**If you follow me, I might (mis)lead you: Following Prime Ministerial Candidates on Social Networks as a Predictor of the Public Agenda during an Election Campaign**

**Abstract**

Control of mass media agendas and public agendas is of particular importance during an election season. In recent years, social networks have become a major locus of activity in election campaigns, and agenda-setting studies have begun to examine the validity of traditional theory in this new context. The current study investigates the effect of exposure to prime ministerial candidates’ social media platforms on voter perception of agendas during the general elections held in Israel in April 2019. A total of 2,217 questionnaires sent out during the four weeks preceding the 2019 election surveyed respondents’ political orientation, tendency to follow political candidates’ personal accounts on social media, and perception of agendas. Survey results revealed significant differences in agenda perceptions between respondents who followed both leading candidates and those who followed a single candidate. The present study adds to the existing literature by providing further proof of the important role of social networks in political campaigns and their impact on the public agenda.

Key words: Agenda-setting, Social Media, Elections, Candidates' Personal Accounts

The age of social networks, originating in the mid-2000s, has brought about fundamental changes in every political system and every country where social media have permeated, at the local, national and global level (Dubois & Dutton 2013; Elishar-Malka et al. 2020; Penney 2017; Spaeth 2009; Stromer-Galley 2014). During the April 2019 general election in Israel, social networks continued to gain traction as one of the most prominent and significant factors in the political communications arena, particularly during election campaigns, an effect which was also evident during Israel’s 2013 and 2015 elections (Samuel-Azran et al. 2015; Weimann-Saks et al. 2016). In addition to countless campaign videos, posts, memes, tweets and images posted by activists, campaign advisors and parties, the personal accounts of prime ministerial candidates – who are also the heads of their political parties – were also actively used. On their personal Facebook and Twitter accounts, leading political contenders addressed news issues and current events in frequent posts. Published on sites that enjoy extensive publicity, these posts and tweets sought not only to broadcast candidates’ positions but also to contribute to processes of agenda-setting and priming (Scheufele 2000; Weaver 2007). Thus, social network posts help define the list of issues perceived by the public to be of chief importance, and therefore dictate how candidates will be judged and evaluated, in accordance with what is perceived as serving the interests of various political contenders and their parties.

Considering insight into the practical political implications of the public’s perceptions of agendas in the age of social networks (Allcott 2017; Elishar-Malka et al. 2020; Weimann & Brosius 2017), the present study seeks to examine the effect of exposure patterns to leading candidates’ personal Facebook and Twitter accounts (the accounts of incumbent Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Benny Gantz, head of the largest rival party, Kachol-Lavan) on followers’ and potential voters’ perceptions of the relative importance of key agenda issues, during Israel’s 2019 elections.

**Theoretical Framework**

*Media roles during elections*

A shared assumption among most political communication scholars identifies the media as a political player. This assumption implies that the media have far-reaching effects on the many facets and operative modes of the political system, particularly during election campaigns (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008; Blumler & Kavanagh, 1999; Patterson & Donsbach, 1998; Wolfsfeld, 2011).

As a new election campaign is unveiled, the political system faces a crucial trial: the behavioral patterns of all players involved become more critical and significant. This holds all the more true in an age in which candidates are required to conduct themselves as if in a ‘permanent campaign’: a campaign that stretches from one election to the next, rather than being confined to the formal election campaign (Blumler & Kavanagh, 1999; Dunaway & Stein, 2013; Iyengar et al., 2004; Weimann & Wolfsfeld, 2002). For the most part, media studies have focused on two fields of activity: aspects of election propaganda and news coverage of election periods. Of particular interest are instances in which election propaganda seeps into the realms of news coverage and interpretation, which cumulatively adds to other influences such as the effects of media coverage on a campaign’s content and messages (see, for example, Sheafer & Weimann 2005).

The emergence of new media, particularly the internet and social networks, has changed – and continues to change – patterns of activity during elections. Across the political arena, new media have opened up fresh avenues of campaign promotion and direct communication with the public, as well as the ability to monitor and follow election discourse beyond the confines of traditional mass media (Bennett & Iyengar 2008; Bennett & Pfetsch 2018; Chadwick & Stromer-Galley 2016; Elishar-Malka et al. 2020; Penney 2017; Spaeth 2009; Stromer-Galley 2014).

