected only 4.44% of the votes. Consequently, Klaus Iohannis’s success – him being a candidate who resembles in some respects Monica Macovei’s candidate profile – is not the exclusive outcome of a Facebook mobilization, but, as mentioned above, other factors had a significant contribution to his victory. Two of them seem to have an essential importance. First, in the electoral campaign developed in Romania, the party system of PNL [*National Liberal Party*] played a major

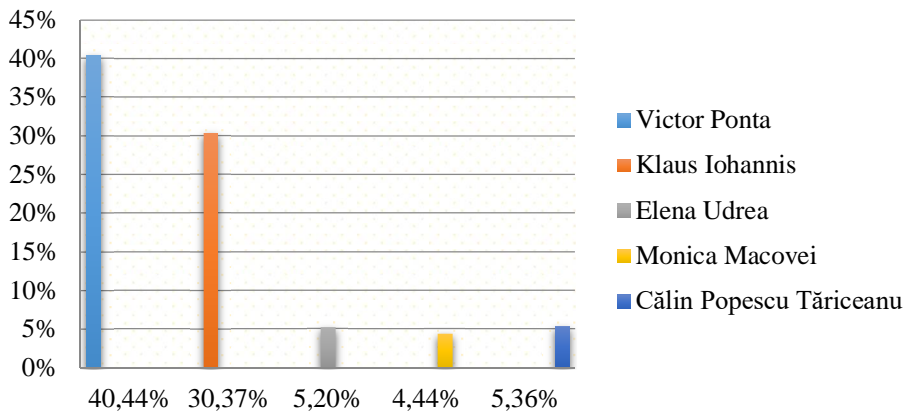
role, counteracting the fact that before the elections Iohannis was a quasi-unknown politician on a national level. This is exactly one of the elements missing from Monica Macovei who, as an independent candidate, was unable to mobilize a larger number of potential voters, considering that in Romania party identification represents a determining factor of voting options, irrespective of the election type or the voting type.

Figure 4(a). Facebook performance vs. votes (Facebook data)



Source: Mediafax News Agency, October 28, 2014

Figure 4(b). Facebook performance vs. votes (voting data)



Source: Romanian Permanent Electoral Authority, 2014

Secondly, the failed management of elections in the voting stations abroad generated, especially during the second round, an unprecedented mobilization of the Romanian abroad, who voted at an overwhelming rate in favor of the right-wing candidate. Consequently, the online campaign did not necessarily lead to the voter turnout during the analyzed presidential elections.

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Thomas J. Johnson and David D. Perlmutter argue that in the emerging medium of digital democracy, candidates are no longer in control over how their messages are shaped and transmitted: “an [i]ndividual can create their own blog to tout their views on the campaign or post those same messages on discussion boards, social media sites or Twitter”, leading the authors to conclude that “[t]he traditional campaign, with its centralized power and planning, although not dead, now coexists – sometimes uneasily – with an unstructured digital democracy” (Johnson and Perlmutter, 2011: 2).

Sharon Meraz notes that “social media environments that depend on friendships and social information filtering to determine popularity” exacerbate the echo chamber effect and can even have a paradoxical effect in terms of the contemporaneous exploits of digital democracy due to the “negative informational cascades, which result when groups remain insulated and homogenous in both perspective and composition” (Meraz, 2009: 125). In addition, as Mihai Covaci observes, in spite of the successes registered via social media, online mobilization tends to be rather short termed: “electronic solidarity happens fast, but it does not have long terms effects on the political sphere. Emotional surges are quickly lost if not properly channeled and articulated in an institutional framework while participants quickly forget the engagements assumed during these periods” (Covaci, 2015: 90). In other words, instead of fostering the development of community that is actively engaged in the political process, for the time being, social media act like a transmission relay between the public and the electorate only during particular periods characterized by intense polarization over the course of the democratic cycle.

It is obvious that this online mobilization is more successful in Romania during the last few years when important issues for the civil society are at stake, and the protests of February 2017 against controversial decisions of the newly-invested government after the elections of December 2016 stand as the best relevant example. Nevertheless, when talking about elections, as important as they are for delivering electoral messages of candidates and parties, the social media networks leave the determining role related to shaping the voting options and the actual turnout either to party identification, or to sociological factors, making Lazarsfeld's famous explanatory theory more and more useful for understanding the subtle mechanisms of forming and expressing the electoral options.

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Article Info

Received: April 02 2017

Accepted: April 20 2017
