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Social Media's impact on Greek elections outcome (Petrou S. Aikaterini, Ph.D Candidate of Ionian University)

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Abstract
This paper aims to assess social media's impact on a country's political scene, the influence on common sense, and whether this can determine or lead to election outcomes. The land that social media is continuously obtaining in Greek society is more than evident today. More and more users, especially young people, advise social media for their daily awareness of what happens globally, or to check common sense's feedback for big events, especially in social and political life. This new trend has been under research by many social academics in recent years. In addition to that the political parties do know that along with communicating through traditional media such as television and newspapers, they must invest in digital political communication and campaigning if they want to reach their audience. Do voter turnout, civic engagement, and participation in social and political movements have been increased or not? Despite the literature revealing that social media has affected engagement in social events and shapes political beliefs, the official data of the latest Greek elections do not prove it.

Keywords: Communication, participation, campaigning

Introduction

Over the last few years, social media has affected how citizens hold their political views and involve themselves in current affairs. Running a transparent period where the traditional media's impact on people's lives changes, many people do not read newspapers and prefer to scroll their social media home pages so they check what goes around as the internet provides them with so much information that was not available years ago.

Reviewing basic social media theories, many of them opposite to each other creates a paradox case as many of them are applied to this topic. Beginning with the Social Identity Theory which looks at how people identify themselves within particular social or political groups through self-categorization processes while engaging with others on social media platforms (Christopher J. Mckinley, 2014) [8]. According to it, people use social media to construct and reinforce their identities and to define their relationships with other people. The Social Capital Theory which follows, suggests that social media users build relationships and networks that can be used to their advantage. Surely, this is the main characteristic of government actors' presence in social media as this theory is based on the idea that people can use their networks to gain access to them and to shape their beliefs (Utz S., 2015) [26].

The Network Effects Theory is the answer to which platform should the politicians used as it is based on the idea that as more people join a network, the more valuable it becomes. The new politicians' profiles in TikTok have depicted this theory as more and more young people trust this platform (Iansiti, Working Paper 21-086) [12]. On the other hand, there are theories such as the Spiral of Silence, which suggests that people are less likely to express their opinions if they believe that their views are not shared by the majority of their peers (Sohn, 2022) [24]. Here comes the power of social media to affect the portion of people who do not have political or historical knowledge.

The fact that anyone can receive live news through social media about anything around the globe has made many people more aware and educated on political issues. This is the time to remember what a social network is and from which parts are defined (Hong Zhao, 2021) [11]. It is a means through which the person maintains his social identity, receives emotional or

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material support, participates in services, has access to information, and creates new social contacts. In the era of Web 2.0 that is now in, social networking is transforming into an online activity that applies to technological services and software that enables people to communicate with others, from anywhere, at any time.

Being based on the user, we understand their importance as without them the network will be an "empty space". This is what makes social networks so much more exciting for internet users. Another characteristic of modern social networks is the fact that they are interactive. It gives the ability to adapt to the needs of their users, that is, they are designed in such a way as to facilitate their interactions, providing them with features and services they use when they are online. This characteristic feeds polarity and contributes to the algorithm.

Operating on the same principle where users are part of a community, where they can exchange opinions, ideas, etc. can create and develop relationship networks. The more followers and connections a user has, the more popular he is. The last aspect of the under-examination network is emotion. While websites are primarily focused on providing information, the social network provides emotional security to its users, that friends are close to them and can easily contact them as per the social impact theory. If the user has friends, family, and co-workers who post on social media, he is more likely to be influenced by their opinions if they are trusted people.

The aforementioned theory can easily apply to the current phenomenon of the exposure of famous people's public opinion or political thesis, whose brand name is extremely strong, via social media for current affairs. How many times has a famous personality's post gotten numerous reposts by many users?

In the last decade, Greek society has been called to manage many crises and scandals. The COVID period was followed by many government false steps that caused a rise in negative comments and reviews. Apart from Twitter, the most "political" platform in Greek society which is used by many people as their "daily newspaper", many posts are made on Facebook and Instagram. Posts that are getting comments and reactions from many different users each time.

It is increasingly often the majority of people communicate their displeasure with the political system via their profiles. It can be said that Generation X is a representative sample of this. They refrain from party involvement, they are by nature skeptical to cynical and this is why the difficulty of the parties to find points of contact with them increases more since they are not informed either by television, not by newspapers, not even by informational websites (Anderson, 2022) [1].

In this context, it is perfectly reasonable for the parties to choose to use Instagram or TikTok, for example, to communicate with them. Most of the time this attempt is unsuccessful, as in their communication platforms, the older ones' wooden language hardly penetrates. It is also ineffective, because most of the time, although the messages are fresher and the approach more interesting, they appeal more to older audiences and not to their intended recipients.

