

## IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON THE BEHAVIOR OF TUNISIAN VOTERS: 2014 ELECTIONS

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**ABSTRACT:** *In the era of Web 2.0, social media are becoming more and more popular among politicians as well as their institutions as an indispensable tool for political messages broadcast, federation and mobilization of voters. Considered as means of communication, these social networking sites offer now real opportunities for innovative interaction (Dewing, 2010). The use of these forms of social web quickly invaded the political arena, and drastically altered the political scenery. Thus, the main objective of this paper is to study the impact of online social media on voting behavior of the Tunisian voters in the 2014 elections. Through the data from a survey of a sample of 564 Tunisian voters, it was possible to unveil the debate about the political uses of social networks and identify their effect on the voting behavior of the Tunisian voters.*

**KEYWORDS:** voting behavior, social media, social web, politics.

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### INTRODUCTION

Today, the tie between marketing and policy raises many reflections. All over the world, political scientists underline how marketing methods influence the political world. Candidates rely on advertising during their election campaigns. These are often analyzed through semiotics and media planning. Besides, the political polls are based on marketing studies (tracking studies, exit poll studies...). Political meetings, reductions offers for new members to adhere to a party during a certain date, candidacy announcements are at the heart of marketing. The study of political parties' location by region is also done by using geomarketing methods. Other tools of the "participatory democracy" are reminiscent of the relationship marketing and "one-to-one" by which candidates would attempt to limit the intermediaries between themselves and the voters, to build a relationship that is no more one-sided and promote dialogue and fidelity. Marketing is influenced by the technological revolution and the development of the internet. Such influence has increased with the advent of social networks. In fact, online social media play today a role, admittedly very important, in the information environment like its predecessors, radio, television and the Internet in its beginning.

Social media opens up new paths of influence and speech. They have a role, increasingly important, in the orientation and understanding of political behavior. Online social networks are a modern way to keep abreast of political affairs. Politicians seek increasingly to adapt their messages to these new tools to reach an audience which may be potential voters. In this regard, Barack Obama has made social networking a cornerstone in the organization of his two electoral campaigns in 2008 and 2012. His campaign team tried to make his message visible

on the social web, to communicate it to his potential electorate, to ensure the proper understanding and dissemination and bring together a community around a project of a candidate.

Thus, the objective of this paper is to study the impact of online social media on the voting behavior of Tunisian voters in the 2014 elections. It includes a first part consisting of a literature review on voting behavior as well as political communication via the Internet. The main theoretical results are empirically tested in the second part to finally infer the main operational implications.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Voting behavior

#### 1. Explanatory models of voting behavior

Several studies have attempted to explain the voter's voting behavior and the scientific debate on the explanatory factors of the electoral behavior since many years.

Several explanatory models of the voting behavior were developed in previous works, but they can be grouped into three main types:

- The first is "**the sociological model**", it is associated with the work of the sociologist Paul Lazarsfeld. In this model, voters decide before the electoral campaign and remain faithful to their original choice.
- The second model is the "**psycho-political model or as the party identification model**". It stresses the importance of "party identification" and the emotional and lasting attachment to a party to explain the behavior of the voter (Campbell & al, 1960).
- The third model is "**the model of the rational voter**" which finds its origins in the rational choice theory (Down, 1957). The basic idea is that the voters vote rationally and choose the party which represents the most interest to the person and to his/her family.

#### The determinants of the voting behavior

The analysis of the determinants of voting behavior has been the subject of several studies, both theoretical and empirical (Gaxie, 1989; Dubois and Fauvelle-Aymar, 2004; Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier, 2006). These researches group the explanatory variables of voting in three categories: structural variables, conjunctural variables and media and opinion polls.

- **Structural variables:** Also known as heavy voting behavior variables or long-term variables, these variables correspond to demographic, socio-economic and cultural factors that seem most significant and explanatory of vote (Gaxie 1989 Dubois and Fauvelle-Aymar 2004, Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier 2006). However, Ghiuță (2014) emphasizes the importance of individual and psychological variables in determining the voting behavior.

