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Facebook Campaigning: Candidates' Perspectives

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The study presents findings from 67 semi-structured interviews with candidates running for heads of municipalities about their views on the advantages and drawbacks of political activity on Facebook, and the perceived impact of Facebook activity on election results. Findings indicate that candidates do not perceive a significant electoral advantage to using Facebook, yet they are convinced that presence on Facebook is obligatory, and absence from this arena would have a negative impact on their election prospects. Candidates are conscious of the problematic aspects of Facebook use; they are apprehensive specifically about potential criticism and attacks, and are hesitant to participate in dialog. On the other hand, especially in large cities, candidates acknowledge Facebook's instrumental role in exposing candidates and disseminating messages, and are aware of the significance of responding to audience comments.

Keywords: Social media, Facebook, Campaigning, Interviews

Facebook is the world's largest social network, exceeding one billion users in 2014. Extensive study asks whether or not campaigning on Facebook is likely to yield electoral advantages to parties and candidates. The current study approaches the issue from a different perspective, by *asking* candidates how they perceive the advantages and disadvantages of using Facebook.

While Facebook developed to become a major political and campaigning arena, research on candidates' perceptions and attitudes about Facebook use in political campaigning is rare. This study contributes to the literature on political campaigning on Facebook by examining candidates' perceptions of Facebook use, its advantages and drawbacks, and its perceived impact on election results.

Even before the advent of Facebook, when Internet use gravitated towards websites, researchers recognized its potential role not only as a tool for information dissemination and image building but also for establishing and maintaining political representatives' ties with the public (Coleman, 2004; Coleman and Blumer, 2009;

Williamson, 2009). Facebook appears to support such aspirations: Establishing and maintaining Facebook presence is less expensive and more intuitive than establishing and operating a website. Facebook makes it possible for candidates to conduct dialog with voters, send messages in a very broad distribution, and oversee their reach and penetration. The fact that the information is shared by "friends" may enhance their further distribution and exposure (Utz, 2009). Equivalently, from the standpoint of political online users, accessing a Facebook page is more strongly integrated into their daily Internet use, as they do not have to go out of their way to access political websites.

Obama's 2008 presidential victory boosted Facebook's status as a political tool, and his campaign became a milestone in the public awareness of the possible political benefits of social media campaigning (Karlsen, 2012). However, social media usage entails several obstacles. In her classic study, Stromer-Galley (2000) found that politicians tend to be apprehensive about interactive Internet uses for three main reasons: first, a direct dialog with the public might expose candidates to criticism and negative comments; second, creating the opportunity for such a dialog often demands that the candidate formulate unambiguous positions and messages, whereas politicians frequently prefer to use as general and vague messages as possible; third, abundance of interaction demands time and other resources that might be otherwise directed to other campaign activities.

Early Facebook uses by politicians were also characterized by concerns from its interactive features. For example, Bürger and Ross (2014) found that candidates used Facebook as a supplementary vehicle for conveying messages, and made no real efforts to genuinely engage voters. Vergeer, Hermans and Sams (2013), who studied Twitter use in the 2009 European Parliament elections stated that Twitter was adopted by a fraction of candidates, who used it "reluctantly".

In recent years, though, Facebook has been used by an increasing number of politicians both during their term in office and during election campaigning. A significant portion of politicians even engage in "permanent Facebook campaigning" (Larsson, 2014; Jackson & Lilleker, 2011). These developments have occurred in response to pressures on politicians by their colleagues, by other candidates, and by voters (Enli & Skogerbø, 2013; Metag & Marcinkowski, 2012). Still, Tenscher (2014) found that MPs who felt comfortable

to use Facebook in their personal lives felt that it was a natural extension to use Facebook in political contexts as well.

In addition to functioning as a communication channel with *the public*, Facebook is also used by politicians for communicating with *journalists*. Thus, Bernhard and Dohle (2015) found that the main target audience of German MPs' Facebook activity is not the general public but rather journalists. This is because on Facebook politicians can post precisely what they want to say and as they want to say it, and the message is transmitted immediately and without interpretations or biases to the journalists.