Despite research abroad especially in the USA showing that young people lead the way in participating in political campaigns and social movements, which play a critical role in election outcomes, the Greek reality seems to be different. Although, the percentage of Greek people who use

social media to participate in political events by criticizing the politicians rising, the most recent election abstention rates were the third highest after 1974, when the transition from dictatorship to democracy took place in Greece.

According to the latest review of Hellenic Statistical Authorities (Greece in Figures, Q3 of 2023), 85,5% of Greek households have access to the Internet which is an ever-increasing rate as it is 10 percentage points above the range of 2018 (72,2%). It is easily understood that COVID policies and practices brought Greek people closer to the Internet and its benefits (Authority, 2023) [2].

People who use the internet regularly, that is, at least once a week, performed by 96.6%. Smartphones are the most used internet access devices by Greek users in a recent of 95% of the population aged 16-74 years old. Checking the reason for internet use by all users, a rate of 81,3% is for sending or receiving electronic messages, a percentage of 80,6% for participating in social network sites (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, etc.), and a percentage of 88,6% is divided in music and search for news and health information.

Table 1: Percentage of households with Internet access at home.
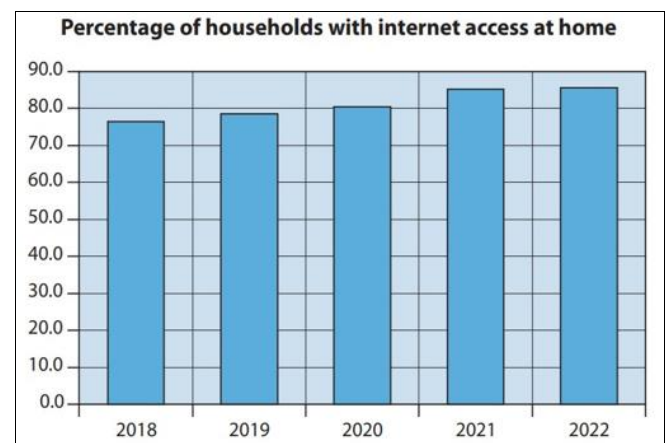
Source: Hellenic Statistical Authorities, Greece in Figures, Q3 of 2023.

The tooling of digital platforms during election periods should be given to America's presidential campaigns and the EU elections of 2014. Back in 2008, Barack Obama's campaign created its social networking site with the John McCain campaign to follow the respective platform. During the 2016 US elections, Donald Trump invested 150 million dollars in Instagram and Facebook advertisements and employed a full digital team which included 100 staffers ranging from copywriters to web developers and data scientists among other job descriptions.

Also, the 2014 EU elections marked the beginning of a more systematic use of social media in Greece. The popularity of these methods attracted Greek Politicians to try their power for the recent elections. Till now, the election campaigns were focused on getting closer to voters via traditional ways (giving interviews on TV, taking part in debates, organizing political events, visiting their towns and villages, etc.). Since the majority of the people do not trust traditional media, they had to communicate with them via social. The polarized, pluralist, and crisis-driven Greek society can't be touched and detected via interviews or politicians who are not closer to their needs.

According to the latest digital report for Greece under Data

Reportal, Instagram seems to be the most favorite digital platform for Greek (37,99%), followed by TikTok (23,03%). Third comes to YouTube (15,03%), then Facebook (13,22%), and finally, Pinterest (6,07%) which is above Twitter (4,05%).

Twitter is a hard environment but excellent for broadcasting. Facebook is more social and better for community building. Both of them address a much more politicized audience that includes among others politicians, journalists, and opinion leaders, the ideal platform for the aforementioned debaters.

Instagram offers a 'backstage' view into the private and personal lives and so can be used to build a more 'authentic' persona. TikTok trends as the users upload videos where they are talking to the audience explaining to them a phenomenon or an event.

Interestingly, it seems that neither politicians nor citizens consider YouTube an essential communication platform despite its high range of users' preferences. YouTube is more connected with fun and relaxing moments watching movies or listening to music. There are many political interviews on the platform but Greek people are interested in watching only current thesis on issues that may arise.

Compared to other EU nations, Greek parties enjoy a reasonable number of followers who only like content (likers), a fairly lower number of followers who like and share content (activists), and despite the correlation a lower number of users who comment only (debaters).

There is a limited number of studies on the use of social media by Greek political actors

and parties as politicians demonstrate a quite fragmented and instrumental use characterized by limited interactivity, failing as such to exploit the Internet's potential. Most of this research was focused on the early use of web pages (2002-2007) and the use of Facebook and Twitter (2008 Facebook is perceived as the social medium with the broadest reach, especially among older people. (Lappas, 2014) [15] (Parisopoulos, 2012) [20] (Manavopoulos, 2017) [18].

