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The use of social media for public outreach in elections for election management bodies and political parties



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Executive Summary

This paper explores how **Election Management Bodies (EMBs) and political parties can leverage social networks** to engage voters, mobilize support, increase political and civic awareness and enhance electoral transparency. It highlights the benefits, challenges, and risks associated with social platforms and offers recommendations for optimizing their use while safeguarding electoral integrity.

Social networks have **revolutionized election communication** by providing direct access to voters, bypassing traditional media filters, and facilitating targeted, cost-effective campaigns. Platforms like Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube enable personalized engagement, disseminate information in a rapid manner, enhanced voter participation and awareness, and tailor messaging to specific voter segments.

Despite these benefits, social networks also pose **significant risks**, including misinformation and disinformation, which can erode public trust in the electoral process; polarization and echo chambers, which reinforce biases and deepen divisions; and cyber threats, which jeopardize both information security and electoral integrity.

To fully harness social networks' potential while mitigating these risks, EMBs and political parties must adopt **strategic, transparent, and ethical digital communication practices**.

EMBs play a vital role in maintaining the integrity of electoral processes by ensuring the accurate dissemination of information, voter education, and public trust in elections. Social networks serve as powerful tools that enable EMBs to expand their outreach and engagement, particularly among diverse and hard-to-reach voter groups. Through strategic use of digital platforms, EMBs can:

- **enhance accessibility and inclusivity**: by leveraging social media, EMBs can reach a broader and more diverse electorate, including youth, first-time voters, marginalized communities, and citizens in remote areas. Digital platforms provide an effective means of delivering election-related content in multiple languages, formats, and accessibility-friendly designs, ensuring that voter information is inclusive and widely available.
- **Deliver timely and accurate information**: social networks allow EMBs to communicate real-time updates on election schedules, voter registration deadlines, polling locations, voting procedures, and other essential electoral information. By utilizing visual aids, infographics, videos, and interactive content, EMBs can clarify complex electoral processes and prevent confusion or misinterpretation of election laws and regulations.
- **Promote transparency and trust**: EMBs can reinforce public confidence in the electoral process by using social networks to share insights into election management, security measures, and ballot-counting procedures. Regular updates, live-streamed announcements, and interactive Q&A sessions with electoral officials can help foster trust and counter suspicions of bias or irregularities.
- **Foster voter awareness and civic engagement**: by utilizing engaging and innovative content, EMBs can encourage civic participation, educate voters on their rights and responsibilities, and raise awareness about the importance of elections. Digital campaigns can include interactive quizzes, educational videos, gamified learning

experiences, and social media challenges to inspire broader participation, particularly among younger demographics.

- **Combat misinformation and disinformation:** the proliferation of false or misleading election-related content on social networks poses a serious threat to electoral integrity. EMBs can proactively counteract disinformation by fact-checking viral claims, correcting misleading narratives, and partnering with independent fact-checking organizations. Establishing rapid response teams to monitor and debunk false claims in real time can help protect voters from being misled by propaganda, disinformation or manipulated digital content.

By harnessing the power of social media, EMBs can strengthen electoral integrity, increase voter engagement, and ensure that all citizens have access to transparent, factual, and reliable election information. However, this requires a structured, well-coordinated digital strategy that prioritizes accuracy, security, and responsiveness to emerging digital threats.

In the digital age, social networks have become an indispensable tool for **political parties** to reach, engage, and mobilize voters. Political parties increasingly rely on digital platforms for campaigning, voter organisation, and brand building, leveraging the interactive and real-time nature of these platforms to shape political narratives, influence public opinion, and drive electoral success. The rise of data-driven digital strategies has further transformed election campaigns, enabling targeted outreach and strategic messaging. Political parties can strategically use social networks to:

- **bypass traditional media channels** and communicate directly with voters. This direct engagement enables parties to build relationships with the electorate, create interactive discussions, humanize candidates and party leaders and respond to crises or controversies swiftly.
- **Mobilise voters** by targeting specific voter segments, using digital advertising, encouraging grassroots activism and run fundraising campaigns. Digital platforms enable highly targeted, scalable, and cost-effective voter mobilization strategies.
- **Shape their public identity and influence voter perceptions** through consistent messaging and storytelling to reinforce party values, key policies, and long-term vision; strategic use of visuals and slogans to create campaign branding; collaborations with opinion-makers who can amplify their reach and credibility among specific demographic groups; crisis management tactics that allow parties to repair possible reputational damage quickly.
- **Influence public opinion and political discourse:** political parties can use social platforms as a powerful tool to set political agendas, frame discussions, and control narratives by amplifying policy discussions, reframing debates and utilizing meme culture and viral trends.

However, the use of social networks in politics also presents significant challenges, including misinformation, negative campaigning, and foreign interference, which can distort democratic processes, manipulate public perception, and erode trust in electoral systems. Therefore, the use of social platforms in political campaigns comes with **serious risks and ethical dilemmas**, that parties should carefully and responsibly address.

The section concerning the **usage of social platforms in North Macedonia** during the 2024 elections showed that the State Election Commission (SEC) uses social networks to

communicate with voters, but its presence is sporadic and largely limited to election periods. The content published is informative, focusing on official SEC communications and voter education. User interaction across platforms is minimal, and there is an opportunity to enhance engagement and outreach, especially during non-election periods.

Enhancing the SEC's social media presence may contribute to public engagement, ensuring transparency, and effectively disseminating information. a number of **strategies** may be considered in this regard, namely: developing a comprehensive public relation and social media strategy, ensuring account verification by pursuing verification badges on platforms, determining the main social platforms to be used, establishing a consistent posting schedule, diversifying content types, enhancing audience engagement and implementing accessibility and inclusivity practices. Other options which may be considered include: utilizing analytics for continuous improvement, collaborating with partners by leveraging trusted voices, enhancing cross-promotion by sharing content from reputable sources that align with the SEC's mission and ensuring compliance and security by developing clear guidelines for social media use.

North Macedonia's **three largest political parties and one coalition** actively use social networks campaigns, though with varying levels of engagement and effectiveness. **Facebook dominates** as the main platform for political engagement. Engagement levels are low, with most comments and shares coming from party members, while content is monolingual, with Albanian parties posting exclusively in Albanian and Macedonian parties using only Macedonian. It appears clear that the minimal audience interaction confirms that most posts serve as one-way communication. Political parties in North Macedonia have been observed employing strategic disinformation tactics to manipulate public perception without facing legal repercussions. These include: framing accusations as rhetorical questions subtly implanting suspicion without presenting evidence; using fake social media accounts to spread misleading narratives; and amplifying unverified claims through social platforms, bypassing traditional media oversight.

Political parties can **improve citizen engagement and foster transparency** in digital campaigning by ensuring account verification to enhance credibility, prevent impersonation, and build public trust; encouraging audience interaction and engagement; diversifying content tailored to different demographics; providing multilingual communication in Macedonian and Albanian to reach a broader audience and promote inclusivity. In addition, parties should commit to ethical information sharing by ensuring accuracy and fact-based communication. They should engage in moderating online discussions effectively to counter hate speech, particularly against vulnerable groups. Finally, political parties should not use disinformation as an element of political struggle and they should form (or upgrade) the internal party structures and mechanisms, codes of ethics and procedures aimed at building resistance to disinformation among their membership and the general public.

I. Introduction

This paper aims to provide a comprehensive overview of how **EMBs and political parties can effectively utilize social networks to engage with voters, mobilize participation, and potentially increase overall electoral turnout**. By exploring the dynamic role of social channels in modern electoral processes, the paper will highlight both the opportunities and challenges that arise from these platforms.

To illustrate these points, several **case studies** will be examined, showcasing successful practices, common pitfalls, and the associated risks. These examples will shed light on innovative strategies, as well as possible countermeasures needed to mitigate issues such as misinformation, polarization, and ethical concerns.

Special attention will be given to the **context of North Macedonia**, focusing on key lessons learned from recent elections. This analysis will help identify specific challenges faced by EMBs and political parties in the country and provide insights into how social media strategies can be tailored to specific electoral contexts.

Finally, the paper will offer a set of **actionable recommendations** aimed at improving the use of social platforms by EMBs and political parties. These suggestions and recommendations will focus on fostering electoral integrity, enhancing voter engagement, and promoting broader participation, while addressing the risks inherent in digital communication.

Social platforms like Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube have become indispensable tools for political and electoral communication. Their rise has fundamentally transformed how politicians, voters, media, and civil society interact, share information, and mobilize support.

These networks allow institutions, politicians, and parties to engage directly with voters, bypassing traditional media intermediaries. This facilitates more personalized communication, enables targeted messaging, and supports real-time updates. Furthermore, the use of advanced data analytics allows campaigns to precisely target specific groups with tailored messages and advertisements, enhancing outreach effectiveness. Political content can spread virally, amplifying messages and reaching wider audiences than traditional media channels alone.

These platforms also empower citizens to interact with political figures, voice their opinions, and engage in discussions, potentially increasing political awareness and participation, particularly among younger demographics. The primary advantages of using social networks for electoral communication include:

1. **Cost-effectiveness:** social platforms offer a relatively low-cost way for candidates, parties and electoral institutions to reach voters compared to traditional media.
2. **Rapid information dissemination:** news, policies, institutional messages and campaign communications can be spread instantly, allowing for immediate engagement with current events.
3. **Targeted information dissemination:** digital platforms can be strategically used to deliver specific, relevant, and timely content to distinct audience segments. It involves tailoring messages based on demographics, interests, behaviours, and other factors to maximize engagement and deliver electoral information.

4. **Enhanced transparency:** politicians and electoral institutions can provide insights into their activities and decision-making processes, fostering a perception of transparency and accessibility.
5. **Mobilization and grassroots activism:** platforms are crucial for organizing movements, protests, and voter turnout efforts, particularly through hashtags and online petitions.

On the other hand, the same platforms pose a number of challenges and risks, such as:

- **Misinformation, disinformation, and online harassment:** false or misleading information spreads quickly on social platforms, affecting public perception and undermining trust in the electoral process. Digital platforms can also be used to intimidate, threaten, humiliate, or otherwise harm individuals or groups. Women, minorities, and marginalized groups are particularly vulnerable to abuse, harassment, and intimidation on social platforms, discouraging political participation.
- **Polarization and echo chambers:** algorithms can create filter bubbles where users are exposed only to information that aligns with their views, intensifying political polarization.
- **Manipulation, cyberattacks, and hybrid threats:** there is increasing concern over the use of social media to manipulate elections and public opinion through bots, trolls, and external interference (e.g., by foreign states).

Given these considerations, it is crucial to recognize that social networks are transforming political and electoral communication by facilitating direct engagement, expanding participation, and enabling real-time information sharing. However, tackling challenges related to misinformation, polarization, and ethical use is essential to protect the integrity of democratic processes and the information environment.

In this context, the **connection between information integrity and electoral processes** has increasingly become a central concern for electoral stakeholders, academics, and activists. Information integrity refers to the accuracy, consistency and reliability of information content, processes and systems to maintain a healthy information ecosystem.¹ As stated by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP): *“Promoting information integrity is particularly essential for preserving the transparency and credibility of elections, allowing citizens to participate fully in those processes and make choices based on facts rather than falsehoods. Information pollution can be weaponized to influence public opinion, sway voters and create distrust, both in electoral processes and in the institutions and the values that support them. It is a direct threat to the democratic electoral system. In the digital age, where information spreads rapidly through various channels, the potential for information pollution to disrupt electoral processes is amplified. Without measures to counteract this pollution, the information ecosystem— including media coverage, public discourse and information dissemination—becomes vulnerable to manipulation and interference, undermining the very foundation of democratic governance”*.²

One of the key countermeasures identified to address the vulnerabilities created by social networks involves the development of innovative strategies by Election Management

¹ United Nations Development Fund, [Information Integrity for Electoral Institutions and Processes: Reference Manual for UNDP Practitioners](#), March 2024.

² *Ibidem*.

Bodies (EMBs), parties and candidates to effectively engage and inform voters through these platforms. Given their extensive reach and interactive nature, digital platforms can play a pivotal role in enhancing voter engagement and strengthening democratic participation. The key areas where social platforms can promote voter participation include:

- **Information dissemination:** social platforms provide a fast and wide-reaching way to share essential election information, such as political parties' platforms, registration deadlines, polling locations, and voting procedures. This helps ensure that voters stay informed and aware of their rights and responsibilities as well as of the options available in the political spectrum.
- **Voter education:** platforms can be used to educate the public about the electoral process, political parties, candidates, and policy issues. Infographics, videos, and interactive content make complex information more accessible and engaging, especially for younger demographics.
- **Engagement and interaction:** by providing real-time updates and fostering discussions, social networks may encourage citizens to participate in the electoral process. Campaigns and institutions can use hashtags, live streams, and online events to motivate people to vote. Social networks also enable direct communication between candidates/parties, electoral institutions and voters. Citizens can ask questions, express concerns, and interact with political leaders and EMBs, creating a sense of transparency and responsiveness.
- **Mobilization and advocacy:** political movements, parties and candidates use social platforms to mobilize supporters, organize rallies, and advocate for specific policies. This digital mobilization helps amplify voices that may not be represented in traditional media.
- **Targeted outreach:** through data analytics and algorithms, campaigns can deliver tailored messages to specific voter groups based on demographics, interests, and behaviours. This allows for more effective outreach to women, youth, minorities, and other key segments of the population. In particular, social platforms resonate particularly well with younger generations. Engaging content and campaigns tailored for platforms like TikTok and Instagram can inspire youth and first-time voters to participate in elections.
- **Counteracting misinformation:** social platforms can be used to fact-check and combat misinformation during elections. EMBs can quickly correct false information, counter misleading narratives on the electoral process and provide accurate material and data.
- **Transparency and accountability:** social networks may promote transparency by allowing citizens to report irregularities and share real-time observations during elections. This can enhance the credibility of the electoral process.

II. The use of social networks by EMBs for voter engagement and education

In an increasingly digital world, EMBs can leverage social networks to inform, educate, and engage with voters.³ This shift recognizes the power of digital platforms in reaching broad and diverse audiences, possibly promoting electoral integrity, and fostering greater civic participation.

Social platforms offer an effective way for EMBs to complement traditional communication methods with the public. Direct communication channels, such as telephone inquiry services, public inquiry desks, suggestion boxes in public spaces, interactive radio and television programs, and town hall meetings with EMB members, have long been recognized as vital to EMB operations. While these methods remain valuable for outreach efforts, social networks allow EMBs to promote these events and services on a larger scale, reaching a broader audience, targeting specific groups and communities and encouraging public participation. Additionally, social platforms provide a unique opportunity for dialogue and interaction, fostering two-way communication rather than just disseminating information.⁴

However, EMBs need to establish a strong and sustainable **digital communication strategy** to ensure their engagement and information campaigns are effective, cohesive, and well-targeted, while minimizing risks linked to their online presence. A comprehensive strategy will enable EMBs to reach diverse audiences, provide accurate information, and build trust throughout the electoral process. By utilizing various social platforms, EMBs can engage with different demographic groups, each with its own preferences and communication habits. This approach ensures that the right messages reach the right audiences at the right time, possibly fostering informed participation and transparency.

