

Inquiry into the impact of social media on elections and electoral administration

Dear Mr. Tarlamis,

We are honored that the Elections Committee of the Parliament of Victoria has asked our organization (Politools) for our opinion on social media and elections.

Our background

Politools is a non-profit NGO established in 2004 by a cross-disciplinary team of scientists (political and communication science, historians, economists and information science). Almost all of its current members work also as researchers at Swiss universities. Politools is dedicated to provide citizens with reliable political information and to civic education projects in general. It is the provider of the Swiss Voting Advice Application (VAA) “smartvote” (www.smartvote.ch). Smartvote allows voters to search for specific candidates or parties, which match best to their own policy preferences. More than 85% of candidates and 93% of MPs make their political positions/profiles available on the smartvote website and one out of five Swiss voters uses the websites as one of his/her main information sources during election campaigns. Smartvote was provided for more than 250 elections in Switzerland on all federal levels (national, cantonal (state level) or local).

Since 2019 a cooperation between Politools and the Australian National University (ANU) exists. This cooperation resulted in smartvote Australia, which was already offered for the Australian Federal Election in 2019 and currently also for the ACT election.

Elections and social media – the case of Switzerland

Of course, we follow the scientific discussion on the influence of social media on opinion formation, elections and democracy in general, but we restrict our comments to the situation in Switzerland – assuming that you have better suited experts for the situation in Australia or other countries at hand.

Social media do not play a crucial role in Swiss election campaigns. A special report of the Swiss Elections Study (Selects) analyzed the role of social media during the campaign to the last Swiss national elections in October 2019 (see Gilardi et al. 2020; only available in German).¹ The report concludes as follows:

¹ <https://digdemlab.io/docs/SelectsTechnischerReport2019.pdf>

“The evaluation of the social media use by candidates shows that in Switzerland a certain sobriety against the disruption of political debate through Twitter or Facebook is appropriate. The reach of the candidates who appear online at all, is limited, as well as the number of politicians, who can use Facebook as a possibility to place political advertising is very small.

Overall, it can be said that both the election campaign and the electoral success were not decisively determined by social media. Often the politicians with the most impact on social media, were already established and well-known politicians (mostly incumbents). With other words a politician’s range in social media came with the office, rather than the other way round.”

This reports’ main conclusion, that social media do not play a major role in Swiss election campaigns is supported by the findings of two further most recent studies. First, the main report of the Swiss Elections Study, which is based on comprehensive survey among candidates and voters. Table 1 presents the importance of different campaign instruments for candidates as well as the importance of the information sources for voters for the 2019 Swiss national elections.

With the exception of Facebook, social media did not play a major role in the candidates' campaign activities. In addition, the already cited report by Gilardi et al. (2020) showed that although most candidates have a Facebook account, they rarely use it for targeted election campaigns. For voters, social media play an even smaller role as information source in their electoral decision-making process.

Table 1: Use of campaign instruments by candidates and importance of voters' information sources in the 2019 Swiss national elections

Campaign instruments	%	Information sources	%
Voting advice application «smartvote»	85	TV / Radio broadcasts	55
Flyer / posters (party level)	70	Discussions with family and friends	55
Facebook	65	Newspapers (print or online)	43
Flyer / posters (candidate level)	55	Postal mailings / advertisements	27
Canvassing («door-to-door» or telephone campaigns)	51	Discussions with coworkers or at school	20
Meetings with party members	48	Voting advice application «smartvote»	20
PR / media (giving interviews, writing of op-eds for newspapers)	46	Posters	14
Public debates	40	Websites, blogs, social media	13
Whatsapp	35	Advertisements in newspapers	13
E-Mail (individual mails)	33	Opinion survey	9
Own website	31	Public debates	5
Own advertisements in newspapers	28	Street stand actions	3
Twitter	22	Canvassing («door-to-door» or telephone campaigns)	1
Telephone campaigning	17		
Visiting companies	15		
Mass e-mailing / newsletter	13		
Instagram	8		
Youtube	6		

Source: Swiss Electoral Study (Selects) 2019.

Notes: N of candidates = 2,121; N of voters = 4,763; data is weighted for participation in the election and party choice; multiple answers were possible.

The second study was focusing on voters' opinion formation on cantonal level (i.e., the 2019 elections in the Canton of Zurich). With regard to Australia that would represent elections on

state level (e.g., Victoria). In general, it provides similar results as the studies on national elections.

Table 2: Importance of voters' information sources in the 2019 elections in the Canton of Zurich

Voters' information sources	%
Newspapers (print or online)	87.2
Discussions with family and friends	45.8
TV broadcasts	41.2
User comments on newspapers websites	36.6
Flyers, posters, advertisements	33.9
E-mail / newsletters	26.3
Voting advice application «smartvote»	25.7
Radio broadcasts	25.6
Candidates' / parties' websites	19.2
Social media (Facebook, Twitter, Youtube)	18.0
Discussions with coworkers or at school	14.3
Blogs	10.2
Civic education platforms (e.g., Easyvote, Politnetz)	10.0
Instant messengers (e.g., Whatsapp)	7.6
Events, podiums, street stand actions	6.1
Online discussion forums	6.1
Canvassing («door-to-door» or telephone campaigns)	6.0
Podcasts	2.2

Source: SNF Digital Lives project «*Digitalization and Electoral Decision-Making: The Impact of Voting Advice Applications on Electoral Choice, Polarization and Democratic Representation*».