Starting by **Demographic variables** they includes age, gender and region. Regarding the age, several researchers confirmed that older people vote differently to youths and that the more a person is old, the more he/she is likely to vote (Blais et al 2002; Nevitte et al 1999; Rubenson et al. 2003). According to Héran (2004), the youngest and the oldest people abstain the least. Other authors consider that age has an effect mostly on the stability of electoral choices and the vote of youths is more volatile than that of elderly (Ysmal 1990 Muxel 2001).

Today the women's vote was aligned with that of men (Ysmal, 1990). Thus, the gender is no longer very discriminating in the voting behavior and femininity has ceased to be a conservative element (Sineau, 1988. Rubenson et al 2003). Finally regarding the impact of Region: André Siegfried, sociologist, geographer and historian tried to show that certain geographical aspects could affect lifestyles favoring thus the left or right vote

**Socio-economic variables** depend on the professional status, the income level and the importance of patrimony. These variables play an important role in electoral choices. The relationship between socioeconomic status and voting behavior has been the subject of numerous studies (Michelat and Simon 1985 Mayer, 1986 Blais 2000).

**Cultural factors** includes the level education and the religion. According to the current literature, voter turnout increases with the level of education of voters (Blais et al. 2002). A high level of education increases the likelihood to vote and to be interested in politics. In other words, a voter with a high level of study is less abstainer and adopts a strategist behavior (Blais et al., 2002; Gidengil et al., 2004). Previous research shows that religious variable explains vote better than class variable. The vote of the left varies more depending on the religious practice more than on the objective belonging to the working class (Guy and Simon, 1977).

**Psychological variables: Voting** behavior can be explained by reference to a number of internal factors such as perception, attitude, motivation, emotion, learning and memory (Ghiuță, 2014).

- **Conjunctural factors** :We speak in this case about a challenging vote or all the election political factors which may influence the choice of the voters in the short term. These factors are related to the party system and the electoral system as well as to the candidate's personality.

- **The influence of media and opinion polls**

Sociological research showed the ability of media to influence and shape the citizen's opinion. So, when media focus on the negative aspects of a political party, this may influence the perceptions of voters. Political leaders are aware that media have an effect on the vote's behavior that is why they try to present a positive media image.

Regarding the opinion polls, they can affect the behavior of the electors in general. For instance, voters can stay at home if the result seems to be inevitable. In some countries, opinion polls are banned as they influence the eventual outcome.

## POLITICAL COMMUNICATION IN THE INTERNET PRISM

### Social web developments

Social media appeared on the Web when it became possible for internet users to effectively participate in the development of online content, or with Web 2.0. Like large organizations, this free environment allows thousands of individuals and small entrepreneurs to create collaborative products, access to new markets and to join with others. According to Cazzava (2008), social media assume, firstly, the online publication of content and, secondly, the sharing of files, opinions, but also social interactions between individuals with common interests. This involves the grouping into communities of interest, the acquisition of reputation for any individual and also the development of influence on the web. So social media are meeting places for individuals, self-expression and sharing of opinions or information.

Today, Facebook is the first social network used on the web, followed by the evolving twitter, then google + and Instagram which are of a minority use and less presence.

In 2014 Facebook celebrated its 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary with 1.15 billion active users worldwide. They increase primarily with the advancement of their changing media such as smartphones, tablets and even new generation of televisions. With the advent of new technologies and the proliferation of smart devices, smartphones mainly, the internet has become a great source of not only of information but also of dialogue and expression. The web has become a weapon of mass communication and televised speech. Indeed, nowadays, interviews or political articles are no longer the only means available for citizens to be politically informed.

For over twelve years, the internet provides to US election campaigns a place for additional deployment. In fact, the political activity on the Internet is inserted in very broad socio-political processes, online electoral campaigns can be assimilated to socio-technical networks, where practices are shaping technology (Vedel, 1994; Bijker, 1995; McKenzie, Wajcman 1999). The rigorous quantitative studies conducted at regular intervals in the United States confirm day after day the merger of politics and the Internet (Chadwick, 2006: 175; Rainie, 2007).