Developing a comprehensive social media strategy is beyond the scope of this paper. However, a valuable resource for those interested in this topic is the **IFES publication [Social Media Strategies for Election Management Bodies - A Tactical Guide to Expanding Voter Outreach](#)**. This guide offers practical insights and strategies for effectively utilizing social media to enhance voter engagement, expand outreach, and improve communication between election bodies and the public. It provides a tactical framework for election officials and organizations seeking to harness the power of social media to promote voter education, ensure transparency, and encourage participation in the electoral process.

The Central Electoral Commission of Lithuania: a multi-platform presence

The Central Electoral Commission of Lithuania maintains a presence across several social platforms, including Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and VRK Flickr. Their [Facebook page](#) is regularly updated with information on the Commission's activities, policies, live streams of meetings (linked

³ For the purpose of this paper, the terms "social networks" and "social platforms" are used interchangeably to refer to interactive technologies that enable the creation, sharing, and aggregation of content—such as ideas, interests, and other forms of expression—within virtual communities and networks.

⁴ International Idea, [Social Media - A Practical Guide for Electoral Management Bodies](#), March 2024.

to their [YouTube channel](#)), updates on ongoing elections, consultations, and other relevant matters. Their [Twitter account](#), however, appears to be inactive, with the last tweet posted in 2019.

To fully understand the potential, challenges, and strategies for EMBs' use of social networks, it is important to explore several key objectives of digital communications and related insights.

1. Enhancing accessibility and inclusivity

Social networks offer EMBs a powerful tool to **connect with traditionally underrepresented and marginalized groups** who may face challenges accessing information through conventional media. New audiences can be reached and informed on key elements of the electoral process.

This includes **younger generations**, who are particularly active on platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube. By tailoring voter education content to these platforms, EMBs can engage first-time and younger voters more effectively. Utilizing multimedia formats such as interactive videos, infographics, and memes can simplify complex electoral information and make civic education more engaging and accessible.

Using social media to promote youth engagement: Elections Canada and Canada's Democracy Week

[Canada's Democracy Week](#) is an annual civic education initiative organized by Elections Canada to raise awareness of democracy and the importance of voter engagement among Canadian youth. Social networks are a key component of the programme and are used to interact with youth and key stakeholders, promote the National Youth Challenge and advertise events and activities that occur throughout the week. Although Canada's Democracy Week was first launched in 2011, social networks only figured prominently in the programme the following year when several platforms were established and regularly used to engage with young people and actively post content. The programme now includes Facebook and Twitter accounts in both of Canada's official languages (English and French), as well as a YouTube Channel in each language. While Democracy Week occurs in September of each year, the social media accounts remain active all year long. Canada's Democracy Week social media represent Elections Canada's first attempt to engage with the public through this important new form of communication and interaction.

In developing its approach to using social media for Canada's Democracy Week, Elections Canada established a governance structure and terms of use. Among other things, the terms of use provide guidelines for user submissions, including a definition of unacceptable content. A relatively small team manages the social media accounts. A staff member drafts most of the content and monitors day-to-day activity. A program manager and senior advisor review and approve content and ensure that posts are consistent with the larger messaging of the agency. Two additional senior directors provide oversight and content approval.

The use of social media in Canada's Democracy Week has been highly successful, but not without its challenges. Becoming adept at using the technology takes time, as does learning how to respond quickly and in an engaging manner. Additionally, as a non-partisan agency, Elections Canada monitors the accounts for postings that could compromise the agency's real or perceived impartiality. Most users respect the guidelines established in the terms of use and only on a few occasions have partisan postings appeared (in each case, they were removed). Ultimately, the use of social media for Canada's Democracy Week has provided Elections Canada with additional ways

to reach youth, reinforce important partnerships with key stakeholders, and establish sound practices.

Source: International Idea, [Social Media - A Practical Guide for Electoral Management Bodies](#)

Women, minorities, and other marginalized groups also represent critical audiences for voter outreach. EMBs can develop targeted campaigns that address the specific challenges these groups encounter in the electoral process. Partnering with influencers, community leaders, and advocacy organizations can help amplify these messages, promote inclusivity, and encourage broader participation in elections.

Additionally, EMBs can use social networks to reach **rural and remote populations**. Despite infrastructure limitations in some regions, increasing mobile phone and internet penetration allows EMBs to disseminate information via widely-used platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp. These channels can bridge the communication gap, ensuring that essential voter information reaches even the most isolated communities.

2. Delivering timely and accurate information

Social networks provide EMBs with an effective platform for delivering **real-time updates** and announcements, ensuring that **voters receive accurate and timely information about the electoral process**. This capability is essential for promoting a clear understanding of key aspects such as election dates, deadlines, procedures, and voter rights and obligations.

Clear and concise **reminders** about registration deadlines, early voting options, and polling day logistics can improve participation and reduce confusion, while step-by-step guides, short videos, and infographics can help demystify voting processes, especially in systems with complex rules or recent changes.

Election commissions can also use social networks to **communicate directly with political parties**, offering them updates on registration processes, guidelines for campaigning, and official announcements regarding the election timeline. This transparent communication helps ensure that all parties are on the same page and aware of their rights and responsibilities during the election. It also allows for clarifying any potential confusion or discrepancies in the electoral process.

The UK Electoral Commission on Instagram: essential updates, reminders, and voter info

The UK Electoral Commission actively engages with the public through its [Instagram account](#), where they regularly provide essential voter information to ensure widespread understanding of the electoral process. Their posts cover key topics such as how to vote by post, how overseas voters can participate, and insights from surveys related to voter behaviour and the electoral process. To promote inclusivity and ensure accessibility, they publish their content in both English and Welsh, addressing the linguistic diversity of the electorate and ensuring that information reaches as many people as possible. This bilingual approach reflects the Commission's commitment to engaging all citizens and fostering an informed and participatory democratic process. The Electoral Commission also maintains active accounts on [Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#).

In an era of misinformation, EMBs can play a crucial role by promptly addressing false information or rumours too. **Proactive fact-checking campaigns and partnerships** with trusted media outlets can reinforce the credibility of official communications.

3. Promoting transparency and trust

Trust in the electoral process is a cornerstone of a healthy democracy. Without confidence in the fairness, integrity, and transparency of elections, public faith in democratic institutions can erode. Social networks offer EMBs a powerful platform to foster and strengthen this trust by enhancing transparency, accessibility, and engagement with citizens. By maintaining a **nonpartisan and transparent online presence**, EMBs can bolster public confidence and combat perceptions of bias.

One key way social networks build trust is by offering **direct access to electoral institutions**, by allowing EMBs to communicate openly and regularly with the public, reducing the reliance on intermediaries like traditional media. This direct communication helps ensure that voters receive information straight from the source, which can mitigate misinformation and reassure citizens that official updates are accurate and trustworthy. Additionally, social networks enable EMBs to share **behind-the-scenes content** that demystifies electoral procedures. For instance, livestreaming the ballot-counting process, showcasing security measures, or explaining the logistics of polling station operations can provide insight into the safeguards in place to ensure free and fair elections. By making these processes visible, EMBs can reduce suspicion and build confidence in the integrity of the system. Furthermore, EMBs can promote trust by **sharing testimonials and stories** from election officials, poll workers, and voters. Highlighting personal experiences and the dedication of those involved in running elections helps humanize the process and reinforces the credibility of electoral institutions.

EMBs can also use social networks to **address citizen concerns and doubts** in a timely and transparent manner. By responding to questions, clarifying misconceptions, and engaging in open dialogue, EMBs demonstrate their commitment to accountability and transparency. This two-way communication may foster a sense of inclusion and responsiveness, reinforcing public confidence in the electoral process.

Transparency reports and updates can also be disseminated via social networks, informing the public about measures taken to ensure fairness, such as monitoring efforts, auditing procedures, and responses to any irregularities. This proactive communication reassures citizens that EMBs are committed to safeguarding the electoral process.

In conclusion, by leveraging social networks to provide direct communication, interactive engagement, and a transparent view of electoral operations, EMBs can build and maintain trust in the democratic process. This **openness helps foster a well-informed, confident electorate** and strengthens the overall resilience of democracy.

4. Understanding voters' needs

Social platforms can play a crucial role in helping EMBs better understand and assess the needs and expectations of the electorate regarding the institutions that oversee electoral processes. By leveraging the interactive nature of social platforms, EMBs can gather **valuable insights into voter concerns, preferences, and areas where additional information or clarification may be needed**.

Methods such as **online quizzes and polls** can help gauge public opinion and assess voter knowledge, while **keeping social media pages open for questions and comments** encourages direct engagement with the public. **Allowing users to create and comment** on posts or articles fosters a collaborative environment for discussion, providing EMBs with real-time feedback. **Posting thought-provoking questions** can spark online debates, enabling voters to express their views and share experiences. Additionally, **hosting live information-sharing sessions** or **question-and-answer events** offers a dynamic way to address voter queries and provide essential electoral information. **Encouraging users to post videos** further enriches the conversation, allowing for diverse perspectives and greater engagement. These strategies not only help EMBs stay informed about voter needs but also contribute to foster a sense of inclusivity and responsiveness in the electoral process.

5. Educating through innovative and engaging content

Voter education campaigns on social networks have the potential to leverage engaging, interactive, and innovative content formats that can effectively capture the attention of a wide range of voters, especially younger demographics. By **utilizing multimedia tools** these campaigns can break down complex political concepts into digestible, visually appealing content. This approach not only enhances accessibility but also fosters greater engagement by encouraging participation and dialogue. Furthermore, social platforms enable campaigns to target specific voter segments with tailored messages, allowing for greater reach and impact.

Short videos and reels are effective tools for distilling complex electoral information into concise, easily digestible clips. Creative and informative videos have the potential to go viral, significantly expanding their reach. **Visual content**, such as infographics and visual guides, simplifies key information—like voting procedures or eligibility criteria—making it more accessible and shareable. **Gamification and interactive tools**, including quizzes, polls, and games, offer an engaging way to educate voters, especially appealing to younger audiences. **Storytelling and testimonials** can further humanize the electoral process by sharing personal experiences from voters, electoral staff, and other key figures, thereby underscoring the importance of voting and fostering a deeper connection with the process.

Pennsylvania State: a digital advertising campaign for 2024 elections

Ahead of Election Day, the Department of State (DOS) launched a [digital advertising campaign](#) focused on voting by mail and election security, as part of its broader efforts to promote trustworthy voter education. The campaign mostly targeted older Pennsylvanians and aimed at ensuring safe and secure elections that uphold the right of all eligible voters to participate.

The educational ads on platforms like YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram, as well as other strategic media partners, intended to inform voters across the state on important issues. The campaign addresses topics such as the mail-in voting process and the safeguards in place to protect election security, making it a key part of the state's efforts to provide accurate and transparent information in the lead-up to the November 5 general election. The campaign particularly targets older adults, a group statistically more likely to have mail-in ballots rejected due to errors. For example, in the 2024 primary, the rejection rate for voters aged 80 and above was more than twice as high as for those aged 50 and younger.

The advertisements include spots on voting by mail, running from September 23 through November 4, and election security ads, which began on September 18 and continued through

November 16. These include 15- and 30-second ads on YouTube (in English and Spanish), and 6-second election security clips on Facebook and Instagram. The security ads directed viewers to the State administration's "Election Security in Pennsylvania" webpage.

This ad campaign complemented other voter education initiative by the DOS, which included: posters in state buildings, parks, and libraries; QR codes on Pennsylvania Liquor Control Board bags and receipts; flyers and vote-by-mail applications included in Meals on Wheels packages; palm cards distributed at food banks and in mailings from the Departments of Transportation and Revenue; voter information included in unemployment compensation call hold music and calls to the DOS; additional communications shared via social platforms and on the DOS website, as well as at county election offices

In addition, the Department developed an online voter education toolkit, offering ready-to-share election facts in English, Spanish, and Chinese to further educate voters and stakeholders.

Michigan State: the development of social media toolkit

The Michigan Secretary of State developed a comprehensive [social media toolkit](#) to enhance voter education and outreach in preparation for the 2024 elections. This toolkit is designed to equip with the necessary resources to effectively inform voters across various social media platforms. It includes ready-to-use templates, informative graphics, and key messages to raise awareness about the election process and important deadlines. The toolkit aimed to reach a diverse range of voters, ensuring that they have access to reliable information and are motivated to participate in the democratic process.

6. Combating misinformation and disinformation

One of the significant challenges facing EMBs is the rapid spread of false or misleading information online, which can directly target their work and **undermine public trust** in the electoral process. This type of communications often focuses on critical aspects of election administration, including the **fairness and transparency of the process**, as well as **key moments** such as voter registration, polling, and vote counting. The proliferation of inaccurate or deceptive content has the potential to **confuse voters, sow doubt, and erode confidence** in the electoral framework. This can result in **decreased voter participation, increased polarization**, and a broader loss of trust in democratic institutions. As the digital landscape evolves, EMBs must remain vigilant in combating dis/misinformation and ensuring that accurate, transparent information is readily available to the public. Addressing this challenge requires proactive monitoring, swift response mechanisms, and ongoing efforts to educate the electorate about identifying credible sources of information. Effective strategies may include:

- **Developing rapid response initiatives:** specialized teams within EMBs can monitor social networks for misinformation and respond quickly with verified information.
- **Partnerships with fact-checkers:** collaborating with independent fact-checking organizations can help verify claims and debunk false narratives in real time.
- **Educational campaigns on media literacy:** EMBs can promote digital literacy by educating the public on how to identify misinformation and verify sources. This empowers voters to make informed decisions.
- **Clear communication policies:** EMBs should establish clear guidelines and communication strategies for social platforms engagement, ensuring consistent and transparent messaging.

7. Addressing cybersecurity and platform vulnerabilities

As EMBs increasingly rely on digital platforms for communication and engagement with the electorate, the importance of prioritizing cybersecurity has become more critical than ever. Social platforms are **prime targets for cyber threats, ranging from hacking and impersonation to the manipulation of information**. To safeguard the integrity of electoral processes and maintain public trust, EMBs must implement robust cybersecurity strategies.