To address my research questions of how and if social media has affected political beliefs, and the election outcome on the national level, presenting in parallel with the Kasselakis' case, I proceeded with a combination of studying the relevant literature and checking peer-reviewed studies through Research Gate and Google Scholar, looking in parallel to their association and implementation in the provided data of the Hellenic Statistical Authority, the Ministry of Interior and the numbers depicted on followers, trends and views in most famous digital platforms, Twitter, Instagram, Facebook and TikTok.

The used terms such as "politics", "social media", "Greek elections", and "engagement" came to the requested info studies which were an important tool along with the writer's active presence in digital platforms and news daily.

Social Media & Politics

Back in 2020 when the pandemic period was starting, engagement on social media sites increased to an all-time high as people were not able to engage with each other physically, so they had to get creative online. People were exposed to multiple stories about government regulations and lifestyle restrictions, people protesting such restrictions and breaking rules, scientific discoveries (treatments, vaccines), and shortages in supply chain issues (hospital beds) (Buchanan *et al*. 2021) [7]. More and more people started to converse with each other about these problems

happening in the world, and they became more aware of them. Overall, social media became a realistic platform for all, especially young people to learn information about COVID19 and kept them occupied during the lockdown.

The digital platforms were the ideal place to express their emotions and their anxieties. Greek society between 2009 and 2015, has experienced political disorder under the constant threat of national bankruptcy. Only in six years, there were five early elections, six governments, and a referendum linked to a threatened disorderly Eurozone exit. From 2011, breaking with the national tradition of one-party majorities, all governments were coalitions cutting across the leftright cleavage. Particularly dramatic was the party-system meltdown election of May 2012. One in five voters opted for extra-parliamentary parties, while the combined vote of the two main parties of government, New Democracy, ND, and the Panhellenic Socialist Movement, PASOK, halved to under 36 percent. A percentage that captured the citizens' disappointment with the policies that the two main pre-mentioned parties implemented after 1974 when the political and social modernization took place (Sotiropoulos, 2018) [25].

Beginning with the repeat election of June 2012, the two-party system subsequently realigned around ND (New Democracy) and SYRIZA (Coalition of the Radical Left – Progressive Alliance). In 2018, Greece exited its third international bailout. Then New

Democracy's election victory in 2019, brought a return to a single-party majority government. It won public support for its handling of the first phase of the pandemic crisis and of GreekTurkish relations at a time of high bilateral tension.

Social media played an essential role in creating environmental factors on par with socioeconomic status or familial factors that shape political development, particularly when it comes to norms about the private and public sphere (S U. 2009). The popular trends that are seen on these sites may influence users to follow them, especially political trends. It provides a range of avenues for media creation and consumption, creating opportunities to engage with social and political issues. (Kiousis, 2001) [14]

Most users, especially young people are more likely to be exposed to online political content that is ideologically closer to their political views than to opposing political ideologies. Recent research was done by Bakshy back in 2015 (BuchananI K., 2021) [7] to study the exposure to ideologically diverse content on Facebook using data on the sharing behavior of over 10 million users. They show that people do encounter less political content aligned with opposing ideologies than with their own. The authors show that this is due both to Facebook's algorithm of presenting news feeds to users and to the fact that users themselves are less likely to share cross-cutting content with their friends. This may encourage people to only stick to what they believe in because they are not being exposed to opposing political content. The only way to receive opposing ideologies is if someone on their friends list has different views than them. The tendency to form links with like-minded people is a very important reason users have limited exposure to the political content of opposing ideologies.

The idea is that social media may facilitate the consumption of one-sided information, either through the use of algorithms or by allowing individuals to self-select into preferred content as previously stated. While there is considerable empirical evidence supporting this idea (Levy

R., 2021) [17], other studies have found that individuals are exposed to a wide range of political opinions on social media (Beam M., 2018) [5], perhaps even more so than via traditional media outlets or personal interactions (Matthew Gentzkow, 2011) [19].

Checking the social media accounts of the biggest political parties' presidents, it is noted that they all use this kind of media except for the President of the Communist Party of Greece (KKE), Mr. Dimitris Koutsoubas. In posted polls of the recent elections, Mr. Koutsoubas was the most popular President in young after the Prime Minister. His presence in viral videos of satirical accounts with expressions that he used in Parliament lectures, has contributed to his popularity.

