**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**

This study investigates the effects of exposure to social media and the two leading prime ministerial candidates’ personal Facebook and Twitter accounts on voters’ agendas during Israel’s April 2019 general election. All of the posts that appeared on the contenders’ Facebook and Twitter accounts at a point in time in each of the four pre-election campaign weeks were analyzed to identify prominent issues. General social media and web discourse in Hebrew was also analysed over the same period. The data was then compared with 2,217 responses to questionnaires undertaken on the four dates. Further questionnaires surveyed voters’ political orientations and the likelihood of their following the candidates’ social media accounts. The results revealed a significant correlation between contenders’ and voters’ agendas. Significant differences were identified in agendas, however, between those respondents who followed both leading candidates, those who followed a single candidate, and those who followed neither.

Keywords: Agenda setting, Social Media, Elections, Candidates’ Accounts on Social Media, Voting Intention, Social Media Following Patterns

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). Besides 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 to broadcast candidates’ positions, 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 by 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 contenders’ 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’/voters’ agendas during Israel’s April 2019 election. In addition, the study examines the relationship between followers’ agendas and those in the general discourse in Hebrew on websites and social media.

**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: all players' behavioral patterns become more critical and significant. This holds all the more valid 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, cumulatively adding 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. Politicians can target audiences with specific demographic characteristics and political interests and tailor their communication to these audiences using Facebook, WhatsApp, and Twitter. This social media utilization enables candidates to reach broader voter segments, 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), as exemplified by cases from around the world (Spaeth, 2009; Rahim, 2019; 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 mass media's power to influence public perceptions of salient political issues' relative importance. It posits that news media gatekeepers (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 several news sources simultaneously, influences public agendas and public discourse, focusing on the issues most prominently covered by mass media outlets (McCombs & Shaw 1972).

According to Weaver, McCombs, and Shaw (2004), the analysis unit in most agenda-setting studies is the public issue (object). However, 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 that 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 audience fragmentation processes 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. Coleman & Wu (2021) contains similar ideas. Roessler (2008) has observed that studies concerning the individual-level effects of agenda-setting are rare compared to the extensive studies of agenda-setting's aggregate-level effects.

*Setting the Agenda in the Social Media Landscape*

Agenda-setting theory is at the crux of controversy over media influence, the power of that influence, and the media’s relevance in the context 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 (Carazo-Barrantes, 2021; Cowart, 2020; 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 the 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 media landscape's transformation 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 the discourse. Regarding candidates’ agendas in their election campaigns, 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 the content, as writers, editors, and distributors are neither concentrated in media organizations nor 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. In contrast, 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, 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. This finding may be explained, at least partially, through agenda melding theory (Shaw et al., 1999; Shaw et al., 2000; Vargo et al., 2014), according to which people consistently search for groups and communities to belong to and assimilating the agendas of those groups is a crucial step in doing so. This leads to a fragmentation of the public agenda into multiple, community-based ones.

According to Posegga and Jungherr, their Twitter related finding 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 delineate directionality of influence among politicians’ agendas as shared on their 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 United States presidential elections. Data analysis showed that content on social networks focused on particular issues, while groups identified with a particular candidate generated content that reflected central themes in the mass media during the same period.

Moreover, as agenda melding theory argues, belonging to social groups may influence agenda setting. This claim may be significant, considering the increasing use of online social networks, such as Facebook, which allow friends and acquaintance circles and membership in various groups.

*Selective exposure to the media*

Selective exposure is the idea that people will expose themselves to content and platforms according to their needs and inner worlds and avoid messages that might contradict these (Mutz, 2004; Messing & Westwood, 2014). The most prominent scholars to address this concept in the early stages of communication and media studies were Paul Lazarsfeld and his partners in the classic ”The People's Choice” set of studies (Lazarsfeld et al., 1948). Even though the concept is associated with the "minimal effects" paradigm, it has become even more relevant in the new media era's abundant media landscape (Bennet & Iyengar, 2008; Iyengar et al., 2008). Wu and Gue (2020) suggest that agenda-setting studies consider this factor because of the inevitable selective exposure that the current era generates.