- **Securing accounts:** properly securing social media accounts is a fundamental countermeasure. Implementing strong authentication protocols can significantly reduce the risk of unauthorized access. Additionally, regularly updating passwords and using encrypted communication channels can help safeguard against hacking attempts and impersonation, which can undermine the credibility of the EMB's communication.
- **Preparing for cyberattacks** is another critical necessity. Given the high stakes during critical election periods, it is essential for EMBs to prepare for potential cyberattacks or disruptions. This includes developing comprehensive contingency plans that outline specific procedures for addressing security breaches, data leaks, or other disruptions to social platforms. Such plans should include clear communication protocols to inform the public and mitigate panic, as well as coordination with relevant cybersecurity agencies and stakeholders to ensure a swift and effective response.
- **Training staff:** ensuring that EMB personnel are well-trained to recognize and respond to cybersecurity threats is equally important. Regular cybersecurity awareness training should be provided to all staff involved in managing digital communication, so they can identify phishing attempts, suspicious activity, or malicious content. In addition to technical training, staff should be equipped with crisis management skills to handle cybersecurity incidents promptly and efficiently. This helps build a culture of vigilance and preparedness within the organization, ensuring that the EMB is ready to tackle evolving cyber threats.
- **Cooperating with other relevant institutions and initiatives** to counter disinformation and cyber threats can strengthen the resilience of electoral integrity. This cooperation is essential to leverage the full spectrum of expertise, technical skills, and resources available across various sectors. By joining forces with cybersecurity agencies, fact-checking organizations, intelligence services, and social platforms, EMBs can ensure a more coordinated and effective response to emerging threats. Collaborative efforts also allow for the sharing of critical intelligence, best practices, and innovative solutions, ultimately strengthening the resilience of the electoral process against malicious interference. Such partnerships not only enhance the security of electoral systems but also help build public trust by demonstrating a unified commitment to safeguarding the integrity of elections.

By addressing these key areas, EMBs can strengthen their digital security infrastructure and maintain the integrity of their online communication during elections.

Germany: countering disinformation and cyberthreats in 2021 parliamentary elections

As Germany prepared for its federal election in September 2021, there were concerns that online disinformation and other cyber threats could disrupt the democratic process. Disinformation

targeting parties and candidates was circulating on social media for months, attempting to sway voters. Following a significant 2015 attack on the German Parliament and a 2021 hacking incident during a CDU party congress, German lawmakers were frequent targets of cyberattacks this year. On September, the government condemned phishing attempts aimed at stealing data, which could facilitate disinformation campaigns during the election. These activities were attributed to Russia's GRU military intelligence, with the government urging Moscow to stop the attacks. Additionally, Germany was identified as the primary target of Russian disinformation in the EU, with over 700 documented cases since 2015. In late August, just before the election, a DDoS attack temporarily disrupted the Federal Returning Officer's website, which was to publish the official election results. Against this background, German electoral authorities and other institutions took action to prevent these threats from materialising into plausible risks. The actions and institutions involved included:

The German government prioritized IT security through the establishment of "hybrid" working groups across various institutions, incorporating experts from multiple ministries and intelligence services. In the Federal Chancellery, a dedicated working group focused on elections, discussing potential crisis scenarios and ways to safeguard critical infrastructure for the proper transmission of election forecasts and results.

The Ministry of the Interior also formed an expert group on "hybrid threats," which included members from the Ministries of Defence and Foreign Affairs. Since late 2020, the National Cyber Defence Centre in Bonn has had a working group specifically monitoring cyber threats related to the Bundestag elections, focusing on information sharing. In September 2021, just weeks before the election, the government introduced a new cybersecurity strategy for the next five years, with the Federal Office for Information Security (BSI) playing a central role. The BSI developed a public awareness campaign, a security guide for politicians on securing social media accounts, and measures to ensure the safe transmission of provisional election results. They also established a direct communication line with social media operators like Facebook and Google to respond quickly to security issues. Additionally, the BSI set up a unit to detect automated bots and coordinated disinformation, working with social media platforms to address these threats. The BSI collaborated with the Federal Ministry of the Interior and the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution on issues related to political extremism and cyber threats.

To combat disinformation, the government launched initiatives such as a website providing information to counter hoaxes and Facebook infographics with the hashtag "#Wahlwissen" to educate citizens about the electoral process. Additionally, the Election Commission launched the "Facts Against Fake News" website to debunk widespread election-related falsehoods, focusing on broader narratives rather than specific hoaxes.

Source: EU DisinfoLab, [The battle against disinformation in the upcoming federal election in Germany: actors, initiatives and tools](#)

8. Evaluating the effectiveness of social platforms campaigns

EMBs should adopt comprehensive strategies for monitoring and evaluating their campaigns to continually improve their use of social networks. This **ongoing assessment** allows EMBs to refine their approaches, optimize their content, and ensure that their digital outreach is as effective as possible. Key components of these strategies include:

- **Analytics and feedback.** Leveraging data analytics is essential for understanding the performance of social media campaigns. EMBs can track key metrics such as engagement rates, reach, impressions, and click-through rates to assess the effectiveness of different types of content. For example, they can measure how well videos, infographics, or interactive posts resonate with different voter segments. Collecting feedback from voters through surveys, comment sections, or direct

interactions can also provide valuable insights into what is working well and what needs improvement. This combination of quantitative data and qualitative feedback helps EMBs adjust their messaging and tactics to better meet the needs of the electorate.

- **Pilot programs.** Testing new approaches on a smaller scale through pilot programs allows EMBs to experiment with different strategies without the risk of large-scale failure. For instance, they may trial new content formats, social media tools and platforms, or engagement methods in a specific region or with a targeted demographic. It is crucial here to:
 - **Define clear objectives prior to the pilot:** whether the goal is to assess voter engagement, test new messaging formats, or evaluate the effectiveness of different platforms, having clear and measurable outcomes will help guide the strategy and provide benchmarks for success.
 - **Start with a small, targeted audience or targeted platforms:** for the pilot to be manageable, EMBs may target a specific audience segment that is representative of the broader electorate. This could include particular age groups, geographic regions, or even specific user behaviours. A well-defined audience will allow for more focused testing and provide more relevant data. Similarly, the pilot could initially be launched on a specific social network (such as Facebook), which may be the most popular in the given national context and for the target audience, before expanding to other platforms.
 - **Experiment with Multiple Content Types:** social platforms offer a wide range of content formats—videos, polls, infographics, live streams, and text posts. The pilot phase can be used to test various formats to determine which ones resonate most with the target audience.
 - **Use A/B testing:** this involves running two variations of content or strategies simultaneously to see which performs better. For instance, different headlines, graphics, or calls-to-action can be tested to understand what drives more engagement or action from voters. This data-driven approach can help refine strategies before scaling them.
 - **Monitor engagement metrics:** key performance indicators (KPIs) such as likes, shares, comments, click-through rates, and engagement time are to be tracked. For example, if the pilot is focused on increasing voter awareness, monitor metrics related to how many users interacted with informational posts or visited a specific page after clicking on a post.

This helps identify best practices, assess the potential effectiveness of different approaches, and uncover any challenges or unforeseen issues. Based on the results of these smaller-scale trials, EMBs can make informed decisions before rolling out new initiatives nationwide, ensuring that their campaigns are well-received and impactful.

- **Case studies and comparative analysis.** Learning from the experiences of other countries or regions is a crucial aspect of continuous improvement. EMBs can examine case studies of successful social media campaigns in other democracies, as well as those that faced difficulties, to understand what works and what doesn't. By conducting comparative analyses, EMBs can adapt strategies that have proven effective in similar political contexts, while avoiding pitfalls encountered by others. These insights can help EMBs stay ahead of evolving trends in digital communication and apply proven methods to their own electoral processes.

By incorporating these monitoring and evaluation strategies, EMBs can continuously enhance their use of social networks, ensuring their campaigns are not only relevant but also effective in engaging and educating voters.

Costs considerations: the cost of a social media campaign during elections can vary widely depending on several factors, such as **the scale of the campaign, the platforms used, the complexity of the content, and the target audience**. The main costs to be considered include:

- **Platform advertising costs:** social platforms cost typically can vary depending on factors such as the platform, audience targeting, and competition for ad space during the election period.
- **Content creation costs:** these include producing high-quality visuals, videos, infographics, and other media to engage your target audience. The cost of content creation depends on the complexity and quality of the content (Basic graphic designs is cheaper than more advanced designs such as animations).
- **Social media management tools:** to manage, schedule, and track campaigns across platforms, social media management tools are often required. These tools may include features for analytics, reporting, and ad management,
- **Influencer or ambassador partnerships:** influencers or local personalities can amplify messages. Depending on the reach and engagement of influencers, costs can vary based on their follower's basis.
- **Paid content and boosting posts:** paid campaigns to boost reach and engagement on social platforms can significantly increase the campaign's visibility. The costs are typically set according to the scale of the campaign.
- **Analytics and reporting:** to assess the effectiveness of the campaign, analytics tools and expert analysis are crucial. Costs for monitoring and reporting might include basic analytics tools and consulting and analysis.
- **Staffing and management:** the cost of staffing a social media campaign includes roles such as a campaign manager, content creators, social media managers, and community managers.
- **Crisis management and moderation:** the cost of crisis management and moderation includes tools, expert services, and additional staffing.

For EMBs it is essential to meticulously plan and design their online campaign while keeping the available budget in mind and maintaining a clear understanding of the associated costs. Effective budgeting ensures that resources are allocated efficiently, maximizing the impact of the campaign without exceeding financial limits.

Conclusion

The use of social networks by EMBs for voter information and education as well as public outreach offers immense potential to **enhance engagement, inclusivity, and trust in electoral processes**. By using these platforms strategically and responsibly, EMBs can provide accurate information, combat misinformation, and encourage broader participation. However, addressing challenges related to **misinformation, cybersecurity, and the digital divide** is crucial to fully realizing these benefits. Through innovation, transparency, and ongoing evaluation, EMBs can harness the power of social networks to strengthen democracy and electoral integrity.

III. The use of social networks by political parties for voter mobilisation

Social networks have a significant influence on voter decisions, especially in the context of political parties. Their impact is multifaceted, contributing to shape public opinion, political behaviour, and possibly electoral outcomes. As a result, political parties have increasingly embraced digital campaigns to connect with and mobilize voters. The key areas where social media channels have influence can be summarized as follows:

- **Contributing to political awareness and knowledge:** social platforms provide voters with immediate access to political news, policy discussions, and party agendas. This constant flow of information may help inform voters' decisions by making political content more accessible, often beyond traditional media. Voters can access a wide range of opinions, including those from political commentators, experts, party supporters, and ordinary citizens. This exposure allows individuals to form more nuanced views, but it can also lead to information overload or confusion.
- **Influencing political opinions and attitudes:** social media algorithms tend to show users content that aligns with their existing beliefs, reinforcing their political attitudes. Political parties and activists use social media to frame issues in particular ways, highlighting certain topics or perspectives while downplaying others. This selective framing can shape how voters perceive candidates, parties, or policies.
- **Voter mobilization and engagement:** social platforms can motivate voters to participate in elections by raising awareness about voting dates, locations, and processes or provide information about rallies or election campaign activities. It can also generate excitement through calls to action, encouraging people to get involved in campaigns and support their preferred parties. Social channels amplify peer influence, with users seeing their friends, family, and influencers express political views. This social pressure can influence individuals' political preferences, particularly when they perceive alignment with their social networks.
- **Political campaigning and targeted messaging:** social platforms allow for precise targeting based on user behaviour, location, and preferences. Political parties can use sophisticated data analytics to target voters with personalized messages based on demographic and behavioural information and tailored content, designed to appeal directly to the interests and concerns of specific voter groups.
- **Viral content and political movements:** social media campaigns, often driven by hashtags or viral memes, can rapidly spread political messages and influence voter perception. These campaigns can make a topic go viral, influencing political discourse and shaping public opinion. Also, social platforms can enable grassroots political movements, which can shift the political landscape by mobilizing people around a cause or candidate.
- **Information integrity:** the rapid spread of misinformation and disinformation on social networks can have a significant impact on voter choices. On several occasions, some political parties or external actors have used social platforms to deliberately spread misleading information, conduct negative and derogatory campaigning, often with the aim of undermining an opponent's credibility or influencing voter preferences through psychological tactics.

- **Voter trust and perception of political parties:** social networks provide voters with a closer, more direct look at political parties and candidates. When parties engage authentically, respond to public concerns, or show transparency, they may build trust with voters. Conversely, if they appear insincere or evasive, they may lose voter confidence.
- **Youth and first-time voters:** social platforms appear to be particularly influential among younger voters. Parties that effectively engage on these platforms can sway younger demographics, which are often more open to new ideas and change. Social channels can also play a critical role in educating first-time voters.
- **Feedback and influence on political parties:** social platforms allow voters to voice their opinions instantly. Political parties can monitor social media discussions and feedback to gauge public sentiment, adjust their messaging, and refine campaign strategies.
- **Impact of social media personalities and influencers:** political parties increasingly rely on influencers and celebrities to endorse candidates or promote party platforms. The reach and influence of these figures can sway the opinions of their followers, particularly among younger or more influenceable voters.

Against this background, **social media marketing has become a game-changer** for political parties, particularly when they realize that **it's not just about sharing posts, but about engaging, connecting, and mobilizing** supporters in ways never before possible. Political campaigns today are no longer limited to traditional forms of communication; they operate in the dynamic and highly visible realm of digital platforms. This ability to connect directly with voters and quickly respond to public sentiment has fundamentally transformed how campaigns are run, making social platforms an indispensable tool in modern political strategy.

The impact of social platforms on electoral campaigns and voter mobilisation is complex, with both **positive and negative effects**. While it democratizes political discourse and enhances voter engagement, it also introduces challenges related to misinformation, polarization, and targeted manipulation. Political parties that effectively leverage social platforms while maintaining ethical standards can enhance their appeal, but the rapid evolution of these channels requires constant adaptation and vigilance.

1. Communication and engagement

Political parties can use social platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok to establish **direct lines of communication** with their supporters and the general public. This direct engagement allows parties to bypass traditional media channels like television, radio, and newspapers, which often act as intermediaries between the party and its audience. By communicating directly, parties can convey their messages without distortion or delay, enabling them to shape the narrative on their own terms.

This approach not only provides more control over the messaging but also allows political parties to **present their policies, stances on key issues, and updates**. Social networks also offer an opportunity to reach a **wider, often more diverse, audience**. The reach is global, making it easier for parties to connect with their local and international supporters, expand their voter base, and increase visibility.