Notes: N of voters = 3,840, data is weighted for participation in the election and party choice; multiple answers were possible.

With regard of the relatively low importance/impact of social media in election campaigns in Switzerland, it is not surprising that there is no broad public discussion about any necessary regulation, as is the case in the USA, Canada, the UK or the European Union. Although such a discussion does exist to some extent among a few scientists/experts, the problem pressure for a more in-depth discussion within a broader public is not yet great enough.

In 2019 Politools/smartvote was part of small research project together with the Bern University of Applied Science as well as the Universities of Zurich and Geneva in order to assess the

candidates' positions with regard to digital transformation (Fivaz et al. 2020; only available in German).² A part of this study also addressed the issue of social media with the following four statements, which the candidates could approve or reject:

1. Social media platforms should be subject to the same rules as traditional media (e.g. liability for published content of users).
2. Social media platforms should be obligated to take more active measures against fake news (invented or ma-nulled news) and systematic disinformation.
3. It is sufficient for the social media to assume their responsibility through self-regulation within the industry; government intervention is unnecessary.
4. Providers of online advertising should be obliged to maintain a public directory of all published advertisements with political content.

A broad majority of candidates from all major parties approves statement 1 (56-93% approval rate). The answers for statement 2 provide a very similar picture with approval rates between 54-95%. Regarding the other two statements larger differences among the parties occurred. A majority of the right-wing parties approved the idea, that self-regulation for social media would be sufficient, whereas center and left-wing parties considered self-regulation as insufficient to enforce the demands form statements 1 and 2. The same conflict pattern comes up regarding statement 4. The right-wing parties reject the idea of public database providing access to all political advertisements published on social media (or search platforms like Google), whereas center and left-wing parties would support more transparency.

With regard to the seat distribution in the Swiss parliament it is unlikely that without at least a partial support from right-wing parties demands for more regulation of social media will have any chances of approval in Switzerland. The question remains, why social media play a significantly smaller role in Switzerland compared to other countries? One reason may be the fragmentation of the Swiss party system. The Swiss party system belongs to the most polarized party systems in Europe. However, the negative effects of this high level of polarization might be mitigated by the equally high level of fragmentation in the party system. In contrast to countries as the USA or the UK there are at least five major parties in Switzerland instead of only two. This fragmentation also requires the building of coalitions to form the national or cantonal governments and by this could mitigate the effects of polarization. It could be that social media have less of a disruptive effect in such a political context than in a system with only two clearly separate political blocks/parties.

Interestingly, the discussion about the role and any potentially necessary regulation of social media has recently gained momentum. This, however, is not due to election campaigns, but rather in connection with the COVID-19 crisis or the discussion about the measures ordered by the government (lockdown, quarantine, etc.). In this context, disinformation was spread in

² <https://www.bfh.ch/dam/jcr:302fad7f-4fc1-4236-ba51-b6a86c9aac4d/Digitalisierungsmonitor2019.pdf>

extreme form in the social media and conspiracy theories were spread (e.g. Qanon). The potential danger of social media is now widely discussed, especially in this context. Whether this discussion will also lead to political measures or will be reflected in party politics, however, is currently still open.

Recommendations – future research

We do not feel entitled to make any policy recommendations as we cannot assess the situation in Australia. Nevertheless, we would like to point out two aspects:

1. It could make sense not only to focus on the role of social media. The example of Switzerland (and also most other western European countries) shows that also other forms of digital information sources as voting advice application or other data-driven websites (e.g., MP-monitoring websites) also contribute to the digital opinion formation. The example of Switzerland can show, that a website like smartvote is an important information source for voters and contributes to a more fact-based than an emotion-driven decision-making process. Voting advice applications are also available in Australia (smartvote and the much better-known ABC's vote compass), thus also quality standards for such applications should be discussed (e.g., quality of questionnaire design, guaranteeing same chances for all parties/candidates, privacy policies regarding the data of voters collected).
2. The scientific discussion on the impact of social media is dominated by research from the USA. However, most of these findings cannot be reproduced in Switzerland. It seems that the local political context is of crucial importance when it comes to the impact of social media on elections campaigns and democracy. Social media effects, which can be shown in US campaigns, often have no validity for Swiss campaigns. There is a clear research gap, when it comes to this line of research outside the USA. Thus, we are very proud to be part of research project approved by the Swiss National Science Foundation this summer, which will address the impact of online news consumption, social media and smartvote on Swiss voters.³ The project will start this December and end in December 2024. We would like to emphasize that for a more in-depth discussion of these aspects it is not sufficient to refer to research results from the USA, but that local research projects are indispensable. To support such localized research approaches we are happy to share our research plan with colleagues at ANU or other Australian universities so that it can serve as input for further Australian projects.

Politools, 30 September 2020.

³ <https://www.nfp77.ch/en/portfolio/does-digital-information-and-news-consumption-endanger-democracy>