The impact of Facebook use on vote share

Despite their perceived importance, most studies have found that social media have little effect on election participation rates (Boulianne, 2015; Bond et al., 2012) and on election results- for example, on the number of Facebook supporters in the US 2006 midterm elections (Williams & Gulati, 2007); on the relative Facebook strength of candidates in each state in the US 2008 presidential primaries (Williams & Gulati, 2008); and on the number of Hyves and Twitter followers in the Netherlands 2010 parliamentary elections results (Spierings & Jacobs, 2014). Still, in the same 2010 Dutch general elections, Kruikemeier (2014) studied the scope and character of Twitter activity and number of followers, and found a significant positive impact on elections results; using Twitter interactively (i.e. Retweeting) had an additional positive impact. Vote share was also positively correlated with the number of Facebook fans and Twitter followers in the 2011 New Zealand General Elections (Cameron, Barrett & Stewardson, 2014).

While the above studies analyzed the impact of social media usage on vote share at the national level, few studies looked at its impact on the municipal level. In Canada, Wagner (2016) used a nationwide survey of 307 candidates to various municipal officeholders between 2010 and 2012, and found that although only few candidates used the Internet, a positive correlation existed between Internet presence and vote share. Sobaci, Eryiğit and Hatipoğlu (2015) found a positive correlation between Twitter presence and vote share in the 2014 Turkish local elections. Finally, in a study of Facebook usage in the Greek 2014 municipal elections, Lappas et al. (2015) found that while only 30% of candidates had a Facebook page, Facebook usage and number of fans were correlated with candidates' vote shares.

Based on these national- and municipal-level findings, it can be argued that Facebook may have an impact, albeit modest, on candidates' vote share. One reason that Facebook activity has such a small effect may be that in some of these studies, many candidates were on Facebook. In contrast to Obama's 2008 innovative and path-breaking campaign on social media, subsequent election candidates treated Facebook as a key arena of campaigning activity. As a result, Facebook usage may no longer generate a distinctive advantage for any single candidate, as no candidate can be attributed a first-mover advantage.

Another reason for Facebook's limited effect may be that politicians' pages are predominantly "preaching to the choir"; For example, a Greek study (Papagiannidis, Coursaris and Bourlakis, 2012) on the use of personal websites found that Internet users prefer to access the pages of their favorite politicians, rather than obtain information on candidates with opposing views.

Municipal Facebook campaigning

Studying campaigning at the municipal level is justified on several counts. First, local elections typically involve a large number of candidates in many cities and towns who are involved in campaigning concurrently. The study of such campaigns generates a broad picture of the distribution of the political uses of Facebook, and makes it possible to compare uses in different campaigns, and look for correlations between uses and election results.

Second, the number of voters in municipal elections is much smaller than in national elections, and local elections may be determined by a small number of votes. In such tight races, and more than in the national level, Facebook usage might make the difference between defeat and victory.

Still, studies demonstrate that variables related to the particular races may affect the political uses of the Internet in general, and of social media in particular; most importantly, incumbency. New candidates are disadvantaged by under-exposure as they run against incumbents whose activities are regularly reported (Herrnson, Stokes-Brown & Hindman, 2007; Lappas et al. 2015; Lev-On, 2014; Wagner & Gainous, 2009). On the other hand, Williams and Gulati (2012) who focus on US congressional elections and demonstrate that "incumbents have more capacity to generate the content that constitutes

or creates usage" (p. 65), a suggestion that seems at least partially valid in our context as well.

Another variable that may affect the scope of Facebook use is the size of the local authority. Candidates' digital activity tends to increase with the number of eligible voters, since as the number of eligible voters grows, candidates are increasingly challenged to reach voters using conventional offline canvassing methods (Lappas et al., 2015; Wagner, 2016).

Limited Internet use in a specific geographical region or population segment may also adversely affect candidates' decisions to establish digital channels for campaigning. Arguably, more extensive Facebook activity can be found in the campaigns of candidates in municipalities whose population is younger, more educated, and has higher income levels (Lissitsa & Lev-On, 2014).