Although the use of social media in politics continues to expand worldwide, researchers do not concur on their impact, their influence, or their relationship with voting behaviors and decisions (Bennett & Pfetsch 2018; Chadwick & Stromer-Galley 2016; Gil de Zúñiga et al. 2014; Foot & Schneider 2006; Boulianne 2015; Gerbaudo 2012). Rahim (2019) has suggested that campaigns, in the age of social media, are more candidate-driven than issue-driven, and politicians can directly target audiences with specific demographic characteristics and political interests and tailor their communication to these audiences using platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and Twitter. This utilization of social media enables candidates to reach broader segments of voters, including smaller and weak-tie networks, with low-cost and self-driven campaigns. Studies have shown that politicians with higher social media engagement receive relatively more votes in national elections (Skovsgaard & Arjan 2013). Examples of the impact of social media in well-executed campaigns are Barak Obama’s well-known 2008 campaign, the less-known victory in the Malaysian elections by the main opposition coalition (Alliance of Hope) by relying solely on social media, segmenting voters, and focusing on marginalized specific groups (Rahim, 2019), as well as the opposition’s successful use of Facebook to challenge the ruling government’s social media dominance in Fiji in 2018 (Tarai 2019).

**Agenda Setting**

Controlling agendas in the media and among the public is of particular importance during election periods. Therefore, it is not surprising that agenda-setting theory has often focused on studying these periods. Agenda-setting theory addresses the power of mass media to influence public perceptions of the relative importance of salient political issues, and posits that the gatekeepers of news media (journalists and editors) emphasize and highlight certain events, people, and issues while ignoring or minimizing others. The relative media salience of certain issues in a particular news source, or in several news sources simultaneously, influences public agendas and public discourse, which tends to focus on the issues most prominently covered by mass media outlets (McCombs & Shaw 1972).

According to Weaver, McCombs and Shaw (2004), the unit of analysis in most agenda-setting studies is the public issue (object), but there remains the research dilemma of whether it is sufficient to examine the issues themselves or whether it is necessary to address their accompanying attributes as well. The authors assert that such attributes, which have been called “the second level of agenda setting,” are granted directly or indirectly by journalists in media reports, and they emphasize particular aspects or attributes of the objects of news coverage. Over the years, studies have reaffirmed the theory’s basic assumptions (Dearing & Rogers 1996; Scheufele 2000; McCombs 2005, 2014; Brosius & Weimann 1996), in a manner which ostensibly seeks to establish a causal explanation. In addition to investigating correlations between the salience of issues in various media platforms and their perceived importance in the view of the public, various studies have manipulated individuals’ news consumption to confirm the correlations between news coverage and the public’s perception of the relative importance of election issues (Iyengar & Kinder 2010).

Most agenda-setting research focuses on an aggregate level in various contexts (Guo 2017). Shehata and Strömbäck (2013) suggest that continuous processes of audience fragmentation decrease the likelihood that people are exposed to the same content as they consume an increasingly wide range of media, thus reducing the agenda-setting impact of traditional news media. Roessler (2008) has observed that studies concerning the individual-level effects of agenda-setting are rare compared to the extensive studies of aggregate-level effects of agenda-setting.

**Setting the Agenda in the Social Networks Landscape**

Agenda-setting theory is at the crux of controversy over the influence of media, the power of that influence and media’s relevance in the setting of an ever-changing media landscape (Bennett & Iyengar 2008; Shehata & Strömbäck, 2013; Weimann & Brosius, 2017). The theory has increasingly been challenged over the past decade with the emergence and popularization of online social network platforms (Haim, Weimann & Brosius 2018; McCombs, Shaw &Weaver 2014). The character of the media landscape (increased fragmentation) and new use patterns alter production and consumption patterns and test the theory’s fundamental questions, such as the ability to define themes (issues) in an interactive setting and the possibility of examining phenomena in a representative way when issues cross technology platforms (Ariel et al. 2017).

McCombs (2014) notes the interplay among different media outlets, resulting in inter-media agenda-setting effects. Some scholars suggest that social media have substituted the dominant agenda-setting role previously played by traditional media (Ceron et al. 2016; Newman, Dutton, & Blank 2012). Other scholars have demonstrated traditional media’s dominance, even in the social media environment (Vargo et al. 2014; Vargo 2011). For instance, Guo and Vargo (2015) found that traditional news media still set the public’s identification of candidates with issues in the presidential election.