Mr. Kyriakos Mitsotakis, the Prime Minister has the majority of the followers on all social media accounts except Twitter. First and far by the others is Mr. Alexis Tsipras, the exPresident of SYRIZA. Mr. Tsipras was a charismatic leader for the Left political scene who was loved to be hated. In the last months, Mr. Mitsotakis has obtained this role with viral videos and expressions for his policies.

The paradox of the case is that Mr. Kasselakis who introduced himself to Greek voters, two and a half months back, has more followers than Mr. Androulakis, the President of PASOK who was voted for the party's president back in December of 2021.

Monitoring the audience's feedback by likes, Mr. Mitsotakis is on top, especially on his Instagram account. The below diagram shows that his audience likes his posts. Mr.

Tsipras' posts were followed, which are more in Facebook and the most on Twitter, and then Kasselakis ones who is the new president of Syriza after Mr. Tsipras' resignation. Mr. Androulakis' audience seems to be less interactive than the rest.
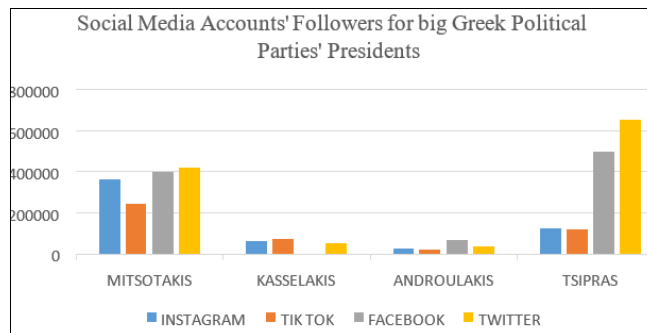

Diagram 1: Social Media Accounts' followers for big Greek political parties' presidents

Table 2: Social Media Accounts' Followers for Presidents of Greek political parties

Digital Platform	Followers			
	Mitsotakis	Kasselakis	Androulakis	Tsipras
Instagram	359,000	62,600	24,700	123,000
Tik Tok	244,600	73,100	16,800	119,100
Facebook	398,000	N/A	63,000	495,000
Twitter	416,455	51,067	34,172	648,837

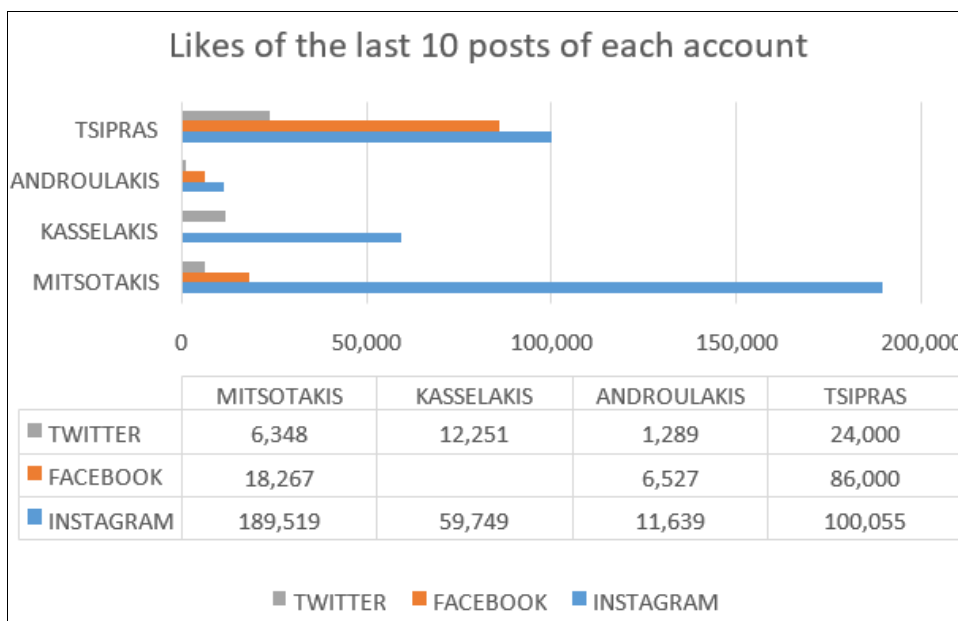|	MITSOTAKIS	KASSELAKIS	ANDROULAKIS	TSIPRAS
TWITTER	6,348	12,251	1,289	24,000
FACEBOOK	18,267		6,527	86,000
INSTAGRAM	189,519	59,749	11,639	100,055