### **Effect of social media on the vote behavior**

Today the world is interconnected almost instantly via social networks that have disrupted the traditional ways of communication and impacted the social and political lives of individuals. Indeed, social media are competing with traditional media even in the political context (Waddell, 2009). We talk about the emergence of web marketing policy. Thus, for politicians and their organizations, social media are considered as election campaign tools since they help to spread political messages and discover the areas of interest and needs of voters and the general population.

Social media can now promote greater pluralism in political speeches. We think that over time social media will grow in importance compared to traditional media as a source of political information (Waddell, 2009). Thus, parties and political leaders have gradually involved in the new sphere of web 2.0 to provide an online reputation called e-reputation. We also note the emergence of “community management CM”: community managers contribute to the effective management of the online reputation and presence of politicians. In this respect, digital marketing has recently emerged as essential to increase and improve one’s online reputation. Social media have a significant potential to promote political participation and a potential to influence the turnout of voters. Indeed, by making use of the rational choice model, reducing costs of obtaining the information leads to an increase in the individual vote probability.

The common will to win potential voters on the Web was inspired by a careful observation of the US 2008 election, with the example of Barack Obama. The 2008 election was the first election where candidates have used social media tools such as Facebook and Twitter (Woolley, Limperos and Oliver 2010). That was the way that President Obama used especially Facebook, YouTube and political blogs to reach users (Hanson et al. 2010). Throughout the year 2011 the use of social media has experienced a very strong growth in all Arab countries. Social networks were considered as a simple tool for social networking and entertainment, now they are becoming ubiquitous in all aspects of the daily life of millions of Arabs. Social media effects are discussed in the occurrences and achievements of the Arab Spring (Howard and

Hussain 2011). Policymakers have gradually recognized this trend and became involved in it regularly. In a similar framework, despite the late follow-up of such a trend in France, politicians have also involved themselves to the online social media. This promoted, from the presidential election of 2012, the emergence of Facebook pages or Twitter accounts specifically dedicated to parties and politicians.

Now, the web has become a "massive communication weapon". Thus, with the emergence and dominance of social networks, political organizations have realized the importance of investing massively social networks. They seem able to reduce the time allocated to communication and, therefore, increase colossally the targeted public. In fact, social networks can replace the movements of politicians by exchanges on the web.

The emergence of social web tools and their rapid development revolutionized political practices, insofar as they have a significant impact on citizens. Moreover, they are sometimes called "e-citizens." Without going so far, social networks can be a real interactivity between citizens and politicians. Moreover, they can be considered a true "power-cons" in the sense that they can directly influence their environment through a formal or informal social "networking" through reading, debating, proposing or making choices, by revolting, manifesting, criticizing ... Thus, this social networking has created a new form of citizenship by promoting the direct contact of the citizen who would be able to perform and to have a say in politics.

In the same vein, the social web can be a very powerful tool for call for vote. In addition, social networks represent an opportunity to get closer to voters out of the "institutionalized" codes of political communication (Léon Walry, 2014). In short, the virtual space becomes a place for socialization to accentuate citizen participation in elections and to confirm their involvement in politics. In this regard, Clarke (2010) assume that social media personalize politics and enhance public confidence in government institutions and public personalities. Also these types of online exchanges may remedy the idea that public institutions are "too rigid and passive" compared to "contemporary society". Furthermore, social media can encourage young people to participate in the democratic process. According to research conducted in the UK, young people are more likely to use the internet to learn about politics than older people (Di Gennaro and Dutton, 2006).

According Walry Léon (2014), social networks can be considered as "powerful new cars launched on the road to the Internet. Without a good knowledge of social networks, slips and accidents are inevitable". Thus, it remains unclear how to use them properly, as their use is not safe and can cause inconveniences, the fact that from the moment we do not take care of the diffused messages on the web, the risk of misinterpretation and controversy becomes wider and swells quickly with the users' comments. In addition, the risks of social media lie in the security, privacy and freedom of expression. They could make it more difficult to protect the public image of a person or institution.