Moeller (2010) divides agenda-setting among three major actors: the government, the mainstream media and citizens. According to Moeller, the transformation of the media landscape has left traditional media with less power than in the past to define media agendas. The change in power relations makes every individual, including “marginal players,” capable of bringing an event or topic to the center of discourse. Regarding candidates’ agendas in election propaganda, Johnson and Perlmutter (2010) note that prior to the Internet age, such political messages were under the candidate’s near complete control, and sponsored advertisements were displayed at the time and place and to the extent predetermined by their campaigns. In contrast, today there is little centralized control over content, as writers, editors and distributors are neither concentrated in media organizations nor in politicians’ campaign headquarters.

Different social network platforms may be characterized by different user behaviors regarding agendas. One study found that Facebook users share a greater quantity of content than traditional media and tend to focus on few central issues, while Twitter users demonstrate a greater diversity of topics in shared content (Trilling et al. 2017). Varying use patterns on social networks may also affect agendas. Thus, for example, Feezell (2018) found that random exposure to news issues on social media may influence agendas. Incidental exposure is apt to occur even when users avoid exposure to certain media outlets or politicians (for example, by sponsored advertising of a news post). Posegga and Jungherr (2019) found that agendas in Twitter tweets (messages) were only weakly correlated with public agendas as determined by public opinion polls. According to Posegga and Jungherr, this indicates the need to examine agendas in the context of the platform and its distinct characteristics (such as rhythm and scope) and not use them as a proxy measure for surveys. Towner and Muñoz (2018) have found that candidates’ Instagram photographs influence media agendas during election periods. Additional studies have reported on the complex correlations between agendas on Twitter and in the mass media. Twitter agendas were found to be influenced by media agendas (Conway et al. 2015), but Twitter was also found to be influential on specific issues, or when it was used by specific candidates (Conway-Silva et al. 2018).

Considering these studies, it is clear why the question “Who sets the agenda?” has returned to the center of analytical discourse. Towner and Muñoz (2018) claim that recent findings regarding agendas on social media (online social networks) still do not clearly delineate directionality of influence among politicians’ agendas as shared on their personal accounts, public agendas as reflected in online settings, and media agendas. In contrast, McCombs and Valenzuela (2014) examine the status of agenda-setting theory and suggest that despite the diversity among various age groups in use patterns of media in general, and the internet in particular, studies from the second decade of the 21st century continue to reaffirm the correlation between the media salience of issues and their perceived importance by the public. Woolley et al. (2010) performed a content analysis of user content posted to online social networks during the 2008 presidential elections in the United States. Data analysis showed that content on social networks generally tended to focus on particular issues, while groups identified with a particular candidate generated content that reflected central themes that appeared in the mass media during the same period.

Moreover, belonging to various social groups may influence people’s agenda setting (Shaw et al. 1999). That is, belonging to a certain group or community may change, or mediate, media agendas. This claim may be significant considering increasing use of online social networks, such as Facebook, which allow for the existence of friend and acquaintance circles and membership in various groups.

**The current political communication arena in Israel**

The last few decades have seen a significant increase in media and election research in Israel. This increase is partly due to the country’s complex political reality, the series of governments that failed to reach full tenure and ended in early elections, and the constantly changing media landscape (Sheafer & Wolfsfeld 2009; Sheafer & Weimann 2005; Shamir & Shamir 2000; Shamir et al. 2008; Weimann & Wolfsfeld 2002).

In recent years, Israeli research has naturally ventured into examining the unique effects of new media on the political media arena, particularly during election campaigns. Although political players in Israel are slower to embrace technological innovations than their counterparts in many Western countries, the internet and social networks have become significant elements in the political arena (Haleva-Amir 2011; Lev-on 2011; Weimann-Saks et al. 2016; Samuel-Azran et al. 2015; Sheafer & Wolfsfeld 2009). This change is partially due to considerable and extensive social media activity on the part of voters.

Elections to the Knesset, Israel’s parliament, take place every four years (or fewer if the Knesset votes for dispersal). The elections of April 2019, the first among two rounds of elections that year, included three main camps: the dovish-left camp, the hawkish-right, and the socioeconomic-center camp. The hawkish-right camp included, among others, the prominent Likud party, headed by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu*.* Benny Gantz, prime ministerial candidate and Netanyahu’s leading rival, led KacholLavan, a ‘third way‘ camp between the dovish and the hawkish camps, which focused on domestic socioeconomic policies (Freidberg 2019). Israeli election campaigns during recent years have been characterized by the growing presence of social networks as a central arena for political activities and by their ever-dominant confrontational, violent public and political discourse (two phenomena that are known to be influenced by each other), which seems to have deepened socio-political cleavages in Israeli society as a whole (Freidberg 2019).