Diagram 2: Likes of the last ten (10) posts of each account

TikTok platform is the most representative one as it depicts the phenomenon of resharing someone's content or creating another media file under a viral name or category. The number of like buttons in the TikTok platform is approximately 23 times more than the number of followers.
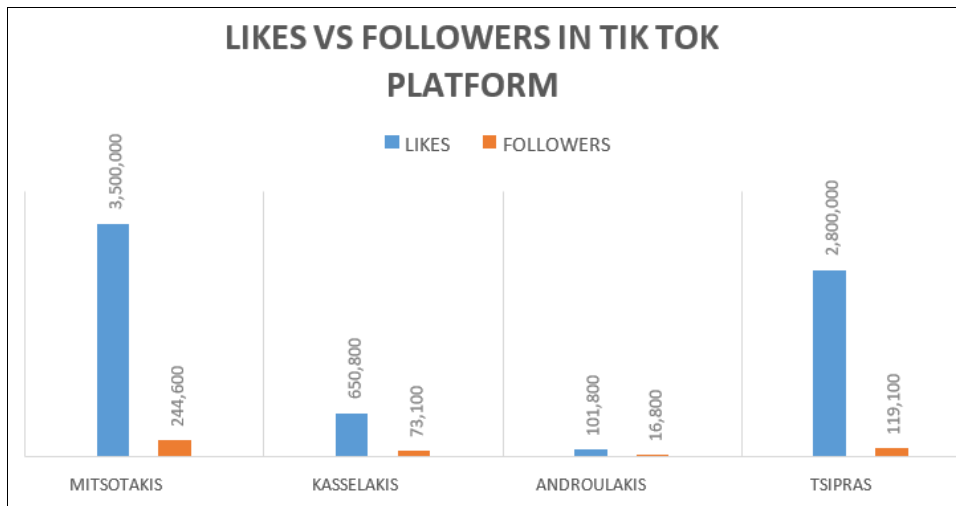
Diagram 3: Likes vs Followers in TikTok Platform
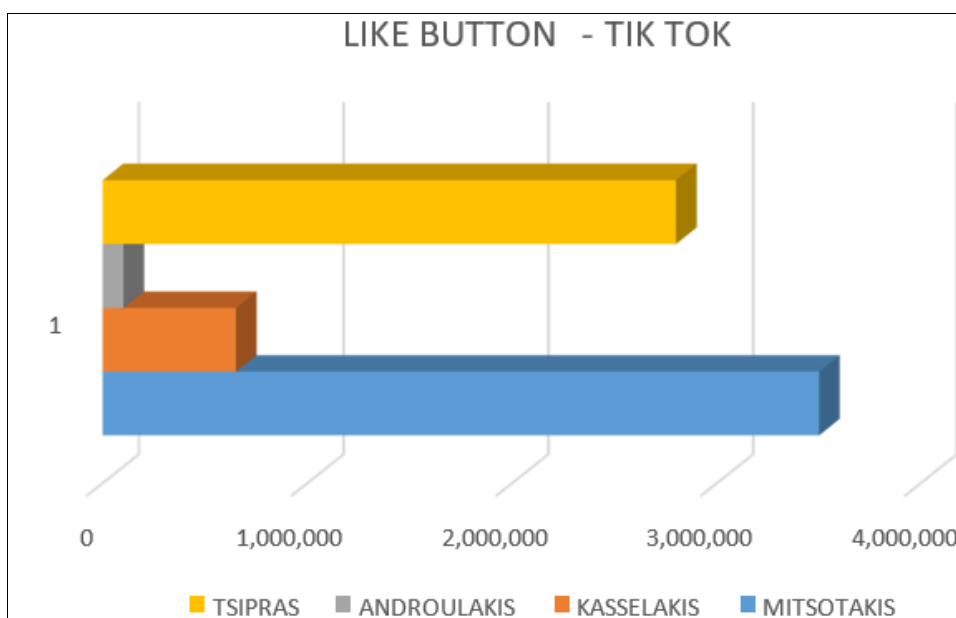

Diagram 4: Like Button-TikTok

Some researchers also challenge the notion that increased polarization due to online channels is quantitatively important (Flaxman S., 2016). Scandals are always sparking an intense public debate on social media. Coming to the end of the four-year term of ND governance, the social media platforms were overwhelmed with intense criticism of all the current affairs.

Each day Twitter had numerous tweets regarding these events. The users' dissatisfaction with all these government actions was more than obvious. Each second a new tweet or post was to be added to the severe criticism that the Prime Minister received.

The high economic dissatisfaction and political mistrust in the Greek political scene, the bad reviews regarding the cost-of-living crisis, the Tsiotras' official report of dead people in the Covid period where the majority of people were not treated as it should be, the National Health system's breakdown, the surveillance of public figures with Predator software which proved as illegal spyware some days ago, etc.