Social networks provide a platform for **two-way communication**, which is a significant departure from the traditional one-way messaging system that dominated earlier political campaigns. In the past, parties would broadcast their messages through speeches, advertisements, and media interviews, with limited opportunity for direct engagement with voters. Today, social platforms enable a dialogue, allowing followers to engage in conversations by commenting, sharing posts, or even messaging the party directly. This interactive nature of social networks may foster a **sense of community and inclusion**, where voters feel their voices are heard. It gives them a direct channel to ask questions, express opinions, share concerns, and give feedback on policies.

Political parties can use this feedback to better **understand public sentiment, fine-tune their messaging, and identify the most pressing issues** for voters. This interaction can also **humanize political figures**, making them more relatable and accessible. It helps **build trust and loyalty**, as voters see that their opinions are valued and considered in the decision-making process. Moreover, this two-way interaction may allow for the rapid addressing of misinformation or misunderstanding, where parties can respond quickly to clarify their positions or correct false claims.

One of the major advantages of social media is the ability to provide **real-time updates** to followers. In the fast-paced world of political campaigns, timing is crucial, and social platforms are the ideal tools for delivering immediate communication. Political parties can use these platforms to share live updates on campaign events, policy launches, and speeches, ensuring that their supporters are informed as things unfold. For example, a party might use Twitter to live-tweet a speech, providing key highlights, reactions, and responses instantly. This immediacy extends beyond campaign events and includes reactions to political developments, public statements, or breaking news.

In an environment where public opinion can shift quickly, being able to provide a **timely response** helps political parties stay relevant and engaged with their audience. Social networks allow parties to share urgent announcements, such as policy changes, event cancellations, or real-time voting updates during elections, ensuring their followers stay informed and can take appropriate action.

Real-time updates also enable political campaigns to be more agile, **adjusting their messaging or strategy on the fly**. If an event or issue gains unexpected attention, a political party can use social networks to capitalize on that moment and engage with voters, answer questions, or clarify their position, all within minutes or hours. This flexibility and speed of communication are invaluable in the context of fast-moving political environments, particularly during elections or moments of crisis.

2. Campaigning and mobilization

Social platforms offer highly sophisticated tools for **targeted advertising**, which enable political parties to reach and engage specific demographics with tailored messages. These platforms allow parties to create precise audience segments based on a variety of factors, such as **location, age, gender, interests, and online behaviours**.

This capability transforms political campaigns into more **personalized, data-driven strategies that can resonate deeply with different voter groups**. For example, a political party might craft a message about environmental policies and target it specifically to younger voters who have expressed interest in sustainability or climate change. By customizing the content and delivering it directly to the audience most likely

to respond, political parties can increase the effectiveness of their campaigns, ensuring their messages are seen by those who are most relevant to the issue or cause.

Moreover, these tools allow for **geographical targeting**, where ads can be customized based on specific locations—whether it's a national campaign or a hyper-local effort aimed at influencing voters in particular neighbourhoods, towns, or regions. This geographical precision helps parties focus their resources where they matter most, allowing for efficient use of the campaign budget.

The advanced **behavioural targeting** options also mean that political parties can reach individuals who have demonstrated specific online behaviours, such as interacting with content related to politics or showing interest in particular causes. This data-driven approach provides a higher return on investment compared to traditional advertising methods, as it ensures that the right message is reaching the right people at the right time.

Social platforms have revolutionized **political fundraising** too, enabling parties to easily raise significant amounts of money through small donations. Platforms allow political campaigns to create donation drives and direct appeals to followers, often in a highly personal and engaging way. This may democratize fundraising, enabling supporters from a wide range of backgrounds to contribute.

Grassroots fundraising builds a sense of ownership among contributors and encourages greater involvement in the campaign. Furthermore, social platforms' viral nature mean that donors can share fundraising campaigns with their networks, amplifying the reach and contributing to an expanding donor base.

Campaigns can also use digital platforms to **target potential donors** based on their engagement with the party's content. For instance, if someone frequently likes or shares a political party's posts, the party might target them with donation appeals. This makes the fundraising campaign feel more personal and relevant, tapping into the supporters' demonstrated interests and behaviours.

The use of **emotional appeals** and **call-to-action posts** encourages followers to donate by leveraging the immediate nature of social networks. A well-timed post—perhaps featuring a powerful message from a candidate or a video highlighting a critical issue—can prompt supporters to contribute to the campaign. Additionally, social platforms makes it easier for people to donate directly through integrated platforms, such as [Facebook's fundraising tools](#) or [Twitter's donation buttons](#), streamlining the process.

Social platforms can also serve as an essential tool for political parties to **mobilize voters, organize events, and encourage active participation**. Whether for rallies, protests, or get-out-the-vote campaigns, social platforms provide a powerful way for parties to organize, coordinate, and galvanize their supporters.

Political parties can **create and promote events** in real-time through digital platforms, reaching thousands of people almost instantly. A political party can announce a rally, a volunteer event, or a protest on platforms, where followers can RSVP, share the event, and encourage their own networks to join. By leveraging social channels' viral capabilities, parties can exponentially increase the attendance and impact of these events. Posts, videos, and live streams can create a sense of urgency and excitement, motivating people to take part and show support.

Beyond in-person events, social platforms is also a powerful tool for **mobilizing voters** during elections. Political parties can use targeted messaging to encourage voter

registration, remind people of election dates, and provide information about voting procedures. This is particularly important in **get-out-the-vote** (GOTV) efforts, where digital platforms can help remind supporters to vote and guide them through the voting process, whether it's providing polling station locations or explaining how to vote by mail.

Social platforms also allow for **peer-to-peer mobilization**, where individuals encourage their friends and followers to vote or participate in political activities. By engaging followers through shareable content and calls to action, political campaigns can tap into social networks and amplify their reach exponentially.

Moreover, **social media influencers** can be powerful allies in these efforts. Political parties often work with influencers to motivate younger voters or specific demographic groups to become active participants in the political process, leveraging the influencers' large, engaged followings.

By combining real-time updates, targeted calls to action, and peer influence, social media may help political parties to create a **vibrant and engaged voter base**, ensuring high participation and interest around their campaigns.

Sanna Marin's open communication in 2019⁵

Finnish Prime Minister Sanna Marin effectively utilized Instagram to connect with younger voters. She shared behind-the-scenes glimpses of her work, personal reflections, and updates on policy issues. By humanizing her role as a politician, she created a strong rapport with her audience. Marin's transparent and relatable communication style on social platforms helped her gain trust, particularly among younger demographics who valued authenticity. In this regard, sharing relatable and transparent content can strengthen a candidate's connection with voters, especially in cultures that value openness and authenticity.

The election of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez to the US Congress in 2018: connecting with voters⁶

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's (branded on social platforms as AOC) election in 2018 represented a significant break from the traditional campaigns run by U.S. politicians. AOC chose to reject large corporate contributions and run a campaign with less than \$200,000—small compared to her competitor Crowley, who spent \$3.4 million.

In her social media communication, Ocasio-Cortez adopted an informal and personal tone, aiming to appear close and genuine, fostering a sense of trust among her electorate. Perhaps the most notable example of this is the iconic video "The Courage to Change", in which the candidate condenses her personal life and political program in just a few minutes, creating a rift not only with the Republicans but also with the mainstream wing of the Democratic Party.

AOC's campaign was characterized by its underlying consistency and direct engagement with her voter base, using social media to maintain a direct connection with her supporters and provide live updates on the campaign's progress. The candidate was supported by several progressive organizations that actively participated in the digital strategy and content production.

The candidate was able to increase her follower count, and at the time of her victory, she had 379,000 followers on Twitter, 127,000 on Instagram, and 88,500 on Facebook. In contrast, her

⁵ <https://ojs.deakin.edu.au/index.php/ps/article/view/1994/1745>.

⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rq3QXIVR0bs>; https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alexandria_Ocasio-Cortez; <https://www.overtureglobal.io/story/the-viral-victory-of-alexandria-ocasio-cortez>.

opponent could only count on a following of 3,600 on Twitter, 1,400 on Instagram, and 15,000 on Facebook during the same period.

3. Brand building and image management

Social platforms are a valuable tool to **build a party identity**. They can shape the public image of political parties and their leaders, allowing them to cultivate and project a distinctive party identity. Unlike traditional forms of communication, which often involve a more formal or controlled message, social media provides the opportunity for political parties to express their values, policies, and vision in a dynamic and authentic way.

Social networks also allow to **showcase party values and policies**: through regular posts, videos, infographics, and live streams, political parties can consistently communicate their core values, principles, and policy positions. Digital platforms facilitate parties' ability to share their vision on key issues, such as healthcare, education, or climate change, while also offering detailed explanations of their proposed solutions. This helps build a coherent, recognizable identity that supporters can easily relate to.

In addition, social platforms are ideal for reinforcing the **party's stance on current events and ongoing policy debates**. By providing regular updates, statements, and clarifications on issues as they arise, parties can maintain a consistent and authoritative voice in the public discourse. This helps build trust with supporters, as they know where the party stands on crucial topics.

One of the unique advantages of social networks is the possibility they offer to **humanize political figures**. Political leaders are often seen as distant or out of touch, but social media provides an opportunity to present them as relatable and approachable. Through personal posts, behind-the-scenes content, and informal updates, parties can showcase the human side of their leaders, making them appear more accessible to the public. Behind-the-scenes content—such as footage from campaign rallies, meetings with supporters, or moments of reflection—can also offer voters a glimpse into the leader's personality and work ethic. Seeing a leader's authentic self on social media may foster a sense of connection and trust.

Social networks also enable parties to **engage directly with their followers**, allowing leaders to interact with voters through Q&A sessions, live chats, or by responding to comments. This kind of direct engagement helps build a sense of community and solidarity, reinforcing the party's identity as being attuned to the needs and concerns of its supporters.

The Justin Trudeau campaign in Canada: personal branding as a strategy

Justin Trudeau, Prime Minister of Canada since 2015, has significantly transformed the competitive landscape in which politicians contend for governance of the country. His candidacy emerged in the aftermath of the Liberal Party's devastating defeat in 2011, a result that provided him with a "blank slate" for crafting his election campaign. As a young and dynamic candidate, Trudeau swiftly recognized the strategic importance of social media in a Canadian election campaign, particularly in a country marked by its vastness and complex political objectives. Within his party, Trudeau spearheaded a revolution in communication strategy, establishing a team entirely dedicated to his persona. This approach personalized party messaging and effectively created the "Brand Trudeau," which resonated as both credible and appealing to the electorate. A key component of this strategy was the development of a database, "The Liberal," which, in

conjunction with mathematical modelling, analysed voter demographics and behaviours to optimize the allocation of campaign resources at the local level.

The results of this approach showed that Trudeau's social media profiles achieved nearly double the engagement of his political rivals, underscoring the effectiveness of his digital strategy. Furthermore, his personal communication style, exemplified by videos that seamlessly integrated public policy discussions with elements of his personal life, significantly enhanced his visibility both within Canada and on the global stage.

Securing the youth vote: a comparative analysis of digital persuasion on TikTok among political actors

A 2022 study investigated the use of digital persuasion on TikTok by political parties and leaders in Spain and Poland. The analysis of 372 videos revealed that political actors are not fully leveraging TikTok's interactive and audiovisual affordances, instead relying on traditional communication strategies. Key findings include:

- **Engagement levels:** political leaders' videos received more views and likes than those of political parties.
- **Content strategies:** political parties primarily used TikTok to ridicule opponents with negative emotions (pathos) and rational appeals (logos) like recorded evidence. On the other hand, political leaders focused on self-promotion and image management, using more positive emotions (pathos), such as hope and inspiration, but with limited interactivity and personalization.
- **Audiovisual elements:** videos often lacked key features like music and creative editing typical of TikTok.
- **Differences by country:** in Poland, political leaders used more interactive genres, frequently appeared in their videos, and employed positive emotions. In Spain more reliance on negative criticism and combining emotional and rational appeals were used.

Overall, political actors in both countries maintained a conservative approach to TikTok, favouring traditional methods of communication over personalization or humanization. The study underscores the importance of political context in shaping digital persuasion strategies on TikTok.⁷

Third party campaign in US 2024 presidential elections⁸

During the recent U.S. presidential election campaign, Elon Musk's social platform X (formerly known as Twitter) experienced unprecedented levels of activity. Both the platform and Musk himself played a significant role in amplifying the views of the newly elected president, Donald Trump. Musk's use of his network was both direct and influential.

As the owner of the platform and an active participant in its discourse, Musk leveraged X's vast user base and his personal account, which has over 200 million followers, to amplify Trump's messages and campaign narratives. Musk actively reshared and engaged with content related to Trump's campaign, including policy announcements, debates, and critiques of opponents. This engagement significantly boosted the visibility of Trump's messages to a global audience. Under Musk's leadership, X implemented policies that appeared to favour free speech, including

⁷ Rocío Zamora-Medina, Andrius Suminas, Shahira S. Fahmy, [Securing the Youth Vote: A Comparative Analysis of Digital Persuasion on TikTok Among Political Actors](#), Media and Communication, 2023.

⁸ <https://theconversation.com/elon-musk-has-turned-x-into-a-globally-influential-media-platform-and-theres-more-to-come-243377>.

reinstating banned accounts, such as Trump's, and reducing restrictions on controversial content. These changes allowed Trump and his supporters to dominate the platform's political discourse.

Musk made public statements supporting Trump's policies and leadership, positioning himself as a key figure in shaping political discussions on the platform. His declaration, "You are the media now," emphasized his vision of decentralized media influence, empowering users to control narratives.

Critics argued that Musk's adjustments to the platform's algorithms, favouring engagement-heavy posts, inadvertently or intentionally amplified polarizing political content, including pro-Trump narratives. Musk's role in promoting Trump has sparked debates about the ethics of platform owners influencing political outcomes. While some see it as an exercise in free speech, others view it as an imbalance of power, where personal influence can disproportionately shape democratic processes. The case underscores the growing intersection of technology, media ownership, and political influence in the digital age.

Crisis management represents another crucial area of engagement by parties through social networks. In times of controversy or crisis, digital platforms become a critical tool for political parties to manage their public perception and control the narrative. In a media landscape where information spreads rapidly and can be amplified through viral content, the ability to respond quickly and effectively on social media is essential to maintaining a party's reputation and minimizing damage.

Social platforms also allow political parties to **take control of the narrative in real time**, particularly when a crisis breaks out. By doing so, they can mitigate the impact of any potential fallout and prevent rumours and misinformation from taking root, while also showing the party's commitment to transparency and accountability.

Social networks provide a direct platform for a party to defend itself and **respond to accusations** in a timely manner: a party might issue a statement, engage in a live discussion, or even directly counter specific claims in real time. This proactive approach is critical for preventing the spread of false or damaging information.