**Research questions and hypotheses**

Considering the above literature review, the current study will explore two main research questions:

Q1: Do perceived agendas vary as a function of the respondent’s political views (voting intentions)?

We assume that perceived agendas will vary between Likud voters and Kachol-Lavan voters (H1).

Q2: Do perceived agendas vary as a function of which candidate or candidates the respondent follows on social networks?

We assume that perceived agendas will vary depending on whether the respondents follow Benjamin Netanyahu or Benny Gantz (H2), and whether they follow one candidate exclusively, both candidates or no candidates (H3).

Q3:Is there an interaction between respondents’ voting intentions and following habits on perceived agenda-setting?

We assume that a significant interaction will be found (H4).

**Method**

**Participants**

The sample of respondents was obtained from an online Midgam Project Web Panel. This company specializes in providing infrastructure services for internet research and employs a panel of over 30,000 subjects, representing every geographic and demographic sector in Israel, for the validity of internet questionnaires. The company uses the stratified sampling method based on data published by the Central Bureau of Statistics (Central Bureau of Statistics Israel 2019), and determines quotas by age, religion, and gender. Participants signed up and were paid for their participation (approximately two U.S dollars). The total number of questionnaire respondents was 2,217 throughout the study period (four weeks). A power analysis, run through GPower software 3.1.9.2 (Faul et al. 2009), accounted for the appropriateness of our sample size (N=2,217), with *α*=.05, power=.80, and medium effect size (Cohen’s *f* ≥.25).

The questionnaires were divided into four waves (once a week). The first wave included 527 respondents, the second wave included 565 respondents, the third wave included 562 respondents, and the fourth wave included 553 respondents. Respondents were aged 18 to 74, with a mean age of 41.8 (SD= 15.5). Of the respondents, 47.5% were men, and 52.5% were women. Most of the respondents were married (60%) (29% were single 29%), non-religious (77%), and with academic education (64%). Regarding voting intentions, 21.1% reported they would vote for the Likud party, 29% for Kachol-Lavan, and 7.6% for the Labor party. On social media, 43% of respondents reported following any or several prime ministerial candidates. Of those, 69% followed Netanyahu on social networks, 48% followed Gantz, and 21% followed Gabai (the Labor party candidate). In total, 88% of respondents followed candidates on Facebook, 18% on Twitter, and 18% on Instagram.

**Research tools**

The research questions were examined through a structured questionnaire that included 20 closed questions. The questionnaire included the following variables: demographic details (e.g., gender, age, education, marital status); party for which they will vote; whether they follow prime ministerial candidates on social networks; which candidates they follow; traditional media consumption patterns (radio, television, newspapers); new media consumption patterns (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Telegram, news sites, YouTube).

To assess respondents' perceived agenda setting, participants were asked to rank the five most prominent issues in their opinion (from first to fifth) from a list of 29 general issues. Respondents’ assessments were then weighted regarding the perceived prominence of issues, and the ten most prominent issues were ranked. Each issue received a weighted score of the respondents’ ratings between 0 (if the participant did not rate the topic at all) and 10 (if the topic was ranked first).

**Research Process**

The questionnaires were distributed in the four weeks before the April 2019 elections. Each week, an online questionnaire was sent to approximately 530 participants. Potential respondents were asked a filter question: Do you have the right to vote in the upcoming elections? Those who indicated they do have a right to vote were sent the questionnaire for completion. The final sample included only questionnaires that were completely correctly by the end of the survey and after verifying the completion time (no less than 5 minutes and no more than 60 minutes). The study was conducted anonymously, and the response time of the entire study averaged about 15 minutes. The Institutional Ethics Committee of the researchers’ academic institute approved the study.