Scholars have found that, in addition to the current profusion of channels, platforms, and content, other external factors might influence selective exposure patterns (Messing & Westwood, 2014; Iyengar et al., 2008). Zillmann et al. (2004), for example, have shown how different frames on news sites will shape selective exposure among users. Iyengar et al. (2008) have highlighted the significant role people's perceptions of current issues have in determining their selective exposure patterns to campaign information. Their ‘issue public’ hypothesis might also be relevant to understanding people's agenda-setting processes, especially during elections.

*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). In recent years, Israeli election campaigns have been characterized by the growing presence of social networks as a central arena for political activities and their ever-dominant, confrontational, and violent public and political discourse. These two phenomena, which are known to be influenced by each other, seem to have deepened socio-political cleavages in Israeli society as a whole (Freidberg 2019). Considering the above literature review, the current study will explore the following research questions and hypotheses:

Q1: What were the most salient issues (a) in the social media and web discourse in Hebrew and (b) in the Facebook and Twitter accounts of the two leading 2019 Israeli prime ministerial contenders prior to the election?

Q2: Which issues did voters find most important in the four weeks before the election?

Q3: What is the relationship between (a) the social media and web agenda and the voters’ agendas? and (b) the contenders’ and the voters’ agendas?

Our hypothesis (H1) was that there would be a positive correlation between (a) and (b).

Q4: Do voters' agendas vary as a function of their voting intentions?

We assume that (H2): differences will be found between the agendas of Likud voters and Kachol-Lavan voters.

Q5: Do voters' agendas vary as a function of their following patterns on contenders' social media accounts?

We assume that (H3): differences will be found in voters' agendas between those who follow Benjamin Netanyahu and Benny Gantz, and (H4): differences will be found between those who follow one of the contenders, both of them, or none.

**Method**

The study deployed two quantitative methods of analysis: (a) Content analysis of general online social media and web discourse in Hebrew and of the Facebook and Twitter accounts of the two leading Israeli prime ministerial contenders for the April 2019 election and (b) analysis of surveys conducted with Israeli voters.

*Content analysis*

The major news stories in the Israeli media were divided into 29 issues based on a similar taxonomy established in Weimann-Saks et al., 2016. This taxonomy was utilized to analyze the social media and web discourse in Hebrew, as well as the content of the two leading contenders’ Facebook and Twitter accounts. The analysis encompassed the entire content published within 48 hours prior to four points in time in each of the four weeks before the election.

Buzzilla console (<http://console.buzzilla.com/>), produced by an Israeli social media monitoring and analysis company to collect responses to posts, blogs and so on, was employed to monitor the relevant accounts. The data ias then documented and archived, making ongoing research possible. The whole of the relevant content was thus monitored as well as the volume and duration of the discourse generated in relation to each issue identified. For example, the issue ‘healthcare system’ was entered, with its variant lexical formulations and combinations (spelling variations, abbreviations, synonyms and so on), and the number of instances logged. The 29 issues monitored yielded 48,405 mentions within the corpus monitored for the four time periods analyzed and 166 relevant mentions for the contenders’ Facebook and Twitter accounts (each averaged around 10 posts daily on the two platforms, with a total of 157 posts altogether). We focused on the 10 most prominent issues that together garnered 43,514 mentions, approximately 90 per cent of the corpus. We then analyzed the same 10 issues in the contenders’ accounts and found 147 mentions, 91 per cent of that corpus. The remaining 19 issues represented at most 0.7 per cent each of the social media content and 1.8 per cent each of the contender’s content.

*Surveys*

The sample was obtained from an online Web Panel based on data published by the Central Bureau of Statistics (Central Bureau of Statistics Israel 2019. The total number of questionnaire respondents was 2,217 throughout the study period: 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%), non-religious (77%), and with academic education (64%). Regarding voting intentions, 21.1% reported they would vote for the Likud party, and 29% for Kachol-Lavan. On social media, 43% of respondents reported following any or several prime ministerial candidates. Of those, 69% followed Netanyahu on social networks, and 48% followed Gantz. 88% of them followed candidates on Facebook, while 18% followed them on Twitter.