In the municipal elections of 2013, 316 of the 387 Jewish candidates (81.7%) operated a Facebook page (Lev-On & Steinfeld, Under Review). Facebook pages were operated by candidates nationwide, with the exception of candidates in the Haredi (ultra-orthodox) sector who made no use of Facebook at all. Institutional variables (size of constituency, incumbency status and competitiveness of the races) had a significant impact on both scope of Facebook engagement and vote share. The number of Facebook posts uploaded to candidates' pages had a weak but significant impact on the vote share they received, although other dimensions of candidates' Facebook activity (number of fans and scope of engagement) had no such impact.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The current study is qualitative, and based on semi-structured interviews with mayoral candidates. Following up on the above survey of the literature the interviews focused on the following research questions:

1. How did candidates use Facebook in his or her campaign?
2. What are the perceived advantages of using Facebook?
3. What are the perceived drawbacks of using Facebook?
4. What are the perceived effects of using Facebook?

RESEARCH ENVIRONMENT

Israel is a promising arena to study Facebook campaigning. According to Internet World Stats, in December 2013 (immediately after data for this study were collected), *Internet* penetration in Israel reached 70.8%, compared to the global average of 34.3%. Israel has also been a world leader in *Facebook* usage in terms of the percentage of the population who uses it, and the average time users spend on it (ComScore, 2011). According to Social Bankers (2014), four of ten of the leading Facebook pages in Israel are websites of media organizations, which reflects the interest of Israeli Facebook users in current events. Israeli MPs also are strongly invested in Facebook. In 2010, the Director General of the Israeli parliament (the Knesset) urged all MPs to open a Facebook page (Mako, 2010). As of 2015, 105 MPs out of 120 (87.5%) had Facebook pages (Steinfeld & Lev-On, 2019). Evidence also confirms substantial penetration of social media at the municipal level: In 2013, 43 of Israel's 75 municipalities had active Facebook pages (Lev-On & Steinfeld, 2015).

The current study focuses on the 2013 municipal elections in the Jewish sector only. This decision requires some explanation. According to Kaminski and Bar-Tal (1996), more than anything else, the history of the relations between Jews and Arabs in pre-state Israel and after Israel's independence demonstrates segregation, which is reflected in geographic divisions between the Arab and Jewish population in Israel. The almost absolute segregation between local governments with a Jewish population and those with an Arab population makes it possible to compare Internet uses in political campaigns in both sectors. The two populations significantly differ also with respect to new media usage patterns during election campaigns. For example, in the 2008 municipal elections, 50% of Jewish candidates operated personal websites, yet less than 5% of the Arab candidates did so: Among the 213 candidates who competed in non-Jewish municipalities, only 8 candidates had a personal website (Lev-On, 2014). In the elections studied in this article, 316 of the 387 Jewish candidates (81.7%) operated a Facebook page (Lev-On & Steinfeld, Under Review), compared to 122 of the 314 candidates in the Arab-Palestinian sector (38.9%). Of these Facebook pages, the majority had negligible activity.

Elsewhere, Lev-On (2013) attributes the sparse use of new media in Arab-Palestinian municipalities to the dominance of Hamulas (clans). Hamulas, a unique social

structure among the agrarian Arab population in the Middle East, are groups of people related by a common ancestral lineage. Hamula membership is a key element in the self-identification of many of the Arab-Palestinian citizens of Israel. A typical Arab municipality includes between two and four Hamulas that usually live in different areas. According to Mustafa (2005), in the municipal elections held in 2003, only 11 mayors and heads of municipal councils were elected based on political party affiliation, while the other 42 elected heads of municipalities were elected based on family affiliation.

The social structure of the voting public sheds light on online political behaviors. For example, hamulas appear to be the source of the information that individuals require in order to make a voting decision in municipal elections. Furthermore, vital campaign activities, such as activist recruitment and persuasion are also dominated by interpersonal and clan relationships (Mustafa, 2005). Hence, the social structure within which the campaigns are anchored overshadows candidates' incentives to establish a vivid digital infrastructure (Lev-On, 2013).

In view of the significant differences in voting patterns in the Jewish and Arab populations in Israel, the remainder of the analysis refers to Internet usage among candidates in Jewish municipalities only.