## **METHODOLOGY**

We will collect direct self-declarations (face to face survey) about the voting behavior of the Tunisian voters, its determinants and the main factors that influence it. The sample was selected according to convenience method and the questionnaire was administered face to face in

different regions to ensure a more intense geographical coverage as indicated in appendix A (Grand Tunis, North East, North West, Central East, Central West, Southeast, and Southwest). To achieve the study's research objectives, we will proceed by descriptive statistical analysis and chi-square analyzes to answer questions of the study. The survey was conducted with a sample of 564 Tunisian citizens whose distribution had the following structure: 52.5% men and 47.5% women. The majority of our sample (75.2%) was made up of young people and adults between 18 and 39 years. Practically, all professional categories were included in our sample. Appendix A summarizes in detail the different profiles of our sample.

## RESULTS

We performed descriptive statistics analyzes and chi-square analyzes to answer the research questions of the study. All the interviewed persons participated in the 2014 elections (legislative and/or presidential 1 and/or 2 presidential) and are all Internet users. Participation rates are as follows: 89.7% participated in the legislative elections, 86.2% participated in the presidential elections 1 against 88.7% who participated in presidential elections 2. Furthermore, examination of the results shows that the main sources of information used by voters in the decision making were the traditional media followed by the environment and social networks with rates of 29%; 26.5% and 23.2%. However, analysis of the results of the ranking of these sources in terms of importance has shown that social networks are ranked second just after the traditional media. To deepen the understanding of the impact of social networks on the decision of the Tunisian voters in the 2014 elections, we asked participants to name the major social networks they had consulted in making voting decisions. The results show that Facebook is the most used social network by participants with 79.3% far exceeding other social networks (Youtube with 14.9% against 5.8% for Twitter and Google plus). In the same context, it was found that the surveyed population uses social media primarily to learn about the programs of political parties with a rate of 33.3% and use it as a tool for decision support in voting with a rate of 24%.

Similarly, social networks can be used as a means of mobilization and motivation of voters (23.9%). However, it seems that the use of social networks in the evaluation of political leaders is little limited, especially with the spontaneous evocation of some participants that social networks can be considered as a source of manipulating candidates' image. In this respect, most of the subjects in our sample reported that social networks were of great importance in determining their choice of political parties to which they voted (56%), against a minority at 12.4% only which granted an importance rating of less than 5 out of 10. The crossing of the question on the sources of decision making and gender of respondents, we can observe that 564 participants gave a valid response to the question. This represents 100% of the sample. The test will be based on these observations.

According to the pivot table, we see that 53.4% of men reported using the surrounding as main source of vote decision against 46.6% for women. From this, can we say that men and women have different attitudes with regard to the surrounding as a source of decision to vote? It is also observed that the degree of significance is very high ( $p=0.481$ ), indicating that the differences between the observed and expected occurrences are not significant. We must therefore accept the null hypothesis that women and men answer the question alike. It seems that the gender of participants has no influence on the choice of the surrounding as the main source of making

voting decisions. However, the effect of gender on the choice of the family as a source of decision making during elections seems significant ( $p < 0.05$ ), especially for women (52.6%). Similarly, the results show that gender has no significant effect on the selection of participants for traditional media and social media as a major source of decision making in voting ( $p = 0.484$ ;  $p = 0.467$ ).

Proceeding in the same way, we made the following intersections:

- Information sources with age and information sources with the level of education.
- Choice of social media with gender, then with age and finally with the level of education.

In summary, the results allow us to presume that age and educational level had no significant effect on the choice of the surrounding as a source of making voting decisions with respective significance level of 0.222 and 0.417. However, it turned out that age has a significant effect on the adoption of the family as a source of information during the decision making insofar as it appears that young people whose age is between 18 and 29 resort to the family more than other age groups to make their decision to vote (48.2% of the population surveyed).