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).

To assess respondents' agenda, participants were asked to rank the five most prominent issues in their opinion (from first to fifth) from a list of 29 general issues. The list was created according to major news categories in the Israeli media and based on a similar list used by the authors in an earlier study (Weimann-Saks et al., 2016). Respondents’ assessments were then weighted regarding the perceived prominence of issues, and the ten most prominent issues were ranked. Each issue was assigned a weighted respondent rating between 0 (no prominence) and 5(highest prominence).

Responses were elicited at four points in time, one in each of the four weeks prior to the election. 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). In all the study hypotheses, sex and age variables were statistically controlled in the analysis of the findings. 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.

**Results**

In relation to Q1a, Table 1 presents the 10 most prominent issues in social media and web discourse in Hebrew, identified and ranked for frequency (with number of instances in brackets) for each of the four time points specified.

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Issue** | **Rank (Frequency) Per Week Prior to Election** | | | |
|  | **Four** | **Three** | **Two** | **One** |
| Party and candidates | 1 (7350) | 1 (6199) | 1 (8102) | 1 (5100) |
| Healthcare system | 2 (1347) | 2 (1127) | 2 (1341) | 2 (1068) |
| Education | 3 (785) | 5 (545) | 4 (758) | 3 (605) |
| Military/security incident | 4 (755) | 3 (785) | 3 (781) | 6 (345) |
| Poverty | 5 (576) | 4 (577) | 5 (594) | 4 (539) |
| Foreign affairs | 6 (458) | 6 (453) | 6 (492) | 5 (360) |
| Coalition formation | 7 (287) | 7 (233) | 7 (301) | 7 (277) |
| Investigations of prime minister | 8 (107) | 8 (209) | 8 (240) | 10 (37) |
| Financial crisis | 9 (118) | 9 (105) | 10 (93) | 8 (111) |
| Corruption | 10 (57) | 10 (80) | 9 (175) | 9 (42) |

*Table 1: Ranking and frequency of issues in social media and web discourse in Hebrew in period prior to April 2019 election.*

In relation to Q1b, Table 2 presents the corresponding data for each prime ministerial contender.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Ranking (and Frequency) Per Week Prior to Election** | | | | | | | |
| **Issues** | **Four** | | **Three** | | **Two** | | **One** | |
| Netanyahu | Gantz | Netanyahu | Gantz | Netanyahu | Gantz | Netanyahu | Gantz |
| Party and candidates | 1 (3) | 1 (4) | 1 (4) | 2 (3) | 2 (3) | 1 (7) | 1 (4) | 1 (4) |
| Healthcare system | - | 2 (3) | 2 (3) | 4 (1) | 4 (1) | 2 (6) | 3 (1) | 2 (3) |
| Education | 3 (1) | 2 (3) | 1 (4) | 4 (1) | 4 (1) | 2 (6) | 2 (2) | 2 (3) |
| Military/security incident | 3 (1) | 3 (2) | 1 (4) | 4 (1) | 1 (3) | 2 (6) | - | 2 (3) |
| Poverty | - | 3 (2) | 2 (3) | 4 (1) | 4 (1) | 4 (5) | 2 (2) | 2 (3) |
| Foreign affairs | 3 (1) | 4 (1) | 4 (1) | 3 (2) | - | 6 (2) | - | 4 (1) |
| Coalition formation | 2 (2) | - | 4 (1) | 2 (3) | 3 (2) | 2 (6) | 2 (2) | 2 (3) |
| Investigations of prime minister | - | 2 (3) | 4 (1) | 1 (4) | 4 (1) | 7 (1) | - | 3 (2) |
| Financial crisis | - | 2 (1) | 3 (2) | 4 (1) | - | 6 (2) | 4 (1) | 2 (3) |
| Corruption | - | 4 (1) | 3 (2) | - | - | 5 (3) | - | 4 (1) |

*Table 2. Contenders' Facebook and Twitter ranking order (and frequency) of issues during the four weeks prior to April 2019 election*

The ten most important issues on the voters' agenda (Q2) were identified across all four surveys conducted in the four weeks leading up to the election. Table 3 presents the issues in descending order of importance as perceived by respondents one month before elections: a military-security incident[[1]](#footnote-2), investigations of the prime minister[[2]](#footnote-3), financial crisis, party and candidates, the healthcare 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 (2.20-2.4) were consistently ranked at the list's bottom. Considering these findings, it is evident that there was minimal variation in the ranked prominence of issues throughout the four weeks. Moreover, 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.