The elections were held in 111 local authorities for the Jewish population sector. Of the 387 contenders, 92 were incumbents, 221 were challengers who competed against incumbents, and 74 competed in authorities in which the incumbent did not run for reelection. Out of the 92 incumbents, 67 were reelected and 25 lost. The mean number of candidates per race was 3.5.

METHOD

Procedure

Immediately after obtaining the names of candidates from the Office of the National Supervisor of Elections at the Ministry of the Interior, I searched for the candidates' websites and Facebook pages in the leading 500 results of the Google search engine, and also in Facebook's internal search engine. Candidates' contact information was retrieved from their Facebook pages and websites. I also noted whether each candidate was an incumbent, running against an incumbent, or running against other non-incumbents.

After contacting all candidates, 67 interviews with candidates who operated a Facebook page were conducted by phone, at a date and time scheduled in advance with the interviewees. Four interviewers conducted the interviews after being trained by the principal investigator who also monitored the interviews to verify that all complied with the interview procedure. The interviews were recorded and transcribed.

Interview Questions

The interviews included questions concerning candidates' general media strategy and specifically Internet strategy, their presence in social networks, the aims of their Facebook activities, their Facebook uses, their opinions of the most effective political activity on social networks, and their impact. The interviews were conducted four months after the elections, and typically lasted 15 to 20 minutes.

Participants

While selecting the interviewees, we maintained a representative cross-section of the factors that had been found to predict new media use in previous studies. The sample therefore included 40 candidates who ran against an incumbent, 8 candidates who ran against other non-incumbents, and 19 incumbents. Of the 67 interviewees, 10 ran for office in large local authorities (more than 100,000 residents); 14 in towns with a population between 50,000 and 100,000 residents; 16 in towns with a population between 20,000 and 50,000 residents; 8 in towns with a population between 10,000 and 20,000, and 19 in towns with a population of less than 10,000. An average of 80.2 posts were uploaded to the interviewees' Facebook pages in the month preceding the elections, and the content in interviewees' Facebook pages attracted an average of 2,878.5 likes in that period. Of our interviewees, 22 won the elections, while 45 lost.

Interview Analysis

Interviews were analyzed using a thematic analysis interpretation method, a systematic method of analysis used to identify recurring themes in large volumes of text. An experienced researcher scanned the texts and extracted the main themes, with reference to and reliance on previous studies that used as theoretical anchors. This method validates interviewees' subjective experiences and attitudes, while helping researchers disregard their own attitudes and perceptions.

RESULTS

Theme 1. Candidates usage of Facebook as a "Showcase"

When asked why they used Facebook in their campaigns, the candidate declared that they wished to create an inexpensive and direct channel of communication in which they could express themselves and present their personal credo. In other words, candidates were especially interested in disseminating "top-down" information.

A.A: "exposure, exposure, exposure…. Only exposure, that's all."

A.Y: "to convey our credo and report on our activities."

There were very few cases in which candidates reported that they developed campaign materials dedicated for Facebook. A considerable share of the interviewees used materials that had been disseminated on other channels.

K.B: "Everything that was published in print was also uploaded to Facebook…because on Facebook we could see how many people viewed it."

H.B: "Facebook was an integral part of this campaign, and everything that appeared in the press or on billboards also appeared on Facebook.".

In response to a question on the type of contents that appeared on their Facebook page, a large majority of candidates described contents that were mainly static, such as photos of the candidate and their teams, schedules of campaign events, and election platforms. As one candidate stated, "Facebook was our showcase window."

S.L: "First of all, we wanted… to expose what I did in my term in office…and then to convey the messages, through slogans and clips."

A.E: "Most of our Facebook use was to present information on our accomplishments in various domains: education, personal security, culture, employment."

Several candidates noted that a significant portion of Facebook activity was designed to attract fans' attention to candidates' appearances on traditional media (such as features that appeared in the press or radio interviews).

E.D: "[I used it] to report that I would be doing an interview here today, and an interview there tomorrow.".

In general, candidates made little attempt to use Facebook to create interactions with the public or use Facebook's unique features. Candidates generally did not use

Facebook's surveys, chats, interactive games or similar features. Their interactions with the public were typically limited to responses to readers' comments.