Social platforms can help managing public perception on political parties' actions and decisions. Public perception is often shaped by the speed and tone of responses during a crisis. Parties can use social networks not only to address the crisis at hand but also to redirect the conversation towards their achievements, their ongoing initiatives, or the broader values they stand for. This helps in **framing the crisis** within the larger context of the party's vision and goals.

In addition to addressing the immediate crisis, social platforms allow parties to engage in **reputation management** by sharing positive stories, highlighting the work they are doing in the community, or showcasing moments of success.

In some cases, crisis management on social media can also involve **apologies and accountability**, especially when a mistake has been made. Publicly acknowledging errors, offering apologies, and outlining steps for resolution can demonstrate humility and responsibility, which helps restore trust, rebuild credibility and protect long-term image.

Real-time crisis communication can be managed through social networks. While traditional media may take hours or even days to respond to a developing issue, social media allows political parties to stay engaged with the public throughout a crisis. This continuous communication stream ensures that voters are not left in the dark and that the party's side of the story is being heard as events unfold.

Moreover, social platforms allow parties to **quickly address evolving** crises. If new information surfaces, the party can adjust its messaging or clarify its position in real time. The ability to react to new developments on the fly helps parties stay in control of their narrative and ensure that their messages remain relevant and timely.

4. Influencing public opinion

Social platforms have become a powerful tool for political parties to **shape public discourse, set agendas, and influence the political narrative**. Through strategic content creation, they can raise awareness on important issues, initiate key debates, and engage directly with the public. Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok offer political parties an immediate and cost-effective way to influence conversations and rally support for their causes.

One of the primary ways political parties use social networks is by **setting the political agenda**. This involves identifying key issues they want to bring to the forefront of public debate. Political parties can use social platforms to highlight specific topics they feel are underrepresented or misrepresented in mainstream media, thereby steering public discussion towards their preferred issues. For example, a party might use social media to promote a focus on healthcare reform, climate change, or income inequality, pushing these topics to the top of the national conversation.

By creating compelling posts, sharing statistics, and releasing informative videos, parties can raise awareness about these issues and generate **widespread attention**. This can influence traditional media agenda as well, as they often follow the conversations gaining traction on social platforms. Through consistent and strategic use of social channels, parties can ensure that certain issues remain at the forefront of political discourse, shaping the direction of upcoming debates and policies.

In addition to setting the agenda, political parties use social networks to **frame debates** in ways that support their positions. Framing refers to the way information is presented to shape how people perceive an issue. Posts, videos, and images can be crafted to highlight specific aspects of a policy or event, influencing how people think about it. For instance, a political party might frame an immigration policy as either a humanitarian necessity or a security threat, depending on their stance. Through well-crafted messages and visual content, they can emphasize the urgency, positive outcomes, or moral imperative of their position. This kind of framing can be highly effective in swaying public opinion, particularly if the messages resonate emotionally with the audience.

A key tool for shaping conversations on social media is the use of **hashtag campaigns** or creating **viral trends**. Political parties can launch hashtags that promote a specific issue, rally support for a candidate, or mobilize voters. Hashtags such as #MeToo, #BlackLivesMatter, or #MAGA are examples of social media movements that grew out of social causes or political forces, often initiating global conversations and influencing political agendas. By creating catchy and compelling hashtags, political parties can draw **attention to specific issues that align with their platform**. These hashtags encourage supporters to share their own opinions and join a larger, collective effort. The viral nature of these campaigns allows parties to rapidly spread their messages, rally supporters, and influence public perception of important topics. When a hashtag becomes trending, it's not just the political party's followers who see the message, but millions of others, including those who may not have otherwise engaged with the topic.

Bridging activism and party politics: mapping frame alignment processes in politicians' use of hashtags

A 2024 study examined how politicians in power adopt activism-related hashtags, using data from the Twitter Parliamentary Database across 10 countries: Australia, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Norway, Spain, Sweden, the UK, and the US. The research explored the types of hashtags politicians use, focusing on their engagement with activism-related hashtags and the activist causes these tags represent. Findings show that activism-related hashtags constitute a small portion of the overall hashtags used by politicians.

Politicians' use of these hashtags often extends beyond supporting the original activist cause. They may align with the hashtag's message, reinterpret its meaning to fit their party's ideology, or even subvert it. This strategic engagement highlights that politicians leverage these hashtags for various purposes, including gaining visibility, appealing to specific voter groups, or reframing political narratives. When engaging with activist causes, politicians favour widely recognized issues like feminism, anti-racism, human rights, climate change, LGBTQI rights, and gun violence. However, they selectively use prominent hashtags with significant national or global impact, such as #MeToo, #FridaysForFuture, and #Pride, likely to avoid controversy. This tendency aligns with previous researches indicating politicians' reluctance to engage with sensitive issues directly, instead opting for safer, mainstream activism-related themes.

The study also suggests that politicians' motives for using activism-related hashtags often go beyond supporting the cause. They leverage these hashtags for visibility, voter engagement, and political strategy. By aligning, negotiating, or subverting the original meaning of these hashtags, politicians can align activism with their party ideologies, appeal to specific audiences, or reframe the discourse. The study identified processes like frame bridging, frame amplification, frame extension, and frame transformation in these practices. Ultimately, politicians strategically use activism-related hashtags to connect with broader voter groups, reshape narratives, and promote their political agendas.⁹

The use of viral trends also extends to videos, memes, and **other forms of shareable content** that can quickly gain traction, generating widespread discussion. Political parties often use memes and videos to appeal to younger demographics, creating content that is humorous, emotional, or relatable while still advancing their political messages.

5. Data analytics and feedback

In the digital age, political parties are increasingly using social platforms to **track public sentiment**—the emotional tone and attitudes expressed by voters. This process, known as **sentiment analysis**, involves using specialized tools and algorithms to examine large volumes of social media posts, comments, and discussions. By doing so, political parties can gain valuable insights into the public's perceptions, emotions, and concerns about various issues, candidates, or policies. Sentiment analysis is an essential part of modern political campaigns, helping parties tailor their messaging and adjust their strategies in real time.

Sentiment analysis helps political parties **identify voter concerns**—the issues that are most important to their supporters and the broader electorate. Through this analysis, parties can determine which topics are resonating with voters, whether those topics align

⁹ Emma Östin, Simon Lindgren, [Bridging Activism and Party Politics: Mapping Frame Alignment Processes in Politicians' Use of Hashtags](#), *Social Media + Society*, 2024.

with the party's platform, and how public opinion is evolving over time. By tracking sentiments surrounding different issues, parties can better understand where to focus their efforts.

Moreover, by monitoring conversations, political parties can identify which **policy proposals are gaining traction and which are not**. If a policy is being received negatively or generating mixed reactions, parties can reassess their approach, refine their messaging, or even consider revising the proposal. Sentiment analysis allows campaigns to stay in tune with the public's shifting views and adjust their approach swiftly to stay relevant.

Sentiment analysis not only helps political parties understand current public opinion but also may offer **predictive value**.¹⁰ By analysing patterns in sentiment over time, campaigns may estimate how voter attitudes might evolve as the election approaches. This allows them to anticipate challenges, capitalize on emerging issues, and focus resources in areas where sentiment is turning positive.

Social media sentiment analysis is also valuable for **geographic and demographic segmentation**. By analysing sentiment at a local level, parties can determine which areas, communities, or demographic groups are most supportive or opposed to their platform. This enables campaigns to focus their resources on key battleground areas and tailor messages to the specific needs and concerns of different voter groups.

Social platforms provide a wealth of **engagement metrics** (such as: likes and reactions, shares and retweets, comments and replies, click-through rate) that may help political assessing the success of their content, understanding how voters are interacting with their messages, and refining their strategies for maximum impact. Engagement metrics offer insights into how well a campaign is resonating with its target audience, the level of emotional connection it is building, and whether its messages are being amplified across networks.

Furthermore, the **tone of comments** is crucial in sentiment analysis. A post that receives a high volume of positive comments indicates strong support, while a post with mostly critical or negative comments may signal the need for adjustment. Monitoring comments also provides an opportunity for campaigns to engage in two-way communication, responding to voter concerns, thanking supporters, or addressing misinformation.

By analysing engagement metrics, political parties can **fine-tune their strategies** for greater impact.

¹⁰ However, it is important to note that researchers have raised concerns about the reliability of sentiment analysis in predicting election outcomes. Specifically, relying solely on Twitter for election predictions is no more accurate than random chance. This limitation arises from various factors, including biases in who uses social media, the transient nature of online discussions, and the challenges of capturing nuanced political sentiment. To enhance the accuracy of predictions, experts recommend incorporating a variety of data sources beyond Twitter, such as other social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram, TikTok) and traditional polling methods. This multi-platform approach allows for a broader, more comprehensive understanding of public sentiment. Moreover, employing non-linear models—which can better capture the complexities of social behaviour and electoral dynamics—along with treating polls as probabilistic targets rather than definitive outcomes, offers a more nuanced and reliable approach to forecasting elections. See Kellyton Brito, Rogério Luiz Cardoso Silva Filho, Paulo Jorge Leitão Adeodato, [Stop trying to predict elections only with twitter - There are other data sources and technical issues to be improved](#), Government Information Quarterly, Volume 41, Issue 1, March 2024.

Campaigns can also use engagement metrics to **decide when and how often to post, what types of content work best (videos, images, or infographics), and which platforms are most effective for engaging with different voter demographics.** For example, younger voters might be more active on Instagram and TikTok, while older voters may engage more on Facebook. Understanding these patterns allows parties to optimize their content strategy for maximum effectiveness across different platforms.

Despite the valuable ways political parties can use metrics to enhance voter engagement, there are troubling instances where these tools are exploited to **manipulate public opinion.** Some parties leverage algorithms and amplification systems to deepen **polarization, spread misleading or inflammatory information, and intensify societal divisions.** These tactics exploit the very mechanisms designed to foster engagement, turning them into tools for **disinformation and conflict.**

Given these risks, political parties must exercise caution and uphold ethical standards in their digital campaigns. They bear a responsibility to ensure their online strategies promote **peaceful, informed, and respectful political discourse.** Campaigns should prioritize transparency, accuracy, and integrity in their messaging to foster constructive dialogue rather than exacerbate divisions. **Ethical use of social media metrics and algorithms** can help build an informed electorate, while unethical practices threaten the very foundations of democracy.

In a digital age where misinformation can spread rapidly, parties that are committed to **responsible digital engagement** not only strengthen their credibility but also contribute to a healthier, more cohesive political environment.

Italy's Lega party and its social media strategy: "The Beast"

The Lega (formerly the Northern League), a political party with a thirty-year history, has undergone a dramatic transformation under the leadership of Matteo Salvini. Originally known for its autonomist and anti-Southern stance, the party has shifted into a national populist entity. This complex and significant ideological shift has been facilitated, in part, by the party's strategic and adept use of social media.

Central to this strategy is a sophisticated digital communication system known as "The Beast." Developed by Salvini's former spin doctor, "The Beast" leverages social media algorithms to amplify the party's messaging and connect with target audiences. It employs a combination of sentiment analysis to gauge the emotions of voters, keyword monitoring to track relevant discussions, and data analysis from affiliated pages to fine-tune communication strategies. The strategy also focuses on creating a distinctive online identity for the party. This identity is defined by:

- Striking imagery designed to provoke emotional reactions—both positive and negative.
- Direct, informal communication with unconventional punctuation and a personal tone.
- Frequent updates on the activities of party figures, ensuring a constant online presence.
- Aggressive attacks on political opponents, reinforcing a combative stance.

Posts are shared at a relentless pace, often including calls to action that encourage followers to subscribe to alternative information channels for constant updates, fostering a sense of exclusivity and urgency.

Controversies and criticisms

While highly effective, the Lega's social media strategy has drawn substantial criticism for its polarizing impact on public discourse. Critics argue that the party's communication approach

relies on constructing narratives that identify and vilify “enemies”, fostering societal division and reinforcing an “us versus them” mentality. Additionally, the strategy has been accused of spreading misleading or partially true information. Because these narratives often come directly from political figures, they are perceived as credible and are widely shared, sometimes becoming entrenched in public belief. This raises concerns about the role of social media in distorting reality and spreading disinformation. Finally, questions regarding the ethical implications of such a strategy remain. The deliberate use of emotionally charged content to exploit public sentiment for political gain challenges the principles of responsible communication. Critics argue that such tactics undermine informed and rational political debate, prioritizing emotional manipulation over substantive discussion.

In summary, while “The Beast” has been instrumental in transforming the Lega’s public image and outreach, it highlights the broader challenges and risks associated with modern political communication in the digital age.¹¹

Romania’s 2024 presidential election annulment and the battle against hybrid interference

The Romanian constitutional court annulled the country’s presidential election (held on November 24) on December 6. A runoff was due to take place just 48 hours later between far-right independent candidate Călin Georgescu and progressive, pro-western alternative Elena Lasconi. The unprecedented decision followed the declassification of security documents alleging foreign interference—primarily from Russia—in the electoral campaign of candidate Calin Georgescu. The documents revealed that the social media platform TikTok was manipulated to favour Georgescu’s candidacy. Specifically, [TikTok’s algorithms were allegedly adjusted to amplify Georgescu’s content while simultaneously suppressing the visibility of videos and posts from rival candidates.](#)

The allegations highlight a sophisticated form of digital interference, a hallmark of hybrid warfare that has long been a concern within European political discourse. Hybrid warfare encompasses a blend of conventional and unconventional tactics, including cyber-attacks, disinformation, and the exploitation of social media platforms to influence public opinion and destabilize democratic institutions. Romania, due to its geopolitical importance and strategic position on NATO’s eastern flank, has been identified by Western intelligence agencies as a prime target for such Russian activities.

In response to these allegations, the European Commission has ramped up its oversight of TikTok under the provisions of the Digital Services Act (DSA). The Commission issued a preservation order mandating that TikTok freeze and retain data related to potential systemic risks posed by its services. These risks include the platform’s role in shaping civic discourse and influencing electoral outcomes within the European Union. The preservation order aims to ensure that crucial evidence is secured for ongoing investigations.

Furthermore, the European Commission is meticulously examining information provided by the informal Cyber Crisis Task Force, a specialized unit that collaborates closely with Romanian cybersecurity authorities. As part of its mandate under the DSA, the Commission has issued formal requests to TikTok, demanding detailed clarifications, data, and evidence regarding the alleged algorithmic manipulation. The platform is being urged to identify specific vulnerabilities and outline the measures it is taking to mitigate potential threats to the integrity of the democratic process.