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Issues** | **Ranking in Week Prior to Election** | | | |
|  | **Four** | **Three** | **Two** | **One** |
| Party and candidates | 4 (2.7) | 4 (2.5) | 4 (2.4) | 3 (2.8) |
| Healthcare system | 4 (2.7) | 4 (2.5) | 5 (2.3) | 6 (2.4) |
| Education | 7 (2.3) | 4 (2.5) | 6 (2.2) | 7 (2.3) |
| Military/security incident | 1 (3.0) | 1 (3.3) | 1 (3.4) | 1 (3.1) |
| Poverty | 6 (2.5) | 5 (2.4) | 4 (2.4) | 5 (2.5) |
| Foreign affairs | 6 (2.5) | 5 (2.4) | 4 (2.4) | 4 (2.6) |
| Coalition formation | 5 (2.6) | 6 (2.3) | 7 (2.0) | 6 (2.4) |
| Investigations of prime minister | 2 (2.9) | 2 (2.8) | 2 (2.7) | 2 (2.9) |
| Financial crisis | 3 (2.8) | 3 (2.7) | 3 (2.6) | 3 (2.8) |
| Corruption | 8 (2.2) | 6 (2.3) | 5 (2.3) | 6 (2.4) |

*Table 3. Public ranking order of issues during the four weeks leading up to elections in April 2019.*

*Examining research hypotheses*

To test H1, we used Spearman Rank-Order analysis with partial correlation for controlling the four time points specified. The relationship between the online discourse agenda in Hebrew and the voters’ agenda (H1a) was tested and yielded a non-significance value (r = .16, p > .05). The relationship between contenders’ and voters’ agendas (H1b) yielded a significance value for both Netanyahu (r = .27, p < .05) and Gantz (r = .34, p < .05). Thus, H1a was not confirmed, and H1b was confirmed.