D.Y: "You can't say that we were doing something very active over there…sometimes questions were posted, and we answered them, but it didn't extend beyond that; we didn't really make more than superficial use of Facebook."

All candidates concurred that it was very important to respond to questions and comments:

A.G: "I never left any question unanswered…all residents' questions and comments always received a response."

A majority of the candidates assigned specific staff members in charge of operating their Facebook page, just as they did for other media channels.

Z.B: "My principle was that if it could be done by someone other than me, than this person should do it. So, I let my staff handle it and I went out to meet with voters and knock on people's doors."

A.B: "I did the writing. Unfortunately, there was no one else to do that… […] In retrospect, it would have been better if someone else had done it and relieved me."

Z.A: "At first I was alone and then I hired a media professional to administer the page. In the beginning I thought I could do it alone but then I understood that it wasn't possible."

N.D: "Someone conducted all of the Facebook activities for me… I had no idea what they were doing."

In contrast to the last candidate, many candidates argued that they determined the tone of their Facebook posts, and were fully aware of what happened on this platform.

A.G: "Of course I was involved… nothing was published without my approval."

I.S: "A marketing firm administered the page, and I was highly involved in everything that was posted. I approved every post, read and monitored all the activity."

Some factors that affected the decisions to use Facebook, and the perceived effectiveness of Facebook in the campaign, come up from the interviews. These factors are aligned with the factors that came up in the studies presented above. One important factor is *incumbency*. The interview materials indicate that Facebook was considered especially valuable for new candidates. The "new faces" that entered the scene had to quickly inform

many voters about their candidacy. Most new candidates believed that Facebook is the ideal tool for this purpose.

K.B: "My campaign was only two and a half months long and I didn't have the time to establish myself... I needed something that was very quick and had an immediate effect, and Facebook was perfect."

M.K: "I wasn't well known in the city…I wasn't involved in the community. To introduce a product on the market… we developed a product called M.K., and Facebook did well in putting him on the shelves… I owe quite a debt to Facebook."

A longstanding mayor underscored the difference between incumbents and newcomers' access to materials that could be used on Facebook.

E.A: "You have to distinguish between an incumbent and someone who is running for the first time… I entered the race with a track record, with a lot of accomplishments, and so I had something to show on Facebook and in the campaign in general. My entire campaign was based on my proven track record. I think that in my case, Facebook's impact was marginal."

Facebook's campaign value was also perceived differently by candidates from small towns and large cities. While candidates in large cities considered Facebook an important tool, all candidates from small towns downplayed Facebook's significance for their campaigns. They felt that personal meetings with voters were more important:

A.Y: "When you go around from one person to another and establish trust with a person- this has a multiplier effect on that person's family, and possibly his friends and neighbors. The real communications are unmediated ones."

A.B: "Although Facebook seems as if it is the most important thing out there, that's not the case. It cannot replace personal meetings, telephone calls, and the like."

In contrast, Facebook activities were much more intense in larger towns and cities, and candidates had almost the opposite attitude toward Facebook use:

Y.B: "[Facebook] is the public square, and the public square is very fertile ground; it's not a burden but rather an opportunity to reach people."

Several interviewees also indicated that specific population groups, such as Haredi populations (ultra-orthodox) or older populations, make limited use of the Internet, and certainly Facebook, hence using Facebook to reach them was useless.

M.O: "Our population is 40% Haredi and many older people who are inaccessible. To reach such populations, I put up a portable TV screen and moved it from neighborhood to neighborhood!"

M.K: "We have some 40% veteran immigrants… they hardly use sophisticated technology."

Theme 2. The advantages of Facebook for municipal campaigning

Candidates' attitudes towards Facebook are based on their awareness that a high percentage of potential voters, and especially younger voters, use it daily. Moreover, they are aware that a large portion of those users are uninterested in the local media.

M.Z: "You identify everyone who is 18 years or older and who lives in your city, and then you have a crazy number of people whom you can reach."

Y.O: "The new generation of voters is less interested with traditional media… and even Websites interest them less. Today you need Facebook, you need interactivity, you need someone to respond, and… to update it on a daily basis and post new things. That's why I think that [Facebook] has added value, assuming, of course, that you do it right."