**Preliminary results**

Ten key issues were identified as prominent in the view of respondents across all four surveys conducted in the four weeks leading up to the election. Table 1 presents the issues in descending order of importance as perceived by respondents one month before elections: a military-security incident, investigations of the prime minister, financial crisis, matters related to the party and its candidates, the health-care system, foreign affairs, poverty, coalition formation, education and corruption. According to the data collected, a military-security incident was consistently the most prominent issue (average range 3-3.4) during all four weeks prior to the elections, followed by investigations of the prime minister (average range 2.7-2.9) and financial crisis (average range 2.6-2.8). Education (average range 2.2-2.5) and corruption (2.202.4) were consistently ranked at the bottom of the list.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Weeks prior to election | Military-security incident | Investigations of the prime minister | Financial crisis | Matters related to the party and its candidates | Healthcare system | Foreign affairs | Poverty | Coalition formation | Education | Corruption |
| Four weeks | 3.0 | 2.9 | 2.8 | 2.7 | 2.7 | 2.5 | 2.5 | 2.6 | 2.3 | 2.2 |
| Three weeks | 3.3 | 2.8 | 2.7 | 2.5 | 2.5 | 2.4 | 2.4 | 2.3 | 2.5 | 2.3 |
| Two weeks | 3.4 | 2.7 | 2.6 | 2.4 | 2.3 | 2.4 | 2.4 | 2.0 | 2.2 | 2.3 |
| One week | 3.1 | 2.9 | 2.8 | 2.8 | 2.4 | 2.6 | 2.5 | 2.4 | 2.3 | 2.4 |

Table 1. Mean prominence of issues during the four weeks leading up to elections in March 2019.

To examine trends in the prominence of issues across the four consecutive surveys, we ranked each week. Thus, a spearman rank-order correlation coefficient used the ranking of the data, rather than the actual data values themselves. Spearman correlation matrices yielded high significance values between the first survey (4 weeks before the elections) and the second (3 weeks before the elections) (r = .82, p< .05), third (r = .76, p< .01) and fourth (r = .81, p< .01) surveys; between the second survey (3 weeks prior the elections) and the third (r = .78, p< .01) and fourth (r = .69, p< .05) surveys; and finally between the third and fourth surveys (r = .96, p< .01).

Considering these findings, it is evident that there was minimal variation in the ranked prominence of issues throughout the four weeks. In fact, the relative ranking of the top three issues remained consistent during the entire month leading up to the election and the remaining issues varied only slightly, as shown in Table 2. Therefore, for the sake of simplicity, the following analysis examines the rankings as a single data set.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Issue prominence rank | | | | |
| Weeks before the election | Military-security incident | Investigations of the prime minister | Financial crisis | Matters related to the party and its candidates | Healthcare system |
| Four weeks | 1st | 2nd | 3rd | 4th | 4th |
| Three weeks | 1st | 2nd | 3rd | 4th | 4th |
| Two weeks | 1st | 2nd | 3rd | 4th | 5th |
| One week | 1st | 2nd | 3rd | 3rd | 4th |

Table 2. Ranking of prominence of the five leading issues throughout the study period.

**Examining research hypotheses**

To examine differences in perceived agenda setting as a function of respondents’ political views (voting intentions) (H1), we conducted an independent samples t-test analysis in which we compared perceived agendas among Likud and Kachol-Lavan voters. The results among Likud voters were as follows, in descending order of prominence: military-security incident, investigations of the prime minister, financial crisis and foreign affairs. The issues deemed least prominent among these voters were crime and violence, corruption, and coalition formation. In contrast, among Kachol-Lavan voters, the most prominent issues, in descending order, were as follows: military-security incident, investigations of the prime minister, financial crisis, and matters related to the party and its candidates. The least prominent issues among supporters of Kachol-Lavan were crime and violence, education and corruption. Table 3 demonstrates the differences between Kachol-Lavan and Likud voters in perceived prominence of issues.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  |  | Mean | Std. Deviation |
| Military-security incident\* | Likud | 3.24 | 1.03 |
| Kachol-Lavan | 3.02 | 1.18 |
| Investigations of the prime minister | Likud | 2.74 | 1.07 |
| Kachol-Lavan | 2.90 | 1.05 |
| Financial crisis | Likud | 2.76 | 1.13 |
| Kachol-Lavan | 2.71 | 1.28 |
| Matters related to the party and its candidates | Likud | 2.62 | 1.17 |
| Kachol-Lavan | 2.60 | 1.13 |
| Healthcare system\* | Likud | 2.14 | 1.04 |
| Kachol-Lavan | 2.31 | 1.03 |
| Foreign affairs\* | Likud | 2.83 | 1.21 |
| Kachol-Lavan | 2.40 | 1.09 |
| Welfare and poverty | Likud | 2.40 | 1.04 |
| Kachol-Lavan | 2.52 | 1.26 |
| Coalition formation\* | Likud | 2.03 | 1.11 |
| Kachol-Lavan | 2.61 | 1.10 |
| Education | Likud | 2.34 | 1.23 |
| Kachol-Lavan | 2.22 | 1.05 |
| Corruption | Likud | 2.19 | 0.99 |
| Kachol-Lavan | 2.36 | 1.14 |

P < 0.05

Table 3. Comparison between perceived prominence of issues among Likud and Kachol-Lavan voters.