The wiretapping scandal that the President of the third party in parliament, Nikos Androulakis was under surveillance by the National Intelligence Service which is under the Prime Minister's guidance was one of the most trended topics in social. The connection of government ministries with journalists (Fourthiotis case), the devastating wildfires and floods, resulting in loss of life and extensive material damage appeared that the government was not entirely successful in dealing with these natural disasters. Reaching the top with the train crash in Tempi that killed 57 people, it arose a national safety issue of infrastructure and made it the talk of the country for many weeks. The aforementioned events led to personal hashtags indicating the Prime Minister to resign his duties mentioning that this government is a circus along with many memes created and stated famous slogans connected to his name or his similarity with a famous series hero, were extremely critical. However, such setbacks have not eroded the party's strong approval rating. New Democracy has managed to maintain its lead in the recent elections in Greece, with a 22,5% advantage over SYRIZA. After all, New Democracy is arguably the most successful party within the European People's Party family.

The below diagram shows the number of voters who trusted each political party in the recent elections, back in June of the current year. New Democracy's voters were more than

double from the second party, SYRIZA. PASOK/Movement for Change followed and KKE, the Communist party of Greece obtained the fourth seat in Parliament. Under the rate of participation at 52.74%, New Democracy receives a percentage of 40.11% (2.1115.322 votes) and 158 seats, while the Coalition of the Radical Left – Progressive Alliance (SYRIZA) is limited to 17.63% (930.013 votes) with 47 seats. PASOK secures a percentage of 11.71% (617.487) and 32 seats. They are followed by KKE with 7.61% and 401.224 votes (21 seats), Spartans (12 seats), Hellenic Solution (12 seats), Niki (10 seats) and Pleusi Eleftherias (8 seats).
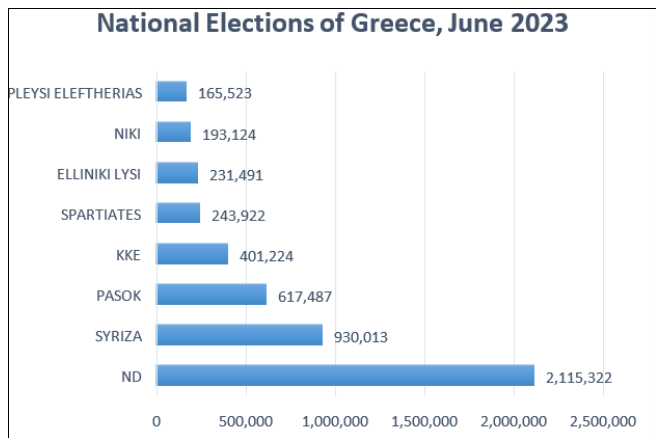
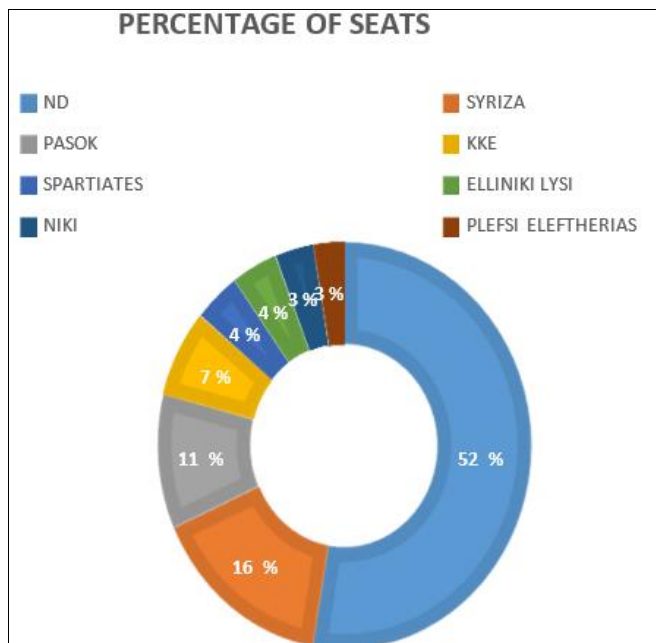**Diagram 5:** National Elections of Greece, June 2023

Diagram 6: Percentage of Seats

In this election, young people showed that their range of political choices is closer to that of older voters. From the 17-24 category to the 65 and over category - without any exception at all - the order of at least the first four parties is exactly the same, which shows that the choices of even the of younger age groups followed the same series of choices of the older ones, without strong differences or extremes. New Democracy achieved its highest percentages once again in the older age groups, while it also comfortably prevailed in the youth. In particular, people aged 55 and over voted N.D. at a rate of 47%, i.e. 6.5 percentage points