Interviewees mentioned a range of additional advantages of Facebook, such as the ability to maintain multiple pages that appeal to different audience groups:

I.S: "There were other pages that were operated concurrently with my main page: A page in Russian, and a page for young people. Both were operated independently."

Many candidates, especially politicians with limited media coverage and resources, noted that Facebook is an inexpensive public relations platform compared to traditional media. As a result, Facebook constitutes an accessible and inexpensive way to create significant public exposure.

M.O: "It's very, very cheap and that's the most important thing. Even when you want to invite people to events!"

Another advantage of Facebook that emerged in several interviews is the absence of gatekeepers, which is demonstrated by Facebook's complete independence of traditional media. This factor was mentioned in several interviews with new candidates who argued that the local press was biased against them since its budget is frequently dependent on decisions by the incumbent mayor.

E.K: "In effect, I entered the race as a new player, and all the previous actors had a lot more coverage in the press, especially the incumbent mayor, because he's the one who funds it."

A new factor that emerged in the current study is the ability to measure the reception of campaign messages. Facebook offers quantitative estimates of a message's reception, either through quantitative measures such as the number of fans, post likes, comments and shares, or through a more sophisticated analysis available through their pages' control panels. Candidates stated that they frequently check the number of likes and new fans, as well as the number of people who merely read the messages.

K.B: "Few people reacted on my page, since we were on a serious confrontation with the incumbent mayor, who is aggressive and vindictive. We quickly understood that if people like [something on our page], to say nothing of positive responses to our posts, they could get all kinds of fines [laughing]… [Still], we knew how many people viewed the page even if they didn't respond, post, or like anything… That was really the only measure available to us."

A small number of candidates noted that Facebook makes it possible for people to contribute in different ways according to their free time, interest, and expertise:

O.R: "I saw many people who would probably not have felt comfortable to go out to the city square waving flags, [but they felt comfortable] to design banners and posters, and they felt that that was an interesting contribution that they could offer, and they triggered a wave of activism. Residents increasingly showed their creativity on this platform as the elections approached."

Although few candidates initiated interactive Facebook uses, interviewees confirmed their awareness of the advantages of interactive uses, focusing on the sense of familiarity this can generate with voters:

Z.N: "It's also good to show people who you are: I did this and that, I was this and that, I studied this and that, and then maybe people would say, 'oh, you went to school with my brother, or my son'… and conversations develop".

Y.B: "Just imagine that I know you, and when I respond to you, I write, 'Hey, Sheila." When I give you this kind of personal contact, it gives me a good feeling."

Few candidates initiated interactive activities that were designed to actively engage residents. Candidates had mixed opinions on such activities:

S.L: "I tried, and I even conducted some conversations about local issues… I have 10,000 residents [but only] 30-40 people participated in the debate… The responses were marginal compared to the number of residents or the number of people for whom the issue was relevant."

R.M: "We initiated activities on Facebook, especially on election day. We posted songs of social change, and anyone who wanted to could propose a song. It was a real celebration!"

A.H: "We posted all kinds of stimuli to prompt people to talk about things, for example, we asked people to tell us about their special place in town."

Theme 3. Candidates' concerns about Facebook use in their campaigns

When the candidates were asked about the disadvantages of using Facebook in their campaigns, most expressed concerns about the outpouring of criticism, including rude and offensive comments, which require incessant attention and resources to handle.

S.L: "Facebook is a double-edged sword. On the one hand it is a fantastic marketing tool, but on the other hand it invites any simpleton or person who is bored or opinionated…and you can't escape that!"

H.S: "Anyone can set up a fictitious Facebook page and start to tell lies or spread dirt, and there is no way you can even discover who it is."

S.L: "These local elections were a thousand times more aggressive than national elections. Anyone with a keyboard… writes something."

How do the candidates address problematic contents? Many experienced an acute dilemma of whether to delete posts or leave them visible for everyone to see. The majority of candidates chose not to delete posts or ban posters, mainly because they were concerned that the public would consider these as acts of censorship.