To enhance transparency and ensure timely intervention, the Rapid Response System (RRS) has been activated. This system facilitates swift and coordinated action during sensitive electoral periods, fostering real-time communication and cooperation between civil society organizations, online platforms, and fact-checkers. The RRS plays a critical role in debunking false narratives and

¹¹ The New York Times, [Matteo Salvini Likes Nutella and Kittens. It’s All Part of a Social Media Strategy](#), January 2019.

mitigating the spread of disinformation that could compromise the fairness and legitimacy of elections.

The annulment of Romania's presidential election serves as a stark reminder of the vulnerabilities inherent in modern democracies. It underscores the need for robust mechanisms to detect and counteract foreign interference, particularly as social media platforms continue to play a central role in political campaigns. The European Commission's proactive measures under the Digital Services Act represent a significant step toward safeguarding electoral integrity and maintaining public trust in democratic institutions.

Costs considerations: for political parties and candidates, the cost of a social media election campaign can fluctuate significantly based on various factors, including the campaign's scope, the platforms chosen, the complexity of the content, and the target audience. While the primary costs are similar to those for EMBs, there are other additional sources of expenses that should also be taken into account:

- **Ad spending for paid advertisements:** a significant portion of the campaign budget will likely go toward paid social platforms advertising. Networks like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok allow political parties to target specific demographics with paid ads. The cost will depend on factors such as: platform, target audience, duration and geographical reach.
- **Legal and compliance costs:** depending on the region, there may be legal costs related to ensuring that the campaign complies with electoral advertising regulations, which could involve consulting with legal experts or hiring a compliance officer. Also several jurisdictions require political ads to be transparent, including identifying the sponsor and the amount spent. Managing this process can add additional costs.
- **Event promotion and live streaming:** if the party hosts virtual or in-person events during the campaign, promoting these events through social networks will incur additional costs for promotion, live-streaming tools, or even event coordination, including public relations companies. In addition, events such as rallies, speeches, or debates streamed on social platforms can incur costs related to their promotion, boosting reach via paid advertisements to drive engagement.

Finally, as with any campaign, there may be unforeseen expenses or rapid adjustments to strategy that could require additional resources. It's a good practice to include a **contingency fund in the overall budget.**

Summary of key cost components:

1. Ad spend: budget for paid promotions across social media platforms.
2. Content creation: design, video production, photography, and copywriting costs.
3. Community engagement: social media management, influencer campaigns, and user engagement staff.
4. Analytics and monitoring: costs for tools to track campaign performance and sentiment.
5. Crisis management: costs for handling negative press or online backlash.
6. Legal compliance: ensuring adherence to advertising regulations and transparency requirements.
7. Staffing and training: hiring digital communication marketing experts and training staff.

8. Youth and underrepresented groups' engagement

In the evolving digital landscape, social networks have emerged as a powerful tool for **engaging youth and underrepresented groups in political parties**. This engagement may enhance their political participation, amplify their voices, and offers opportunities to reshape traditional power dynamics within party structures.

Social platforms provide an accessible means for youth and marginalized groups to engage with political parties, **bypassing traditional barriers** like geographic isolation, socioeconomic challenges, and rigid party hierarchies. They enable political parties to share information about party policies, events, and opportunities for involvement. This accessibility helps youth and underrepresented groups stay informed and participate in discourse more easily. The affordability of social network allows for cost-effective participation, which is especially valuable for underrepresented groups who may face economic constraints.

Digital platforms can provide a **space for youth, women, and other marginalised groups** to express their views and experiences, **challenging mainstream narratives**. By sharing their perspectives, these groups can influence party agendas and push for more inclusive policies. Hashtags such as #YouthInPolitics or #WomenInPolitics may help create virtual communities, drawing attention to issues often overlooked by political parties. These movements often pressure parties to respond with meaningful reforms. Parties can engage in real-time discussions with underrepresented groups, addressing their concerns and showcasing responsiveness to grassroots needs.

Political action can also be mobilised as social platforms enable youth and other marginalized groups to organize and activate for causes and candidates who represent their interests. Platforms like WhatsApp are widely used for coordination, particularly in contexts where mainstream media or party infrastructure is limited.

Parties can use social media to **engage with these voters**, by running targeted campaigns that appeal to young voters and underrepresented groups, using language, memes, and cultural references that resonate with these demographics. **Campaigns driven by social media advocacy** often spark political momentum, such as youth-led protests or minority rights movements, influencing party platforms or leadership choices.

A number of **challenges and risks** should be emphasised, including **digital exclusion, tokenism misinformation and manipulation**. Many young people and underrepresented groups face unequal access to social media due to limited digital literacy, inadequate infrastructure, or lack of access, especially in developing regions. Also, political parties may involve youth, women and minority voices on social media in superficial ways, making these efforts more symbolic than meaningful, which can lead to frustration and disengagement. Finally, disinformation campaigns often target youth and marginalized communities, aiming to suppress their political engagement or exploit their movements for party interests.

To effectively engage youth and underrepresented groups on social media, political parties can adopt a number of **strategies**, including:

- **Developing inclusive messaging** by shaping communications that genuinely reflect the needs and aspirations of youth and underrepresented groups, ensuring the tone is respectful and avoids being condescending or dismissive.

- **Ensuring diverse representation** by highlighting young people, women, and other marginalised groups leaders in party communications to reinforce a commitment to inclusivity and diverse leadership.
- **Promoting interactive engagement** by facilitating live Q&A sessions, polls, and discussions on social media to create authentic, two-way dialogue with these groups.
- **Supporting capacity building** by providing training on digital literacy and social media advocacy to empower youth and marginalized communities to participate more effectively in political conversations.
- **Addressing policy concerns** by showing a clear commitment to policies that tackle issues like digital access, youth unemployment, and social inclusion.

Social platforms present an unprecedented opportunity for political parties to connect with youth and underrepresented groups. By embracing **inclusive, participatory, and responsive strategies**, parties can harness this engagement to build more representative and dynamic political movements. However, efforts must be genuine and backed by concrete policy commitments to avoid disillusionment and deepen trust.

United Kingdom: #leaderslive 2015 on YouTube

#LeadersLive was a live show, streamed on YouTube, organised by the charity [Bite the Ballot's](#) in 2015. The event was made up of five, hour-long online shows and, each episode featured one of the then party leaders, Natalie Bennet, Nigel Farage, Nick Clegg and Ed Milliband, with David Cameron dropping out at the last minute. It was the first of its kind with social influencers acting as a mouthpiece for their fans to question the party leaders and drill down on the issues that matter most of them.

Gamification of formal political processes – The European Parliament

The European parliament has developed two types of engagement methods mainly considered new or unconventional:

1) The [Digital Journey to the European Parliament](#) where participants can follow in the footsteps of a Member of the European Parliament and learn more about European democracy through games, 360° tours and explainers in all 24 official languages of the European Union.

2) The [Virtual Role Play Game](#) where participants can take on the role of a Member of the European Parliament by negotiating and voting on key legislation in the EU in this group game.

9. Information, disinformation and online harassment

While social platforms have provided political parties with unprecedented opportunities to engage with voters and shape public conversations, they have also introduced significant challenges, particularly when it comes to the spread of **disinformation, misinformation** and **online harassment**.

Disinformation refers to the deliberate spread of false or misleading information with the intent to deceive or manipulate public opinion. Political parties, both domestically and internationally, have often been accused of using social channels to spread disinformation to weaken opponents, sway voters, or gain an unfair advantage. This can include the dissemination of false news, manipulated videos, or false claims that misrepresent a political figure or policy. **Disinformation campaigns** are often carefully **orchestrated**,

utilizing bots, fake accounts, and targeted ads to amplify false narratives and create confusion. When these false claims are widely shared, they can significantly affect public opinion. Political parties may also use disinformation to **undermine opponents' credibility**. For instance, a party might fabricate a scandal or distil an opponent's words or actions out of context to damage their reputation.

While disinformation is intentionally false, **misinformation** refers to the unintentional spread of inaccurate or incomplete information. Misinformation can still have a harmful effect, especially when political parties or their supporters share content without verifying its accuracy. Though the intention is not to deceive, the spread of false information can still mislead voters and disrupt political discourse. Misinformation is often **amplified because it is shared in good faith**. It may arise from misleading headlines, incomplete statistics, or misrepresented quotes that are shared without proper fact-checking. On social platforms, the rapid sharing of content and the use of sensational language can lead to the viral spread of misinformation, sometimes before it can be corrected.

Both disinformation and misinformation can distort public understanding of political issues, leading to **confusion, polarization, and an erosion of trust** in the political system. The ease with which false or misleading content can spread on social media has made it a significant challenge for political parties, regulators, and the public to discern fact from fiction.

Online harassment on social networks also poses significant challenges for political parties, affecting both their members and their public engagement. **Female** politicians and candidates, as well as **marginalised groups** leaders are disproportionately targeted with harassment, including threats of violence, sexist comments, and racial slurs. This often discourages their participation in political discourse and limits their visibility. **Young party members and activists** who express their views online are also frequently subjected to bullying and intimidation, deterring them from further political engagement. Finally, **members of opposition parties** are more vulnerable to coordinated harassment campaigns designed to delegitimize or silence their viewpoints.

This type of harassment has an **impact** on political participation and can lead to self-censorship, as individuals withdraw from public discussions to avoid abuse, reducing diverse perspectives in political debates. The fear of harassment discourages potential candidates, particularly women and marginalized groups, from seeking leadership roles or running for office. Constant harassment can lead to stress, anxiety, and burnout, affecting the well-being and effectiveness of political figures and party activists.

In this context, **political parties play a crucial role in protecting** their members from cyber harassment. This includes developing policies that offer support services, counselling, and legal assistance. Providing digital literacy and security training can also help members identify harassment tactics, safeguard their online presence, and respond effectively. Additionally, political parties should publicly denounce harassment and take a firm stance against abusive online behaviour to promote a safer and more respectful environment.

Germany: parties' agreement to support information integrity

During the 2017 parliamentary campaign, all the parties contesting the elections - except the right-wing Alliance for Germany - agreed to the non-use of computational propaganda, the spread and

endorsement of false narratives, and other manipulative tactics. Germany has a regulatory framework in the social media space, linked with EU regulations such as the Digital Service Act and the General Data Protection Regulation, which provides useful data privacy for European citizens as well as those who simply access European networks.

Source: CEPPS, [Countering Disinformation Guide, Developing Norms and Standards on Disinformation, Party Commitments to Non-Use of Disinformation and Computational Propaganda and Promotion of Information Integrity Principles](#)

The UK: party self-regulation - Labour Party's Digital Campaigning Guide

The Labour Party has adopted guidelines, resources and support to help candidates campaign using digital channels. A section is devoted to setting forth norms of online behaviour, which includes provisions against:

- Abuses, harassment, intimidation, hateful language, bullying and discrimination based on gender, race, religion, age, sexual orientation, gender identity or disability.
- Personal attacks and derogatory descriptions of the positions of others.
- The use of anonymous accounts or other means to hide one's identity to abuse others.
- The use of sexualised language or imagery, and unwelcome sexual attention or advances.
- The publishing of others' private information without their explicit permission.
- The provision of access to those who persistently engage in abuse as well as the sharing of their content.
- Trolling, or other ways to disrupt the ability of others to debate.

The code also urges party members to challenge abuse and to stand in solidarity with victims of such behaviours and encourages the reporting of abusive behaviour to the Labour Party, administrators of the relevant website or social media platform, and where appropriate, to the police

10. Global reach

Social networks offer political parties a powerful global platform, allowing them to engage with **diasporic communities and international audiences** in meaningful ways. This connectivity can be leveraged for a variety of purposes, such as **advocating** for policies or causes that resonate beyond national borders, **mobilizing financial contributions** from supporters abroad, and building **solidarity networks** that amplify their message.

By reaching out to the diaspora, parties can maintain **cultural and emotional ties** with citizens who live overseas but still have a vested interest in their homeland's political future. Additionally, social platforms facilitate **real-time communication**, making it easier to raise awareness about domestic issues and attract international attention and support from human rights organizations, foreign policymakers, and global media.

This international engagement can **enhance a party's legitimacy**, expand its **influence**, and provide critical resources to support its political objectives.

Social media and cross-border political participation: a case study of Kyrgyz migrants' online activism

A 2022 study explored the circumstances under which migrants become politically active in virtual communities and how this online engagement translates into real-world social mobilization. The research focused on Kyrgyz migrants' digital activism within social media platforms like Facebook, VKontakte, and Odnoklassniki. It found that while migrants generally do

not consistently engage in or initiate political discussions on these platforms, moments of crisis—such as the October 2020 revolution, the first wave of COVID-19 in summer 2020, and the Kyrgyz-Tajik border conflict in April-May 2021—spark surges of political activity online. These bursts of activism frequently spill over into tangible actions, such as fundraising efforts and protest mobilizations in the real world.

Crises in the homeland, whether related to regime change, public health emergencies, or violent conflicts, prompt waves of transnational online-to-offline engagement. This activism goes beyond superficial interactions like comments, likes, and shares, manifesting in real-world initiatives such as grassroots projects funded through online donations and public demonstrations.

This type of online political participation, which leads to collective action with real-world impacts, carries significant implications. Firstly, the rapid advancement of internet and mobile technologies, coupled with the increasing role of social media, provides migrants living far from their home countries with new opportunities for meaningful political engagement. Virtual activism should not be dismissed as mere “clicktivism”; instead, it should be recognized as a valid form of political expression capable of driving collective action.

Secondly, transnational online-to-offline activism is often shaped by specific ideologies. While some ideational factors—such as majoritarianism or dualistic worldviews—can foster polarization, others, like nationalism and humanitarianism, can promote unity. These unifying ideas can help establish and strengthen grassroots virtual diaspora communities.¹²

Conclusions

Social platforms significantly transformed how political parties engage with voters by offering an **accessible and far-reaching platform**. It allows parties to connect with **diverse demographics**, particularly youth and marginalized groups, in ways that traditional media often cannot. Unlike one-way communication methods, social platforms facilitate **two-way interaction**, enabling **real-time feedback** and fostering a sense of **inclusion**. Additionally, the ability to use data analytics allows parties to **tailor messages** to specific voter segments, enhancing relevance and engagement. Social media also serves as an effective tool for **mobilization**, helping organize events and encouraging **voter participation**.

However, this digital engagement comes with **challenges**. It exposes users to **misinformation** and **online harassment**. The **digital divide** remains a significant barrier, as those without internet access or digital literacy may be excluded from these online interactions. To address this, political parties need to balance their social media strategies with traditional outreach methods to ensure equitable engagement for all voters.

¹² Ajar Chekirov, [Social Media and Cross-Border Political Participation: A Case Study of Kyrgyz Migrants' Online Activism](#), Social Sciences, 2022.