As for the relationship between age and the use of traditional media, it also remains significant ( $p = 0.049 < 0.05$ ). As expected, it appears that the relationship between age and social networks is highly significant with  $p = 0.00$ . In particular, it turns out that it is the younger (aged between 18 and 39 years old) who use more social networks as sources of help in making voting decisions with a rate of 73.2%.

In the same stratum, the results show that the level of education has a significant effect on the choice of the family, traditional media and social networks as sources of making voting decision ( $p = 0.00$ ;  $p = 0.001$ ;  $p = 0.00$ ). In other words, respondents with higher levels of education resort more to the family, traditional media and social networks to decide on the choice of political parties (46.7%; 61.4%; 74.1%). To better understand the role of social networks in the elections, we proceeded to the application of chi-square test crossing the question on the most used social networks with that which examines the role of social networks in the elections. The results are significant ( $p = 0.00$ ) and show that Facebook and Youtube are considered by respondents as the main means adopted to learn about the political programs, evaluate political leaders, mobilize voters and assist them in making voting decision.

Moreover, we used the variance ANOVA (appendix B) to test comparing averages over several independent samples. In fact, we have to cross a qualitative variable for several modalities with a quantitative variable (metric) to see if there is a link between the role played by social networks and the degree of importance attached by the participants to these networks when choosing their political parties. In other words, we want to know if the role filled by the social network, according to the voter, has an impact on the level of importance that he/she will give to such social web support.

Thus, the examination of the results of the ANOVA shows that the relationship between the said variables was significant ( $p < 0.05$ ), which means that the differences in tools are statistically significant. The difference between the four groups of individuals is significant. We can therefore conclude that social networks (including Facebook and YouTube) inspire their importance from the roles they play according to respondents. In other words, the degree

of importance attached by respondents to social networks varies significantly depending on the role undertaken by such networks.

Indeed, the participants said that social networks played an important role in the choice of their political parties, to the extent that they used them as effective sources of information about the programs of their political parties ( $F=15.517$ ;  $p=0.00$ ). Similarly, the social web tools are considered effective ways to support decision-making of participants who use to choose their political parties during elections ( $F=12.725$ ,  $p=0.00$ ). Furthermore, these social networks are also qualified important because they represent a means to mobilize voters, the fact that we live today a growing trend in the number of adhered on these networks ( $F=7.982$ ,  $p=0,00$ ). Finally, respondents also reported having assessed the political leaders through these social networks, this is what makes them a very important tool in their choice of political parties in elections ( $F=7.114$ ,  $p=0.00$ ).

## DISCUSSIONS AND PERSPECTIVES

This study allowed assessing the importance of traditional media, the surrounding and social media as the main sources of information adopted by voters in making voting decisions. Thus, social networks are ranked second just after traditional media in terms of importance according to the classification made by the participants. This confirms, a priori, the weight of the roles played by social networks (including Facebook and YouTube) in the 2014 elections. Today, with the proliferation of new RSS waves and the easy access to them, the role entrusted to social networks in politics has become more important than ever. Indeed, in addition to their informational role, social networks are considered as a means of voting decision making and mobilization of participants in elections. In this sense, Tunisian citizens access social networks not only for information about the programs of political parties, but also to structure an opinion in making voting decisions.

Moreover, our results showed that socio-demographic criteria of respondents such as age and level of education have a significant effect on sources adopted by the participants when taking voting decision. As for the effect of gender, it remains significant only on the family. In this respect, it is inferred that the profile of the Tunisian elector whose electoral choice is determined by the social networks as a source of information is a young (male or female) aged between 18 and 39 years with a high level of education. They are always connected via the web and therefore access easily to social networks, which makes them a generation of technophiles. In fact, with the increasing proliferation of smart devices, smartphones mainly, young people have become able to connect all the time from any place.

Thus, with the development of the social web, the importance given to social networks seems to be in rapid rise from one day to another in all areas including that of politics. In Tunisia, Facebook and YouTube are seen by voters as the indispensable means of information on political leaders and the programs of their parties and are accepted as effective tools for decision support. Indeed, our study confirmed that, with the key roles they played in the 2014 elections, the social network were able to upset the political life in Tunisia and influence largely trends and visions voters.