R.B: "If you remove every person who writes something critical [when] everyone watches… then you lose out. In other words, you have to ban people who use inflammatory speech, or curse, or are disrespectful of others, but there is no problem with everyone else, even if they are critical or even voice strong criticism."

Many candidates recounted that they responded to the comments that they found relevant and ignored offensive posts. Some candidates even encouraged criticism in order

to emphasize their own support of pluralism, and to stimulate debates on their page. One candidate stated that her supporters were the ones who responded to the negative posts that other people uploaded to her page.

K.B: "Part of my agenda was to support the legitimacy of any debate, and even if someone expressed a negative comment about me, I saluted him, I stated that I accept all responses; [my opponents] left no room for critical comments; such comments were deleted."

S.B: "Most of the time I responded. Facebook is not a uni-directional tool. If you're afraid of a dialog, you shouldn't be on Facebook."

In contrast, some candidates chose not to respond to comments at all.

E.S: "No Facebook campaign is free of "incidents" – you might be the target of outright slander… the question is how you respond. If you get stressed out and agitated, then you get dragged down to places where you don't want to find yourself. I decided that I wouldn't be a part of that, and then they just went away."

Many of the candidates expressed concerns about users who were "sent" by their opponents to sabotage their Facebook activity, either by mudslinging and spreading lies or by provoking heated arguments on controversial topics on the page.

E.M: "The fact that you can be slandered endlessly by some unnamed person and by 'foot soldiers' whose sole purpose is to slander you- that's the big disadvantage of Facebook."

Many candidates spoke of the extensive work and trouble entailed in maintaining a Facebook page. Some noted that their intensive attention to Facebook becomes a borderline obsession:

K.B: "Maintaining [a Facebook page] is hard work. You have to be 'up to date' all the time, provide materials, know how to write the materials… It's work and the work is not simple at all."

A.Y: "In some respects, it's a kind of addiction…just like people become addicted to watching the news."

There were some additional concerns mentioned by a small number of candidates. First, several candidates discussed the illusion Facebook creates and the fact that the number of likes that a candidate attracts and the positive atmosphere on her Facebook

page do not reflect the actual rate of support in the population. These interviewees describe Facebook as "misleading":

K.B: "You can see how many people viewed the page but….you can't infer who is going to vote for you from that information."

H.S: "I was in first place of all the candidates in the number of comments I received. According to Facebook I should have been mayor, but the elections proved it wrong."

E.A: "It's both very misleading and very intoxicating… the person who runs the town is not determined on Facebook."

A second problematic aspect of Facebook use mentioned by a small number of candidates, is that supporters' actions are performed through their personal profiles, and as a result, the revealed preferences of supporters become common knowledge; Concerns about personal exposure and attracting rivals' comments might deter supporters from expressing support:

M.K: "When you run against the incumbent mayor, who has been in office a long time, the population is seriously afraid of expressing their opinion….I know exactly how many people viewed and read each post… [but] very few of these people liked my posts or commented on them."

Theme 4. Candidates' perceptions of Facebook's impact on election results

Although many candidates in smaller towns did not believe that Facebook use influenced election outcomes, the vast majority of these candidates operated and regularly maintained a Facebook page. They offer two explanations in their interviews: One, Facebook is an additional channel of communication that is available at no cost, it is simple to operate, and supports widespread dissemination of messages. Two, "everyone uses it." Since Facebook use is so ubiquitous, candidates were concerned that if they didn't use Facebook, they would be left behind, they would be viewed as being "old fashioned" and inaccessible. They were also concerned by the possibility that someone might slight them on Facebook and they would be unable to respond.

A.G: "I don't think that it was very beneficial, but I had no choice… All other candidates had a Facebook page, not being there would leave that front vulnerable… and it's really easy to make a Facebook page, so if I need it, why not do it?"

A.E: "Today you have no choice, Facebook is a necessity in the political arena, I would gladly give it up but that's not possible."

When candidates were asked if they believed that election results would have been different had they not used Facebook in their campaigns, the majority of the candidates believed that campaigning on social media made little difference to the final election results. Candidates argued that Facebook is important for raising public awareness of candidates, as a means of identifying supporters and as a general measure of public sentiment, but activities on the ground, especially on election day, eclipse any achievements that Facebook enables.