IV. Digital communication in North Macedonia: use of social platforms by the State Election Commission and political parties

Background

As of early 2024, North Macedonia had 1.82 million internet users, representing an internet penetration rate of 87.2%.¹³ Social media usage also plays a significant role in North Macedonia's online landscape. As of January 2024, there were 944.600 social media users, which accounts for 45.4% of the total population. While this figure highlights **strong engagement with digital platforms, it also suggests room for growth**, particularly among older demographics and rural communities where social platforms adoption may be lower due to **digital literacy gaps or limited access** to high-speed internet.

Additionally, **mobile connectivity is exceptionally high**, with 2.55 million active cellular mobile connections recorded in early 2024. This number is equivalent to 122.6% of the total population, indicating that many individuals maintain multiple mobile connections, either through dual-SIM devices, separate business and personal lines, or different service providers offering competitive plans. The widespread availability of mobile connections may have contributed to the increasing shift toward mobile-based social media consumption and digital communication.

Overall, **North Macedonia's digital landscape continues to expand**, with internet and social media penetration facilitating greater connectivity, access to information, and economic opportunities.

"With various practices of using digital tools and solutions both in public and private sector, the country has emerged in [UNDP's Digital Development Compass](#) that puts North Macedonia's current digital readiness at a systematic stage. This means the country is making progress and thinking strategically towards a digital future, while making sure to invest in key areas of digital transformation based on identified priority areas, such as skills, digital public services, and others".¹⁴

Social networks have a critical role in North Macedonia's digital landscape, shaping how people communicate, access information, and engage with public life. The increasing penetration of the internet and the widespread use of social networks have reshaped the way citizens interact with each other, businesses, and government institutions.

Penetration: The country has experienced a **steady increase in internet penetration**, with over 80% of the population having regular access to online platforms. The affordability of smartphones and expanding mobile internet coverage have contributed significantly to this growth, allowing more people, including those in rural areas, to connect online.

Demographically, social platforms are more frequently used by **younger audiences**, aged up to 24 (52%), **students** (40%) and those with **higher education** (35%).¹⁵ Thus, data

¹³ [Digital 2024: North Macedonia](#).

¹⁴ UNDP, [North Macedonia sets a benchmark for digital readiness in the region](#), 2024.

¹⁵ IFES, Demographic Effects on Civic Engagement and Voter Education in North Macedonia, 2021. (<https://electoralsupportprogramme.mk/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/ENG-Demographic-Effects-on-Civic-Engagement-and-Voter-Education-in-North-Macedonia.pdf>)

show that a **digital divide persists**, with urban and educated populations having better access to high-speed internet and digital tools.

Popularity and patterns of consumption:¹⁶ Several social media platforms dominate the digital space in North Macedonia, each catering to different demographics and content preferences. Facebook remains the most popular platform, widely used for news consumption, business promotion, and community engagement. It serves as a primary tool for political discussions, civic activism, and event organization. YouTube is also extensively used across all age groups, providing a platform for entertainment, educational content, and political discourse. Instagram has gained significant traction among younger users, primarily for visual storytelling, influencer content, and lifestyle marketing. Similarly, TikTok has experienced rapid growth, particularly among teenagers and young adults who engage with short-form video content. Meanwhile, X, although less popular than other platforms, remains influential in shaping political narratives and journalistic discourse. Social media consumption is shaped by three primary use cases, namely news consumption, entertainment, and community engagement.

Challenges and risks: While social media platforms offer significant benefits for public engagement and information dissemination, several concerns have emerged regarding their impact on the public sphere in the country:¹⁷

- **Digital threats** such as **misinformation and disinformation** are prevalent, particularly around political events. **Cyberbullying and online harassment**, particularly targeting women, journalists, and public figures, with limited regulatory oversight to address these concerns effectively.
- The **lack of digital literacy** among certain segments of the population makes it easier for misleading narratives to spread unchecked, influencing public opinion and potentially exacerbating social tensions. Fact-checking initiatives have emerged, but they face challenges in countering the speed at which misinformation spreads.
- The **digital divide** remains a barrier, particularly for rural populations and economically disadvantaged groups who have limited access to high-speed internet and digital literacy programs. While mobile internet has expanded access, disparities in technological infrastructure still exist, impacting digital inclusion.
- **Privacy and data security** concerns are also growing, as social media platforms collect vast amounts of user data. Many users are unaware of how their personal information is being used or the risks associated with data breaches. There is also the issue of government surveillance and political manipulation of digital spaces, raising questions about online freedoms and the right to digital privacy.¹⁸

Trends and opportunities: social networks are playing an increasing role in **political and civic engagement**. Digital platforms can be used for voter education, political debates, and election monitoring. This presents an opportunity for greater political transparency and citizen participation in governance. The **expansion of government and institutional presence on social media** presents an opportunity to improve public

¹⁶ Data Reportal, [Digital 2024: North Macedonia](#), 2024; StatCounter, [Social media stats Macedonia, North Jan 2024 - Jan 2025](#), 2025; NapoleonCat, [Social media users in TFYR Macedonia at the end of 2024](#), 2025.

¹⁷ UNDP, [News on information integrity in North Macedonia](#), 2024; European University Institute, Bleyer-Simon, K., Da Costa Leite Borges, D., Brogi, E., Carlini, R. et al., [Monitoring media pluralism in the digital era – Application of the Media Pluralism Monitor in the European Member States and in candidate countries in 2023](#) – Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom, 2024; International Journalists Network, [How North Macedonia's Metamorphosis Foundation is weathering smear campaigns and online attacks](#), 2024.

¹⁸ Balkan Insight, [Ranking Digital Rights in the Balkans](#), 2024.

communication, enhance transparency and bridge the gap between authorities and the public.

The penetration and patterns of social media consumption in North Macedonia highlight both the **transformative power of digital platforms and the challenges that come with them**. As internet and social platforms use continues to grow, stakeholders—including Election Management Bodies (EMBs) public institutions and political parties — can work to maximize the benefits of social networks while mitigating possible risks.

State Election Commission use of social networks

The State Election Commission (SEC) maintains an online presence across multiple social media platforms to engage with the public and disseminate information. Below is an overview of their activity on each platform at the time of writing:

1. **Facebook:** The SEC has approximately 18,000 followers. As for **content frequency**, posts are sporadic. The latest update was in November 2024, with the previous one in May 2024. This seems to indicate limited activity outside of election periods. The SEC mostly shares contents related to official SEC announcements, promotional and educational materials, voter registration information, public engagement campaigns, interviews with the commission's president, and voting results. Each post typically garners around ten reactions, mainly likes, with occasional shares. Comments are minimal and almost no responses are noticed.
2. **X (formerly Twitter):** The SEC account has 642 followers and some 498 items published. SEC activity is minimal, with fewer than ten posts in 2024. The most recent post dates back to March 2024, just few months before the Parliamentary and Presidential elections scheduled in April and May 2024. Similar to Facebook, the SEC posts official announcements, educational content, and voter information. There is negligible engagement, with almost no likes, shares, or comments.
3. **YouTube:** The SEC channel has 901 subscribers and published 556 videos. Uploads are sporadic, primarily around election periods. Recent content includes videos from official SEC sessions. The account features official announcements, educational materials, voter registration information, public engagement campaigns, interviews with the commission's president, and voting results. Comments are disabled, and there are very few likes or shares.

None of the SEC's social media profiles are verified. Facebook posts and YouTube video titles are bilingual, available in Macedonian and Albanian languages. However, posts on X are primarily in Macedonian.

In summary, the **SEC's social media activity is concentrated around election periods, with limited engagement in-between elections**. For instance, on the SEC Facebook page, the latest posts are from November 2024, related to a workshop on the SEC strategic plan and a post-election workshop with the Venice Commission, while earlier posts date back to May 2024. On Platform X, the most recent content is from March 2024. On the YouTube channel, following the 2024 elections, there are several videos from the SEC official sessions.

The content is informative, focusing on official SEC communications and voter education. User interaction across platforms is minimal, and there is an opportunity to enhance engagement and outreach, especially during non-election periods.

Enhancing the SEC's social media presence may contribute to public engagement, ensuring transparency, and effectively disseminating information. A number of **strategies** may be considered in this regard, namely:

- **Developing a comprehensive public relation and social media strategy**, with clear objectives, target audiences, and platform selection.
- **Ensuring account verification** by pursuing verification badges on platforms to enhance credibility and prevent impersonation.
- **Determining the main social platforms to be used** by assessing penetration, consumption habits and available resources. Currently, Facebook, Instagram, and X (formerly Twitter) are considered the main channels.
- **Establishing a consistent posting schedule**, with regular content updates, based on a content calendar. This should contain key dates, such as voter registration deadlines, election days, and public holidays, around which posts are scheduled to maintain relevance.
- **Diversifying content types**, which could include educational materials in a user-friendly format, insights of the SCE work, and interactive content.
- **Enhancing audience engagement** by ensuring monitoring comments and messages and responding promptly to questions and concerns to show that the SEC values public input.
- **Implementing accessibility and inclusivity practices** by broadening the use of multilingual content across platforms and ensuring that all images have alt text, videos are captioned, and content is designed for screen readers to accommodate individuals with disabilities.
- **Utilizing analytics** for continuous improvement and use platform tracking to measure engagement metrics, such as likes, shares, comments, and reach.
- **Collaborating with partners** by leveraging trusted voices such as community leaders, influencers, and organizations to amplify messages and reach a wider audience.
- **Enhancing cross-promotion** by sharing content from reputable sources that align with the SEC's mission to provide diverse perspectives and information.
- **Ensuring compliance and security** by developing clear guidelines for social media use, including content approval processes and security protocols, to maintain consistency and protect the commission's integrity.

Political parties use of social networks

The analysis of parties' use of social platforms focused on the three larger political parties and one coalition, namely:

1. Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (VMRO-DPMNE);
2. Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM);
3. Democratic Union for Integration (BDI/DUI); and
4. Coalition VLEN/VREDI¹⁹ (VLEN/VREDI).

Presence: All the above-mentioned parties maintain official social media accounts on the main platforms.

¹⁹ Coalition VLEN/VREDI includes following political parties: Alliance for Albanians (Arben Taravari's wing), Alternativa, Besa and Democratic Union

Party/Coalition	Platform presence
VMRO-DPMNE	Facebook , Instagram , Tik Tok , X , YouTube
SDSM	Facebook , Instagram , X , Tik Tok , YouTube
BDI/DUI	Facebook , Instagram , X , Tik Tok , YouTube
VLEN/VREDI	Facebook , Instagram , Tik Tok , YouTube

Account verification:²⁰ Some of the accounts, for example VMRO-DPMNE and SDSM on Instagram, are verified, while others are not, such as the BDI/DUI profile on Instagram. Below a summary table for each party and platform:

Political party	Facebook	Instagram	YouTube	X	Tik Tok
VMRO-DPMNE	No	Yes	No	No	No
SDSM	Yes	Yes	No	No	No
BDI/DUI	Yes	No	No	No	No
VLEN/VREDI	No	No	No	/	No

Also, it should be noted that, the youth and women’s sections of VMRO-DPMNE and SDSM have Facebook fan pages, as do their youth and women’s sub-sections in various municipalities. Additionally, VMRO-DPMNE veterans, as well as municipals’ sections of VMRO-DPMNE and SDSM, also have Facebook fan pages. This is the case also with BDI/DUI while VLEN/VREDI have social media presence also as a political party that are part of the coalition.

Following: The number of followers varies significantly by party and platform, with **Facebook being the dominant platform for all parties**. The VMRO-DPMNE has the highest number of followers across all platforms, apart from YouTube.

Political party	Facebook	Instagram	YouTube	X	Tik Tok
VMRO-DPMNE	131K	13.8K	10.6K	9.7K	2.1K
SDSM	99K	13.2K	12K	9.3K	157
BDI/DUI	34K	1.2K	435	176	6.2K
VLEN/VREDI	7.8K	226	36	/	2.3K

Level of engagement: engagement levels on political party social media platforms vary depending on the topic. Generally, posts receive limited interaction, with most comments coming from party members and supporters. Promotional events typically

²⁰ Account verification on social platforms is crucial for political parties to establish authenticity, build trust, and effectively engage with the public. Verified accounts, often marked by a distinctive badge, signify that the platform has confirmed the account's ownership and legitimacy. A verified account allows political parties to promptly address and correct misinformation, ensuring their messages are accurately conveyed. In addition, social platforms may prioritize content from verified accounts, leading to increased visibility and engagement and they may offer additional tools and analytics to verified users, aiding in more effective campaign strategies.

garner expressions of support. Political party social media pages often repost content from other fan pages, such as those of the party leader or senior officials.

An example of this limited engagement is the post published on January 31, on Facebook fan page of the ruling VMRO-DPMNE: the post was shared from party leader and Prime Minister Hristijan Mickoski about his visit to a monastery in Tetovo. The post received 73 likes, no shares, and three short comments.

However, **certain topics generate more interest**. On the SDSM Facebook fan page, a photo was posted showing a murder suspect using a mobile phone in prison, with a caption alleging that the defendant has government protection. This post received 44 shares and 68 comments, including responses from individuals with opposing political views.

This pattern suggests that **while routine posts receive limited engagement, content addressing controversial or high-profile issues elicits more significant interaction** from a broader audience.

Audience engagement: an analysis of political parties' social media platforms reveals that they generally do not actively engage with their audiences through their posts. Posts appear to primarily serve as one-way communications, focusing on disseminating information without inviting dialogue or feedback from followers.

Contents: parties most often publish statements from their leaders and high-ranking political representatives, along with official party activities, meetings with international representatives, podcasts, and press conferences, including their key messages and highlights. They also address current political issues. Generally, the content is not specifically tailored to particular audiences, such as youth, rural populations, or women. Rather it addresses the general public. Political parties use multimedia content, particularly videos and live streams, to engage followers. They also frequently use sponsored posts to increase the visibility of their content. Political parties' social media communications are predominantly monolingual: Albanian parties typically post content exclusively in Albanian, while ethnic Macedonian parties use only Macedonian language.

Based on the current analysis, several **strategies** may be adopted by parties to foster citizens' engagement:

- **Ensuring account verification** by pursuing verification for all official accounts to enhance credibility and public trust. Achieving verification across platforms can prevent impersonation and signal authenticity to followers.
- **Fostering audience engagement and interaction** by expanding content that invites dialogue. This includes polls, Q&A sessions, and live discussions to actively involve followers.
- **Promoting responsive communication** by monitoring and responding to comments and messages promptly.
- **Diversifying content and targeting** by developing content strategies that address the specific interests and concerns of diverse demographic groups, such as youth, rural populations, and women. Leveraging a mix of videos, infographics, podcasts, and live streams can also help catering to varied audience preferences and increase content engagement.
- **Disseminating multilingual communication** by posting content in both Macedonian and Albanian. This approach can broaden reach and demonstrate a commitment to inclusivity, acknowledging the country's ethnic diversity.