To examine differences between the agendas of Likud voters and Kachol-Lavan voters (H2), we conducted an independent samples T-test analysis to compare 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 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 party and candidates. The least prominent issues among supporters of Kachol-Lavan were crime and violence, education, and corruption. Table 4 demonstrates the differences between Kachol-Lavan and Likud voters in the perceived prominence of issues.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Weeks prior to election | Issue | Participant Voting Intention | Mean | SD | df | t |
| 4 | Military/security incident | Likud | 2.89 | 1.33 | 91 | 0.61 |
| Kachol-Lavan | 2.73 | 1.17 |
| Investigations of prime minister | Likud | 2.71 | 1.31 | 71 | -0.60 |
| Kachol-Lavan | 2.89 | 1.07 |
| Financial crisis | Likud | 2.45 | 1.13 | 39 | -0.92 |
| Kachol-Lavan | 2.83 | 1.18 |
| Party and candidates | Likud | 2.33 | 1.15 | 18 | -0.28 |
| Kachol-Lavan | 2.53 | 1.12 |
| Healthcare system | Likud | 2.54 | 1.07 | 81 | -1.32 |
| Kachol-Lavan | 2.89 | 1.20 |
| 3 | Military/security incident | Likud | 3.19 | 1.08 | 147 | -0.97 |
| Kachol-Lavan | 3.36 | 1.02 |
| Investigations of the prime minister | Likud | 2.91 | 1.03 | 85 | 0.70 |
| Kachol-Lavan | 2.75 | 1.02 |
| Financial crisis | Likud | 2.63 | 1.17 | 41 | -1.35 |
| Kachol-Lavan | 3.11 | 1.15 |
| Party and candidates | Likud | 2.93 | 1.03 | 27 | 3.23\* |
| Kachol-Lavan | 1.71 | 0.99 |
| Healthcare system | Likud | 2.64 | 1.14 | 79 | 0.53 |
| Kachol-Lavan | 2.52 | 0.82 |
| 2 | Military/security incident | Likud | 3.35 | 0.97 | 146 | 0.04 |
| Kachol-Lavan | 3.34 | 1.12 |
| Investigations of the prime minister | Likud | 2.69 | 1.01 | 83 | 0.06 |
| Kachol-Lavan | 2.68 | 1.07 |
| Financial crisis | Likud | 2.85 | 0.99 | 30 | -1.75\* |
| Kachol-Lavan | 3.42 | 0.67 |
| Party and candidates | Likud | 2.00 | 1.13 | 32 | -1.77\* |
| Kachol-Lavan | 2.68 | 1.04 |
| Healthcare system | Likud | 1.87 | 0.99 | 54 | -2.02\* |
| Kachol-Lavan | 2.46 | 0.98 |
| 1 | Military/security incident | Likud | 3.39 | 0.92 | 114 | 2.62\* |
| Kachol-Lavan | 2.80 | 1.27 |
| Investigations of the prime minister | Likud | 2.72 | 1.10 | 85 | -0.81 |
| Kachol-Lavan | 2.94 | 1.13 |
| Financial crisis | Likud | 3.05 | 1.24 | 44 | 1.05 |
| Kachol-Lavan | 2.60 | 1.58 |
| Party and candidates | Likud | 2.50 | 1.07 | 30 | -1.43 |
| Kachol-Lavan | 3.13 | 1.08 |
| Healthcare system | Likud | 2.27 | 1.01 | 87 | -1.17 |
| Kachol-Lavan | 2.53 | 0.97 |

\* p < 0.05

*Table 4. Comparison* *between perceived prominence of issues among Likud and Kachol-Lavan voters.*

As can be seen in Table 4, significant differences are evident between Likud and Kachol-Lavan voters. Thus, for example, among Likud voters, a military-security incident was more prominent than among Kahol-Lavan 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) =1.60, p < .05).

An examination of which candidates’ accounts the respondents followed found that 80 per cent of Likud voters followed Netanyahu but not Gantz, while 19 per cent of them followed both candidates. Among Kachol-Lavan voters, 48 per cent followed Gantz but not Netanyahu, while 47 per cent of them followed both.

In relation to H3, an Independent Samples *t* Test revealed significant differences in the relative prominence respondents attributed to issues after exposure to a single candidate’s posts on social media. Among respondents who followed Netanyahu, the issues perceived as most prominent were military-security incidents, investigations of the prime minister, foreign affairs, and party and candidates in that order. Those considered least prominent were healthcare, education, and corruption. Among respondents who followed Gantz, the most prominent issues were military-security incidents, investigations of the prime minister, the financial crisis, and coalition formation, in that order. The issues deemed least prominent were crime and violence, corruption, and foreign affairs. As Table 3 shows, significant differences were found between respondents who exclusively followed Gantz or Netanyahu. Thus, for example, among Netanyahu only followers, a military-security incident was perceived as more prominent than among Gantz only followers (t (266) = 2.40, p < 0.05). Foreign affairs were perceived as significantly more prominent among Netanyahu’s followers (t (128) = 1.71, p < .05). Financial crisis was considered more prominent among Gantz’s followers (t (178) = 1.90, p < .05), as was coalition formation (t (106) = 2.1, p < .05).