As can be seen in Table 3, significant differences are evident between Likud and Kachol-Lavan voters. Thus, for example, among Netanyahu’s supporters, a military-security incident is more prominent than among Likud voters (t(504)=1.42, p < .05). Similarly, foreign affairs were perceived as more important among Likud voters (t(150)= 2.35, p < .05). Healthcare in Israel, however, was perceived as significantly more important among Kachol-Lavan voters (t(307)=1.72, p < .05), as was coalition formation (t(121)=1.6, p < .05).

An examination of the candidates’ personal accounts that respondents followed found that 80% of Likud voters only followed Netanyahu’s account, while 19% followed both Netanyahu and Gantz. Among Kachol-Lavan voters, 48% only followed Gantz, and 47% followed both Netanyahu and Gantz. To examine the differences in perceived agenda setting as a function of the candidate the respondent followed on social networks (2H), an independent samples t-test was performed and revealed significant differences in the relative prominence respondents attributed to agenda issues based on their exposure to a single candidate’s posts on social media. Among respondents who followed Netanyahu, issues perceived as most prominent, in descending order, were as follows: military-security incident, investigations of the prime minister, foreign affairs, and matters related to the party and its candidates. The issues considered least prominent were healthcare, education and corruption. Among respondents who followed Gantz, the most prominent issues, in descending order, were a military-security incident, investigations of the prime minister, financial crisis and coalition formation. The issues deemed least prominent were crime and violence, corruption and foreign affairs. Table 4 presents a comparison of the relative perceived prominence of each issue based on which candidate respondents followed on social media and presents issues in which a significant difference was identified between respondents who exclusively followed a particular candidate.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | מעקב | Mean | Std. Deviation |
| Military-security incident\* | exclusively Gantz | 3.01 | 1.21 |
| exclusively Netanyahu | 3.39 | 1.05 |
| Investigations of the prime minister | exclusively Gantz | 2.93 | 1.08 |
| exclusively Netanyahu | 2.75 | 1.04 |
| Financial crisis\* | exclusively Gantz | 2.97 | 1.24 |
| exclusively Netanyahu | 2.49 | 1.13 |
| Matters related to the party and its candidates | exclusively Gantz | 2.78 | 1.11 |
| exclusively Netanyahu | 2.68 | 0.96 |
| Healthcare system | exclusively Gantz | 2.59 | 0.99 |
| exclusively Netanyahu | 2.35 | 1.07 |
| Foreign affairs\* | exclusively Gantz | 2.28 | 1.07 |
| exclusively Netanyahu | 2.77 | 1.03 |
| Welfare and poverty | exclusively Gantz | 2.50 | 1.19 |
| exclusively Netanyahu | 2.52 | 1.07 |
| Coalition formation\* | exclusively Gantz | 2.96 | 1.02 |
| exclusively Netanyahu | 2.36 | 1.14 |
| Education | exclusively Gantz | 2.36 | 1.15 |
| exclusively Netanyahu | 2.03 | 1.12 |
| Corruption | exclusively Gantz | 2.21 | 1.00 |
| exclusively Netanyahu | 1.93 | 0.90 |

p < .05

As evident in Table 4, significant differences were found between respondents who exclusively followed Gantz or Netanyahu. Thus, for example, among Netanyahu’s exclusive followers, a military-security incident was perceived as more prominent than among Gantz’s followers (t(266)=2.4, p < 0.05). Likewise, foreign affairs were perceived as significantly more prominent among Netanyahu’s followers (t(128)=1.71, p < .05). Financial crisis, however, was considered more prominent among Gantz’s followers (t(178)=1.9, p < .05), as was coalition formation (t(106)=2.1, p < .05).

Examining the differences between respondents who exclusively followed a single candidate and those who followed both candidates (3H) reveals differences in perceived importance of a military-security incident (F(2, 395)=3.8, p<.05), with highest perceived prominence reported among Netayahu’s exclusive followers (M = 3.38, SD = 1.04), followed by followers of both Netanyahu and Gantz (M = 3.13, SD = 1.13), and finally by exclusive followers of Gantz (M = 3, SD = 1.2). Additionally, differences were found in the perceived prominence of coalition formation (F(2, 108)=2.36, p<.05), with greatest perceived prominence among Gantz’s followers (M = 2.96, SD = 1.02), followed by followers of both Gantz and Netanyahu (M = 2. 39, SD = 1.2), and lastly by Netanyahu’s followers (M = 2.36, SD = 1.13).