- **Promoting ethical information sharing** by committing to sharing verified and accurate information. This issue appears to be central in the communication approach used by parties in North Macedonia and as a separate summary analysis is presented below.

In this regard, it is important to stress that **effective comment moderation** on social platforms is crucial to counter hate speech, particularly attacks against women politicians, individuals with disabilities and other vulnerable groups. Such moderation not only safeguards the dignity and well-being of these individuals but also fosters a more inclusive and respectful online environment.

Misinformation: in North Macedonia, political parties have been observed employing **strategic communication tactics that contribute to the dissemination of disinformation while circumventing legal repercussions**. A prevalent method involves **framing allegations as questions** during press conferences, rather than making direct accusations. This rhetorical approach allows political representatives to insinuate misconduct without presenting concrete evidence, thereby avoiding potential defamation or insult charges. As an illustrative example: instead of directly accusing an opponent of unlawfully acquiring property, a political figure might pose the question, "*Is it true that this individual has illegally acquired property?*" This technique subtly implants suspicion in the public's mind without substantiating the claim, effectively spreading disinformation under the guise of inquiry. Such tactics can undermine public confidence in political discourse, as they promote unverified claims and contribute to a culture of misinformation. In addition, by framing statements as questions, politicians can disseminate potentially damaging insinuations while minimizing the risk of legal consequences associated with direct accusations.

Furthermore, in North Macedonia, **social platforms have become significant channels for the dissemination of political disinformation**. Political entities and their supporters often establish fake accounts on platforms like Facebook and X to propagate misleading or entirely false narratives. These fabricated accounts amplify disinformation, shaping public opinion by presenting speculative claims as facts. This strategy enables political parties to bypass traditional media channels, further distorting public discourse and contributing to the spread of misinformation. By promoting unverified information, they foster a climate of uncertainty and distrust, where opinions are formed more on speculation than on credible, fact-based reporting.

These tactics have serious consequences for the political environment and public trust. The distortion of facts undermines democratic processes, especially during critical events such as elections or referendums, where misinformation can influence voter behaviour and decision-making. [A 2022 survey conducted by the Institute of Communication Studies \(ICS\)](#) and the Institute for Democracy "Societas Civilis" found that **political parties are widely seen as the primary sources of disinformation in the country**.²¹ While many citizens believe they can identify false information, a significant number admit to occasionally sharing it themselves.

The widespread use of these disinformation tactics not only erodes trust in the media but also complicates efforts to combat false narratives and maintain an informed electorate. As political parties continue to leverage these methods, the challenge of addressing

²¹ ICS survey, [Political parties – main source of disinformation in Macedonia](#), 2022.

disinformation grows, posing a significant threat to both the integrity of political processes and the stability of democratic institutions in North Macedonia.

Following research and open consultations with various experts and stakeholders, a group of organizations in 2022 has proposed [recommendations](#) for all relevant stakeholders to address disinformation in North Macedonia²².

Recommendations for the political parties and the politicians

- Political parties should not use disinformation as an element of political struggle and they should form (or upgrade) the internal party structures and mechanisms, codes of ethics and procedures aimed at building resistance to disinformation among their membership and the general public.
- Individual politicians, as part of their legitimate political struggle, should not spread disinformation through all forms of public communication that are available to them, such as the parliamentary rostrum, social networks, media appearances, party newsletters and in daily contacts with the citizens.
- Political parties should refrain from using organized structures on social networks (troll farms) for orchestrated malicious dissemination of disinformation, hate speech and incitement to violence.

²² Metamorphosis, [Recommendations for joint action for building societal resilience towards malign influences of disinformation, 2023](#).

V. Recommendations

1. Recommendations for EMBs to effectively use social networks for voter engagement and education

1. **Developing a comprehensive digital strategy:** EMBs should identify specific goals, such as increasing voter registration, improving voter turnout, educating the public on voting procedures, or combating misinformation. Objectives should be SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound). They also should identify target audiences by segmenting voters by factors like age, gender, geographic location, and socioeconomic status. Tailored messages to each group's needs should then be developed — for example, more visual and interactive content for younger voters and accessible, straightforward content for rural communities. EMBs must also select the appropriate platforms to reach the intended target audience:

- Facebook is ideal for broad demographic reach, especially in developing regions.
- WhatsApp is effective for direct communication and group messaging.
- TikTok and Instagram are useful for engaging younger audiences with creative visuals.
- X (formerly Twitter) is effective for real-time updates and news dissemination.

2. **Ensuring accurate and timely information:** EMBs must take care of establishing official verified accounts on all major social platforms to build credibility and ensure voters know where to find reliable information. They must ensure to disseminate clear indications on voter registration, how to check polling locations, and voting procedures. Plain language and visuals like checklists and flowcharts can help to simplifying instructions. Regular updates must be provided on key election milestones, deadlines, and any changes in procedures.

3. **Creating interactive and engaging content:** using multimedia products—such as videos, infographics, animations, and memes—helps communicate complex information in an engaging and digestible format. Live-streamed sessions on platforms like Facebook or Instagram, where election officials answer voter questions in real-time, are also effective tools for fostering transparency and engagement. Additionally, EMBs can leverage storytelling and testimonials to highlight how voting impacts individuals or communities.

4. **Combating misinformation and disinformation:** EMBs can partner with reputable fact-checking organizations to quickly identify and correct misinformation circulating online and provide dedicated webpages or social media posts for verified facts. Pre-bunking campaigns can be established to anticipate common misinformation themes and address them proactively. EMBs can also encourage the public to report suspicious content or fake accounts to them and provide clear instructions on how to report misinformation directly to social media platforms.

5. **Promoting inclusivity and accessibility:** language diversity should be addressed by providing content in multiple local languages to reach all communities. Accessibility features—such as text-to-speech, subtitles, and video transcripts—should be incorporated to support people with disabilities. Website content must also be compatible with screen readers. EMBs should ensure outreach to marginalized groups by designing campaigns that reflect the needs and concerns of women, youth, rural populations, and

persons with disabilities. Messages should be tailored to resonate with their experiences and promote inclusivity.

6. **Leveraging data analytics:** EMBs can monitor engagement through analytics tools to track user interactions (shares, comments, views) and to identify which types of content resonate most with their audience. Data can be analysed to measure success metrics - like voter registration spikes, increased page follows, or higher interaction rates - and to adjust strategies based on these insights.

7. **Adopting safety and security protocols:** EMBs must protect voter privacy and ensure that any online forms or data collection follow data protection laws and regulations. They should also communicate how voter data will be used and protected. Cybersecurity measures must also be adopted to secure EMBs websites and social accounts against potential hacking or cyberattacks.

8. **Establishing strategic partnerships:** EMBs can cooperate with trusted public figures, social media influencers, or community leaders to amplify voter outreach messages. These influencers should align with the EMB's nonpartisan stance. EMBs can also work with civic society organizations (NGOs, women's groups, youth organizations, and other community bodies) to expand reach. These organizations can help bridge trust gaps between the EMB and specific communities.

9. **Planning pre- and post-campaign engagement:** voter outreach must start well before election day and it should be based on educational campaigns that explain the importance of voting, how the election process works, and how to detect misinformation. After the election, EMBs should engage with the public to gather feedback through online surveys, polls, or comments and use this information to refine future voter outreach efforts.

10. **Ensuring proper planning and budgeting:** given the increasing role of digital platforms in elections, it is essential that EMBs approach their social media strategy with careful consideration of both the content, the framework and the budget required to achieve their goals. Proper planning based on realistic financial projections ensures that the EMB's efforts are sustainable, impactful, and aligned with their broader electoral objectives.

2. Recommendations for political parties to effectively use social networks for voter mobilisation

1. **Developing a clear strategy:** parties should set goals, by clearly defining what they want to achieve with their social media campaign. For example, increasing voter registration among youth by 20%, raising awareness of your platform, or countering misinformation. Having measurable objectives helps track progress and adjust tactics as needed. They should conduct research to understand the demographics they aim to reach. Parties should focus on the platforms where their target audience is most active:

- Facebook is effective for reaching a broad audience and sharing detailed posts.
- WhatsApp is a useful tool for direct communication and grassroots mobilization.
- Instagram and TikTok are ideal for visually-driven content and engaging younger demographics.
- Twitter/X is best for real-time updates and interacting with journalists or politically engaged audiences.

2. **Creating engaging and shareable content:** a variety of content formats - videos, infographics, animations, and memes – can be used to convey key messages in an engaging way and formulate narratives that resonate emotionally and inspire others to get involved. Parties can also highlight Call-to-Actions (CTAs), by ending each post with a clear, actionable request (“Share this video with your friends!”, “Register to vote by [date]!” “Click the link to find our programme!”).

3. **Using live engagement and interaction:** live Q&A Sessions can be organised by scheduling regular live-streamed sessions where candidates or party officials answer voter questions on platforms like Facebook Live, Instagram Live, or YouTube. Responding to comment and message help build engagement as it makes supporters feel heard and can help address concerns or misinformation. Parties can also use platform features like polls, quizzes, or question stickers on Instagram Stories to involve their audience and gather feedback.

4. **Leveraging influencers and ‘ambassadors’:** parties can identify and work with local influencers, respected figures in the community, and activists, who can amplify their message to their followers. Party supporters can be encouraged to create and share content promoting the party platform. User-generated content, such as personal testimonials or short videos, can have a grassroots authenticity that resonates widely. Ambassador programs can be established where volunteers receive training and resources to spread the party message effectively within their networks.

5. **Ensuring accessibility and inclusion:** multilingual content must be developed to ensure that all linguistic communities are reached in contexts where voters speak different languages. Accessibility features - like captions, subtitles, transcripts, and text-to-speech options for videos – are to be incorporated. Images and graphics should include alt-text descriptions so people with visual impairments can understand the content. Parties can also design campaigns that specifically address the issues and concerns of women, youth, rural populations, and persons with disabilities.

6. **Using data and analytics:** parties should monitor engagement metrics by tracking key performance indicators (KPIs) such as likes, shares, comments, reach, and click-through rates. Content can then be adjusted, in case, based on insights. In this regard, regularly reviewing analytics helps understand what types of content resonate most with the party audience.

7. **Planning a content calendar:** parties should establish a regular posting schedule to ensure consistent engagement with their audience. Their content calendar should align with key dates, such as voter registration deadlines, candidate debates, and election days, and include targeted campaigns leading up to these events. Additionally, thematic campaigns can be planned around specific issues or voter groups, such as "Youth Voter Week" or "Higher Salaries for Women," to focus attention on important topics and encourage broader participation.

8. **Upholding digital ethical standards:** political parties play a crucial role in maintaining the integrity and fairness of electoral and democratic processes, especially when carrying out digital campaigns. Ethical behaviour online not only strengthens democracy but also builds public trust and enhances voter engagement. The key areas where political parties can demonstrate ethical responsibility during their online campaigns include:

- *Combating misinformation, disinformation and online harassment:* parties should verify information before sharing by fact-checking all content before posting to

ensure that it is accurate and from credible sources. If misinformation is inadvertently shared, parties should promptly correct it and issue clarifications to prevent confusion. They should also promote media literacy and encourage supporters to verify information by sharing resources or guidelines on how to spot fake news and unreliable sources. Political parties should develop and enforce clear policies condemning online harassment, outline acceptable standards of behaviour for their members, supporters, and staff and develop internal and external policies to address the problem.

- *Promoting transparency in communication:* political parties should clearly label advertisements, sponsored posts, and paid endorsements to avoid misleading the public. They should also ensure that official party accounts are verified and distinguishable from fake or imposter accounts to prevent confusion and misinformation. Parties should promote open and honest messaging by avoiding exaggerations or misleading statistics and communicating campaign promises, policies, and achievements accurately and transparently.
- *Adhering to accountability and ethical advertising:* parties should not resort to manipulative ads and they should refrain from creating messages that distort facts or use deceptive practices to manipulate emotions or beliefs. Political parties should take responsibility for all content shared on their platforms and by their campaign teams. This includes content produced by third-party agencies. They should disclose the sources of funding for online campaigns to uphold public trust and integrity.
- *Ensuring respect for privacy and data protection:* parties should promote responsible data usage and adhere to data protection regulations when collecting voter information. They must clearly explain how personal data is used and ensure consent is obtained. Parties should refrain from using invasive micro-targeting strategies that exploit private information to manipulate voter behaviour. Finally, supporters' personal information must be protected by using secure online platforms and technologies.
- *Promoting civil and respectful discourse:* parties should commit to promoting respectful language and refrain from inciting hatred, division or hostility toward opponents or specific groups. They should moderate supporter behaviour by establishing and enforcing guidelines for how supporters and party representatives engage in online discussions. They should remove harmful or offensive content when necessary. Constructive dialogue is to be encouraged by promoting discussions on policies and ideas rather than personal attacks to foster engagement based on informed debate and mutual respect.
- *Complying with platform guidelines and legal regulations:* parties must ensure that all online campaign activities adhere to the rules and guidelines set by social media platforms (e.g., restrictions on misinformation, hate speech, and advertising transparency) and abide by national election laws and regulations governing digital campaigning, such as spending limits, content restrictions, and reporting obligations.
- *Embracing an ethical use of artificial intelligence (AI) and technology:* transparency in AI tools is a paramount and if AI-generated content is used (e.g., chatbots or deepfake-style videos), parties should disclose this clearly to avoid misleading voters. Parties should avoid deepfakes and manipulative content that misrepresents opponents or events. Responsible automation should be also

promoted to ensure that robotic tools, like bots, are used ethically and not for spamming, harassment, or spreading disinformation.

- *Educating supporters on ethical engagement:* parties should provide ethical guidelines to educate party members and supporters on responsible online behaviour, including how to engage respectfully with others and identify misinformation. They can also promote constructive advocacy and encourage supporters to advocate for the party's message in positive and respectful ways, avoiding trolling or online harassment.
- *Monitoring and self-regulation:* parties can establish oversight mechanisms – such as internal committees or protocols - to oversee the ethical conduct of the party's online campaign. Regular audits and evaluations of online campaign practices may be conducted to ensure compliance with ethical standards and address any lapses promptly. Parties may also make a public pledge to uphold ethical online behaviour and encourage other parties to do the same.

9. **Allocating necessary financial resources:** effectively managing financial resources for a political party's social media campaign is essential to maximizing the impact of digital efforts while staying within budget constraints. A strategic allocation of funds ensures that the campaign's objectives—whether it's increasing voter engagement, promoting policies, or building trust—are met with the right tools and resources.

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