Table 5 presents a comparison of the perceived prominence for each issue relative to which candidate(s) respondents followed, focusing on those issues where a significant difference was found between respondents who exclusively followed a particular candidate.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Week prior to election | Issue | Following Pattern | Mean | SD | df | F |
| 4 | Military/security incident | Neither | 2.99 | 1.15 | 3, 175 | 0.20 |
| Gantz only | 2.79 | 0.97 |
| Netanyahu only | 3.03 | 1.18 |
| Both | 2.88 | 1.26 |
| Investigations of the prime minister | Neither | 2.80 | 1.05 | 3, 153 | 3.21 \* |
| Gantz only | 2.44 | 1.26 |
| Netanyahu only | 3.17 | 1.11 |
| Both | 3.36 | 0.85 |
| Financial crisis | Neither | 2.77 | 1.12 | 3, 76 | 2.04 \* |
| Gantz only | 3.40 | 1.07 |
| Netanyahu only | 2.18 | 0.98 |
| Both | 2.73 | 1.35 |
| Party and candidates | Neither | 2.70 | 1.29 | 3, 48 | 0.74 |
| Gantz only | 3.00 | 1.03 |
| Netanyahu only | 2.75 | 0.46 |
| Both | 2.50 | 1.64 |
| 3 | Military/security incident | Neither | 3.27 | 1.08 | 3, 247 | 1.43 |
| Gantz only | 3.00 | 1.20 |
| Netanyahu only | 3.50 | 1.13 |
| Both | 3.09 | 1.09 |
| Investigations of prime minister | Neither | 2.79 | 1.03 | 3, 143 | 2.39 \* |
| Gantz only | 3.29 | 0.83 |
| Netanyahu only | 2.50 | 1.02 |
| Both | 3.09 | 0.95 |
| Financial crisis | Neither | 2.65 | 1.10 | 3, 71 | 1.88 \* |
| Gantz only | 3.33 | 1.21 |
| Netanyahu only | 2.29 | 1.16 |
| Both | 3.08 | 1.08 |
| Party and candidates | Neither | 2.27 | 1.34 | 3, 43 | 2.4 \* |
| Gantz only | 2.20 | 1.30 |
| Netanyahu only | 3.23 | 0.93 |
| Both | 1.67 | 1.15 |
| 2 | Military/security incident | Neither | 3.52 | 1.15 | 3, 288 | 0.62 |
| Gantz only | 3.41 | 1.37 |
| Netanyahu only | 3.34 | 1.01 |
| Both | 3.33 | 0.92 |
| Investigations of the prime minister | Neither | 2.61 | 1.06 | 3, 169 | 0.70 |
| Gantz only | 2.88 | 0.96 |
| Netanyahu only | 2.70 | 1.03 |
| Both | 2.86 | 0.99 |
| Financial crisis | Neither | 2.56 | 1.18 | 3, 68 | 0.43 |
| Gantz only | 2.71 | 1.38 |
| Netanyahu only | 2.82 | 1.07 |
| Both | 2.29 | 0.76 |
| Party and candidates | Neither | 2.64 | 1.03 | 3, 65 | 2.23 \* |
| Gantz only | 2.80 | 0.84 |
| Netanyahu only | 2.00 | 1.12 |
| Both | 2.00 | 0.82 |
| 1 | Military/security incident | Neither | 3.06 | 1.12 | 3, 218 | 3.53 \* |
| Gantz only | 2.81 | 1.17 |
| Netanyahu only | 3.61 | 0.77 |
| Both | 3.00 | 1.41 |
| Investigations of the prime minister | Neither | 3.01 | 1.08 | 3, 155 | 0.98 |
| Gantz only | 3.09 | 1.08 |
| Netanyahu only | 2.64 | 0.95 |
| Both | 2.85 | 1.14 |
| Financial crisis | Neither | 2.90 | 1.33 | 3, 83 | 1.15 |
| Neither | 2.17 | 1.17 |
| Gantz only | 2.56 | 1.25 |
| Netanyahu only | 3.18 | 1.08 |
| Party and candidates | Both | 2.98 | 1.11 | 3, 66 | 1.16 |
| Neither | 3.14 | 1.21 |
| Gantz only | 2.55 | 0.82 |
| Netanyahu only | 2.45 | 1.04 |

*Table 5. Comparison between perceived prominence of issues between the various following patterns for Gantz and Netanyahu.*

Examining the differences between respondents who exclusively followed a single candidate and those who followed both candidates or none (H4) reveals significant differences in the perceived importance of a military-security incident (F(2, 395) = 3.80, p < .05), with the highest perceived prominence reported among Netanyahu'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).