Finally, in order to examine the interaction between respondents’ voting intentions and following habits on the perceived agenda setting, we performed a MANOVA (multivariate analysis of variance) test. There was a statistically significant difference [*F* (70, 6228) = 2.26, *p* < .005; Wilk's Λ = .864] in the prominence of the issues based on the interaction between voting intention (Likud or Kachol-Lavan) and following patterns of candidates on social media (none, exclusively Gantz, exclusively Netanyahu, both). This interaction has a statistically significant effect on the issue of investigations of the prime minister [F (7, 1076) = 4.68; p < .005]; healthcare system [F (7, 1076) = 3.42; p < .005; partial η2 = .02]; foreign affairs [F (7, 1076) = 2.86; p < .005]; and corruption [F (7, 1076) = 6.48; p < .005].

Table 5 displays the means of the prominence of the issues within every variation of the examined interaction: Intention to vote for the Likud party and following none of the candidates; intention to vote for the Likud party and exclusively following Gantz (the leader of the rival party Kachol-Lavan); intention to vote for Likud party and following its leader Netanyahu; intention to vote for Likud party and following both candidates (Gantz and Netanyahu); intention to vote for the Kachol-Lavan party and exclusively following Gantz (the leader of Kachol-Lavan party); intention to vote for the Kachol-Lavan party and following Netanyahu (the leader of the rival Likud party); and intention to vote for the Kachol-Lavan party and following both candidates.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Issues** | **'Following' patterns of candidates on social media** | **Likud** | **Kachol-Lavan** |
| Investigations of the prime minister | None | (M=1.58, SD=1.22( | )M=1.91, SD=1.43( |
| Exclusively Gantz | )M=1.00, SD=0.23( | )M=2.28, SD=1.61( |
| Exclusively Netanyahu | )M=1.65, SD=1.29( | )M=2.50, SD=1.45( |
| Both | )M=1.71, SD=1.41( | )M=2.16, SD=1.60( |
| Healthcare system | None | )M=1.65, SD=1.21( | )M=1.91, SD=1.41( |
| Exclusively Gantz | )M=1.00, SD=0.40( | )M=1.90, SD=1.34( |
| Exclusively Netanyahu | )M=1.50, SD=1.09( | )M=1.58, SD=1.38( |
| Both | )M=1.36, SD=0.98( | )M=1.58, SD=1.07( |
| Foreign affairs | None | )M=1.26, SD=0.87( | )M=1.31, SD=0.89( |
| Exclusively Gantz | )M=1.00, SD=0.31( | )M=1.34, SD=0.93( |
| Exclusively Netanyahu | )M=1.57, SD=1.21( | )M=1.00, SD=0.58( |
| Both | )M=1.69, SD=1.41( | )M=1.26, SD=0.84( |
| Corruption | None | )M=1.32, SD=0.92( | )M=1.70, SD=1.28( |
| Exclusively Gantz | )M=1.67, SD=1.15( | )M=1.71, SD=1.20( |
| Exclusively Netanyahu | )M=1.22, SD=0.66( | )M=1.50, SD=1.00( |
| Both | )M=1.40, SD=0.99( | )M=1.86, SD=1.33( |

Table 5.

Thus, for example, Table 5 shows that the prominence of investigation of the prime minister was higher among Kachol-Lavan voters, especially among Kachol-Lavan voters who exclusively followed a single candidate: it was highest among those who exclusively followed Netanyahu (M = 2.50, SD = 1.45), while slightly lower among those who exclusively followed Gantz (M = 2.28, SD = 1.61). Among respondents who followed neither candidate on social media, the healthcare system was ranked most prominent, both among Likud voters (M = 1.65, SD = 1.21) and Kachol-Lavan voters (M = 1.91, SD = 1.41), in comparison to respondents who reported all other following patterns, whether they exclusively followed a single candidates or followed both candidates.