S.L: "Face-to-face meetings are most important… The Facebook story unjustifiably captured center stage."

D.Y: "The important things in any election are the ability to identify your supporters and motivate them to vote. And with all due respect, Facebook might possibly help with the identification, but it can't help with the mobilization. Mobilization happens one-on-one, not through the Internet and social media; it should involve human touch."

Y.O: "At the end of the day, the goal is to motivate your voters to leave their homes and go to the polls. Facebook can help with exposure and reach…but ultimately you need to have people go to the polls, not like you on their computer."

I.G: "It doesn't have a very strong effect but you can't do without it."

Many candidates concurred with the claim that "you have to be on Facebook." While many interviewees clearly did not truly embrace Facebook use or seriously invest efforts in planning Facebook activities, they maintained a Facebook page out of a sense of obligation and awareness that Facebook was an arena that they could not afford to neglect.

M.Z: "Everybody sets up a Facebook page. You can't be absent. It's vital."

A.B: "Since Obama turned Facebook into a key [election] tool, you have to be there or otherwise you don't exist…but on the matter of its significance and effectiveness, and the public storms that it generates, these are merely storms in a teacup!"

DISCUSSION

The paper studies conceptions of Facebook usage, importance, advantages and drawbacks in political campaigns. The case study examined was Facebook use by candidates of local governments in the 2013 Israeli municipal election campaigns. To this

end, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 67 candidates. The list of interviewees was constructed to include both incumbent and non-incumbent candidates, candidates in small and large authorities, and candidates in local governments with different population characteristics.

The key findings was that many candidates argued that presence on Facebook is more of an obligation than an opportunity. They argued that "everyone has a Facebook page" and that Facebook is an arena that they can't afford to neglect; without a Facebook page, they would be "left behind," and wouldn't be familiar by the public. As a result, they invest time, effort, and resources to maintain their Facebook page.

Candidates made little attempt to use Facebook to create interactions with the public or use Facebook's unique features. Candidates generally did not use Facebook's surveys, chats, interactive games or similar features. Their interaction with the public were typically limited to responses to readers' comments.

Candidates use Facebook due to low costs; the option of conveying messages in a direct, unmediated manner; and the broad distribution of messages. The perceived significance of Facebook as a key media channel was reflected in the fact that many candidates hired special staff to operate their page, and in some cases hired professionals. Most updated their Facebook page regularly, at varying frequency.

Candidates used Facebook to convey messages in an informative, top-down manner, similar to traditional media use. In general, candidates used Facebook to create public awareness of their credo, allow the public to become familiar with the candidate, and establish the candidate's image as accessible and attentive to the public.

The candidates' main apprehensions concerning Facebook use are related to the significant time and effort that are required to operate the Facebook channel, the fear of losing control over the posts on their walls, and the fear of intentional sabotage by users who provoke disputes and undermine the candidate's image. Many candidates stated that they suspect or were certain that "agitators" had been sent to their Facebook page by their opponents, in order to stir up trouble and spread lies. Candidates' responses to such efforts ranged from shutting their eyes to the provocations in order to avoid fanning the flames, to accepting the criticism and offering relevant responses. The vast majority of candidates

objected to deleting posts, with the exception of extreme cases of posts containing curses and hate speech.

In small towns, where candidates can feasibly meet with many voters personally, candidates believed that Facebook has a more limited impact on their election campaign than did candidates in large towns, where most candidates considered Facebook an important tool that can help them to reach the public. It was also clear that Facebook was considered to be more valuable for new candidates who need media channels to expose their messages to the public. Nonetheless, incumbents used Facebook extensively although they reported that they posted mainly on reports of their accomplishments. These findings echo the quantitative findings in Lev-On & Steinfeld (Under Review).

The findings, when added to previous studies, indicate that local government candidates' use of Facebook transcends population groups and geographic locations. The interviews paint a complex picture: although most candidates do not believe that Facebook can be a decisive factor in an election campaign and are cautious about dialog and interaction, they regularly update their Facebook pages and may invest significant amounts of time and resources for this purpose.

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