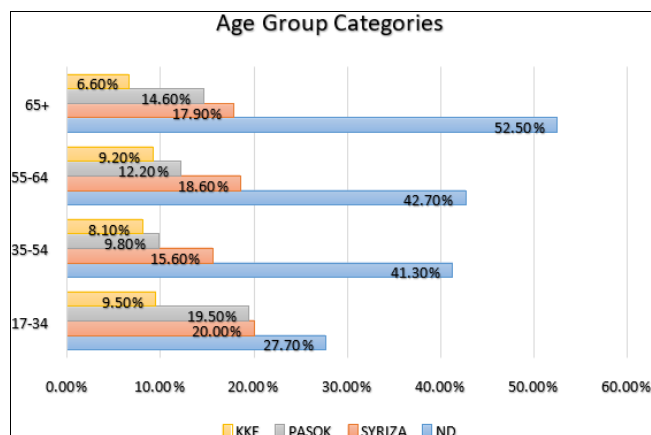more than its general rate (40.5%).

Diagram 7: Age Group Categories

In this age group, SYRIZA moved within the limits of its general rate, with 17.9%. However, among older people, PASOK achieved its best performance with 14.2%, i.e. almost 2.5 points more than its general percentage (11.9%). And in the other age categories, N.D. comfortably secured first place, but underperformed compared to its overall percentage. In particular, among the 35 to 54-year-olds it received 38.9%, in the 25 to 34-year-old category 27.7%, and among the very young, 17 to 24-year-olds, 28.9%.
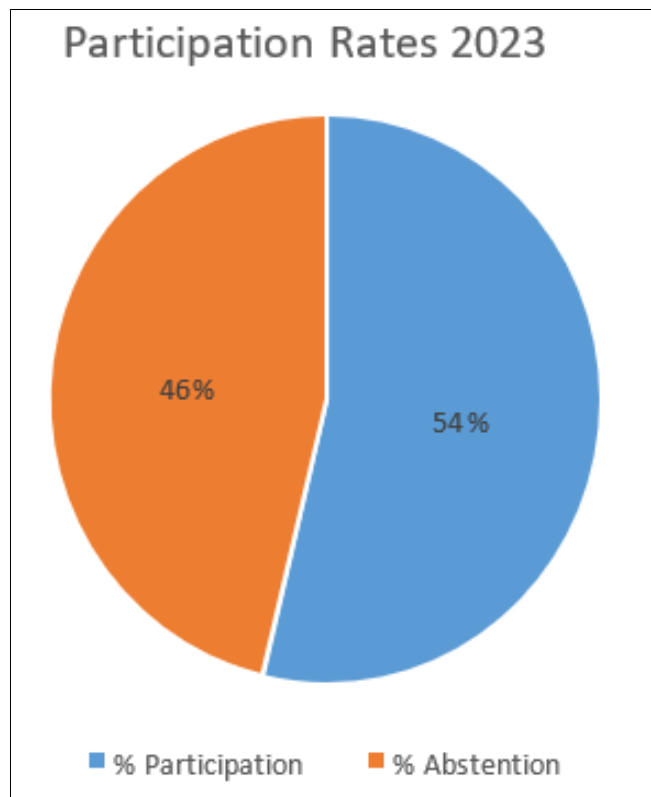
Diagram 8: Participation Rates

As far as the abstention recorded in the electoral contest is concerned, it is historic and based on the first estimates of the analysts, it has specific causes, which include the frustration of some voters, the mileage, the cost of transportation, and even the time of year. Although it is not the first time that a decrease in participation has been observed in elections held within a short period (it was also

recorded in the 2012 elections), however, for the first time in recent years, the decrease is so great: More than 790,000 citizens who had participated just a month ago in the national elections, this time chose to abstain (about 8% of those registered).

Following the above data and returning to the basic research question of this paper, it is noted that the results of the recent elections proved that the social media impact is really important but not decisive, at least at the national level. Many people have learned to express their severe criticism via their tweets, Facebook posts, Instagram stories, or sharing TikTok viral content but they finally, choose not to take part in democratic procedures.

Kasselakis' case
Following the recent election outcome where the Prime Minister strengthened his public political profile with his high winning rate, having dealt with numerous negative comments and posts for his policies on social media platforms, Greek society discovers the other sight of the coin regarding social media use and power with Kasselakis' case.

On 29 August this year, Mr. Kasselakis announced his candidacy in the intraparty elections of the largest opposition party, SYRIZA. He introduced himself via social media and through a viral video, inspired by Bernie Sanders' campaign elements, announced his candidacy with an engaging personal story and his relationship to politics, proving how effective a digitalfirst movement could be. With just twenty-seven days of campaigning, heavily leveraging social media, he managed to persuade the voters and become the new president of the party.