Furthermore, we found that the prominence of the issue '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 candidate or followed both candidates.

**Discussion**

Our findings indicate no significant correlation throughout the study period between voters’ agendas and the web and social media agenda. This may be because the general ‘online discourse’ is extremely broad, much broader than any single news medium has ever been. However, the contenders’ and voters’ agendas were found to correlate significantly. This matches the extensive extant literature on agenda-setting studies, though the current study went beyond this literature into examining unique voter profiles and their different patterns of following on social media.

There were significant differences observed between the agendas of those who intended to vote for Likud (Netanyahu) and Kachol-Lavan (Gantz), regardless of their following patterns. These findings are consistent with earlier studies, such as Camaj and Weaver (2013) and Muddiman et al. (2014), which identified the impact of voters’ political orientation on their perception of agendas.

When we compared four different groups - respondents that followed both candidates, respondents that followed a single candidate, and respondents that followed neither - we observed significant differences in voters’ agendas. Focusing on the interrelation between following patterns and voting intentions and its influence on voters’ agendas, we identified an even more specific division. Each such group displays a different combination of the two independent variables and the significant differences between them tell us the whole story: understanding the processes of agenda setting is much more complex than one might at first believe. It requires that we consider not only political orientations or following habits but rather both variables in their interaction. It also calls for the full comprehension of a political reality in which variations in the agendas of different potential voters are immense. Still, the limited size of groups we had, once we had divided them according to the interactive variables, challenged the strength of this finding, meaning future studies should examine a much larger sample.

These findings are also significant in a broader sense, as they attest that our following habits on social media affect our perception of agendas. In reality, these are subject to constant exposure to a wide range of information sources, confirming that there is a correlation between social media activity and the shaping of agenda perceptions indicates those sources’ power. 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 the phenomena that shape agenda setting on the multiplicity of platforms that do not publish at fixed time slots in the way print newspapers or TV newscasts do. Identifying leading candidates’ Twitter and Facebook accounts as key influences on the public agenda provides at least a starting point for mapping the online landscape.

The study shows that examining exposure to the Facebook posts and Twitter accounts of leading political players is a key element for understanding voters’ decision-making processes and helps to shape followers’ perceptions of the public agenda. As agenda setting is considered to affect voting decisions, this highlights the political implications of following and exposure to social media accounts. The current study does not claim to demonstrate a direct correlation between social media exposure and voting patterns, but does identify how social media exposure shapes the perception of agendas, based on established theory and research that suggest that agenda perception has significant impact on how voters evaluate candidates.

This finding has far reaching practical implications: minor candidates, whose likelihood of having exclusive followers is low, must aspire to attract their competitors’ followers to follow them as well, so as to reduce the impact of their competitors’ agendas on voters’ agenda perceptions. Major candidates should conversely, aim to maximise the number of voters who exclusively follow them. A candidate’s influence over such followers, or at least on their perception of agendas, may be significant, while their influence over voters who follow multiple candidates will be significantly lower.

Some limitations to the present study should be acknowledged. It is focussed only on the two leading prime ministerial candidates in Israel’s April 2019 general election. A comprehensive analysis of all the relevant political actors in that election may have yielded different results. The generalizability of the study is also limited by the fact that its data relates to a single election, especially considering that the April 2019 election was one of three held in a period of around 18 months. Further research may be beneficial to provide a more comprehensive comparison over a longer period and across more countries with similar election systems worldwide. Future studies should examine other factors that may shape voters’ decisions too. Another significant challenge experienced that should be considered when planning future studies involves defining the the range of possible explanations for variations in following patterns and media exposure among voters. Explanations may come from the field of political psychology. Another aspect that emerges from the present study as meriting future empirical and theoretical examination is that of the relationship between exclusive followers, non-exclusive followers, and users exposed to content despite having followed neither candidate, both in terms of their sociopolitical profile and what shapes their perceptions of the agenda.

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1. During the study period, Israel was facing a military escalation in the prolonged conflict with the Gaza-based Hamas organization. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. The ongoing investigations against PM Netanyahu (in three different cases) were at their final stages, later followed by three indictments. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)