Ainsi, avec le développement du web social, l'importance prêtée aux réseaux sociaux semble en montée rapide d'un jour à l'autre dans tous les domaines et notamment celui de la politique.

En Tunisie, Facebook et youtube sont considérés par les électeurs comme étant des moyens indispensables d'information sur les leaders politiques ainsi que les programmes de leurs partis, et sont admis comme outils efficaces d'aide à la décision. En effet, notre étude a confirmé que, grâce aux rôles déterminants qu'ils ont joué dans les élections de 2014, les réseaux sociaux étaient en mesure de bouleverser la vie politique en Tunisie et d'influencer en grande partie les tendances et les visions des électeurs.

## CONCLUSION

The purpose of this research is to address the impact of social networks on the voting behavior of Tunisian voters during the 2014 elections. The main results are broadly in favor of the important role of social media in determining the electoral decision of the Tunisian voter. Indeed, it was found that social networks are an essential source for information and form an opinion with respect to parties and candidates. Specifically, our study showed that Facebook and YouTube were the most used social networks by Tunisian voters. At the end of this research, it should be noted that the profile of the Tunisian voter, sensitive towards social networks in taking voting decision, is a well-educated young who often uses Facebook and Twitter to learn about the political programs and to assess candidates. Being part of a qualified technophiles generation, these young people frequently connect via the web and rely on social networks and consider them as intimate spaces for exchanging ideas and sharing convictions. Our study enriches the previous work addressing the determinants of voting behavior by confirming the weight of social networks as a source of shaping voting decisions. Such results may be taken into consideration by politicians in the next election to promote their election campaigns and unite voters around their projects.

Although this research provides relevant results, it has some limitations that should be taken into account in future studies. Indeed, it is appropriate to incorporate a model illustrating voting behavior on the Tunisian voters by ensuring the introduction of the main variables to enrich such as political brand and political cynicism. Similarly, it would be wise to understand the nature of structural and conjectural factors adopted by the voters in their electoral choice. In addition, the credibility of the social networks content is still a huge component to be of interest, in subsequent works, to better explain voting behavior of voters.

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<b>Appendix A : Profile of participants in the survey</b>			
<b>Feature</b>			
<b>Gender</b>			
	N	valid percent	cumulative percent
Male	296	52,5	52,5
Female	268	47,5	100
Total	564	100	
<b>Age</b>			
	N	valid percent	cumulative percent
18-29	286	50,7	50,7
30-39	138	24,5	75,2
40-49	70	12,4	87,6
50-59	54	9,6	97,2
60 and more	16	2,8	100
Total	564	100	
<b>Instruction level</b>			
	N	valid percent	cumulative percent
Primary or illiterate	82	14,5	14,5
secondary	140	24,8	39,4
Bachelor degree, university	284	50,4	89,7
postgraduate	58	10,3	100
Total	564	100	
<b>Region</b>			
	N	valid percent	cumulative percent
Big Tunis	142	25,2	25,2
North East( nabeul, bizerte)	76	13,5	38,7
North wesr ( beja jandouba)	76	13,5	52,1
Center-East ( sousse, sfax)	100	17,7	69,9
Center West (kasserine , sidi bouzid)	78	13,8	83,7
South West (gabes , medenine)	32	5,7	89,4
South East ( gafsa , tozeur)	60	10,6	100
Total	564	100	

**Appendix B: ANOVA 1 factor**

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Squares	F	Sig.
Information' Source on programs of political parties	Between groups	25,869	9	2,874	15,517	0
	Within groups	102,621	554	0,185		
	Total	128,489	563			
means to evaluate political leaders	Between groups	12,696	9	1,411	7,114	0
	Within groups	109,857	554	0,198		
	Total	122,553	563			
means of mobilization	Between groups	17,523	9	1,947	7,982	0
	Within groups	135,129	554	0,244		
	Total	152,652	563			
means to assist in making voting decision	Between groups	24,057	9	2,673	12,725	0
	Within groups	116,369	554	0,21		
	Total	140,426	563			