**Discussion**

The present study sought to examine the influence on agenda perception of voters’ exposure to the social network accounts (Twitter, Instagram and Facebook) of the two leading prime ministerial contenders in Israel’s April 2019 election. The relative news prominence of various current issues was examined from the point of view of the respondents. The study’s findings show that trends in perception of public agendas (issues perceived to be most prominent) were nearly identical over the four weeks leading up to the election. A comparison of perceived agendas between groups of voters who supported each candidate also highlights the impact of exposure to the candidates’ personal social media accounts. Thus, among respondents who followed both Benjamin Netanyahu and Benny Gantz on social media, those who intended to vote Likud (Netanyahu’s party) and those who intended to vote Kachol-Lavan (Gantz’s party) did not have significantly different perceptions of the relative prominence of various agenda issues. In contrast, a comparison of agenda perceptions between groups that supported each party, without consideration of voting patterns, observed clear and significant differences. These findings are consistent with earlier studies, such as those by Camaj and Weaver (2013) and Muddiman et al. (2014), which identified the impact of voters’ political orientation on their perception of agendas. These findings may indicate that patterns of following political candidates on social media may have a more significant impact than political orientation on agenda perceptions.

When we compared four different groups - respondents that followed both candidates, respondents that followed a single candidate (Netanyahu or Gantz), and respondents that followed neither candidate - we observed significant differences in perceptions of the relative prominence of various agenda issues. Among those that followed a single candidate, there was a greater correlation between issues addressed on the candidate’s social networks and the prominence of these issues in the respondent’s agenda perception, when compared to those exposed to either both or neither of the candidates’ social media accounts. This finding has far-reaching practical implications: relatively minor candidates, whose chances of having exclusive followers is low, must aspire to attract their competitors’ followers to follow their own accounts as well. In this manner, minor candidates may reduce the impact of their competitors’ agendas on potential voters’ agenda perceptions. In contrast, relatively strong political candidates must strive to increase the number of potential voters who exclusively follow their own social media activity. A candidates’ influence on such followers, or at least on their perception of agendas, could be significant, while the influence on potential voters who follow multiple candidates would be considerably lower.

These findings also have considerable significance in the broader sense, as they attest to the fact that our following habits on social media impact our perception of agendas. In a reality characterized by constant exposure to a wide range of information sources, confirming a correlation between social network activity and the shaping of agenda perceptions indicates their power and impact in the political media arena. A study by Ariel et al. (2017), which discusses the methodological dilemmas and challenges of researching agendas on social networks, notes that one of the major challenges is identifying processes that shape agenda-setting in a multi-platform environment that lacks established time slots (such as daily printed newspapers or an evening newscast on TV). Identifying leading candidates’ Twitter and Facebook accounts as prominent sources of influence on the public agenda provides a sort of anchor, or at least a starting point, in mapping processes in the online landscape.

An analysis of the study’s findings shows that examining exposure to the Facebook posts and Twitter accounts of leading political players is pivotal to understanding the role of media in general, and social networks in particular, on voters’ decision-making processes in Israel’s 2019 elections. The current study shows that exposure patterns to the personal Facebook and Twitter accounts of leading candidates during an election season contribute to shaping followers’ perceptions of the public agenda. As agenda-setting is considered to have significant impact on potential voters’ decisions at the ballot, this sharpens the recognition of the practical political implications of following, and exposure to, social media accounts. The current study does not purport to present a direct correlation between social media exposure and voting patterns, but rather to identify how social media exposure shapes perception of agendas, based on theories and research that suggest that agenda perceptions have significant implications on how voters evaluate candidates, and ultimately on how they decide to vote.

Alongside the study’s contributions to understanding the political significance of voters’ patterns of following leading candidates’ Facebook and Twitter accounts, a number of limitations can also be pointed out: the present study focused on the two leading prime ministerial candidates and their parties, rather than on all the political parties and their leaders in Israel’s April 2019 general election. It is possible that a comprehensive analysis of all the relevant political actors in that particular election would have yielded different results. The fact that the study gathered data from a single election, especially considering that the April 2019 election was one of three general elections held over the course of a year and a half in Israel, somewhat limits the generalizability of the findings. As part of further research, it may be beneficial to conduct a comprehensive comparison, both over a longer time period and across multiple countries with similar elections systems around the world. Future studies should examine other factors that may shape voters’ decision-making at the ballot. Another significant limitation that should be considered when planning future studies in the field involves potential explanations for the variation in following patterns and media exposure among potential voters. It is possible that explanations may arise from the field of political psychology, which we did not address in the current study. Another distinction that emerges from the present study that merits empirical and theoretical examination in future studies is that between exclusive followers, non-exclusive followers, and users exposed to content despite not having followed either candidate (users who were exposed to content from candidates’ personal social media accounts who did not actively follow these accounts), both in terms of their sociopolitical profile and the character of what shapes their perceptions of agenda-setting.

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