Mr. Kasselakis's sudden appearance boosted the public's interest in SYRIZA and reinforced a passion once again. Taking advantage of a deep divide within SYRIZA between different fractions and audiences based on political origin and identity, Mr. Kasselakis addressed the non-traditional voters, the majority that had been neglected by the leftist party cadres, and took them by storm.

He is Kasselakis who defeated four other candidates, three of them prominent Syriza former ministers, by promising to promote transparency, boost labor and social rights, speed up justice, and eliminate perks for bankers and politicians.

He secured a resounding victory with 57% of the votes, out of a total of 130,000 participants in the elections. In his first statements, immediately after his victory, he repeated that he cares about the citizens and not the media. When the reporters were trying to take the first statements, checking the monitors and the sound, he said: "I do not care for the image. I am here to speak with the people. I am here only for them."

During, his social media campaign, was repeatedly accused the media of being biased in favor of New Democracy that is backed by a powerful and well-organized propaganda machine. The fact that Mr. Kasselakis is not a member of the Greek Parliament presents a minor impediment. He also emphasized that, in a country that has seen three prime ministers from the Papandreou family, two from the Karamanlis family, and two from the Mitsotakis family, he does not come from a political dynasty. This combination of 'expertise' and 'outsider status' was enough to convince the Syriza faithful. Ever since 2015, when it capitulated to the demands of the Troika despite the tremendous popular defiance expressed in the bailout referendum, the party's

leftism has been exclusively cultural, rather than political or ideological.

This was reflected in Syriza's declining popularity and eventual defeat at the ballot box.

In 2019, after four years of brutal austerity, it won 31.5% of the vote compared to New Democracy's 40% and was duly ejected from office. In 2023, New Democracy ultimately triumphed over Syriza with a margin of almost 23%, the largest gap between the first and second parties in recent history. The latter was hit especially hard in predominantly workingclass constituencies.

The party had an electorate, but never a base. Unable to cohere anything like a left-wing 'common sense', Syriza remained a detached parliamentary vehicle, associated with the betrayal of 2015 and the austerity that followed. Once in power, New Democracy positioned itself as the voice of 'stability' – putting things 'back to normal' after the trauma of the Memoranda period and the pandemic.

In a party that has created an audience rather than a base, which has repudiated organizing from below, and which lacks a clear legislative program, the role of the leader is transformed: he is no longer the expression of a collective political will, but rather an image. His primary purpose is to use his personality – or 'brand' – to halt the process of electoral decline. This is the shift that Kasselakis represents.

Results
This study posed a main question regarding the social media's impact on elections outcome. The author's findings, responding to the main research hypothesis, prove that Greek national elections were not defined by social media.

The Prime Minister's influence was enhanced but not determined by the use of social media. Indeed, there is the tension of instrumentalization of social by both political actors and citizens. One the one hand, to express their program, to be liked, and to monitor their presence in the current affairs. Secondly, to evaluate, approve and ennoble every political move.

2,407,699 out of the 9,945,502 registered citizens and 5,902,447 valid ballots. A percentage that is not disputed and a party that dominated all social groups, the young, the selfemployed, and the retired, despite the opposite climate that prevailed on social networking platforms.

On the other hand, social media's impact is to be considered indisputable in the designation of the leader of SYRIZA. However, we are not talking about the same numbers. Reviewing the voters of the respective introparties elections of PASOK/Movement for Change (270.000 votes) and New Democracy (404.000 votes), these were the less. It was the first and only one where social media use was implemented as it is a fact that people outside the party became members of it due to Mr. Kasselakis' order via his videos on social media platforms.

Beside the widespread use of the Internet by Greek citizens for issues of political current affairs, there is still a share of people who trust the traditional means of information and interaction. There are not a few who prefer personal contact to discussions, by exchanging opinions and peacefully disagreeing about everything that does not find them all together. It is, furthermore, understandable that personal contact with the politicians you trust and want to represent you is necessary. There is no more basic manifestation of democracy than the choice of your representatives in the political events of the country.

After all, the contribution of technology to people's daily lives is decisive and necessary on a practical level. As long as it does not replace the essence of human existence, which is none other than the exchange and expression of opinions and feelings.

Last but not least, it should be noted that social media became a key driver of the widening gap in voting behavior between voters over and under 45 years of age. Even though they do exist, these voters are currently at such a low level of usage that they don't impact the overall results.

Conclusion

All in all, the recent elections represent an important crossroads for the relationship between politics and social media. The role of social networks and digital communication is undeniable in shaping public opinion and political debate. However, the way elections are treated on social media has created a number of challenges and contradictions.

One of the main reasons for the upheaval the election caused on social media is the way social media platforms' algorithms work. The algorithms were designed to promote content that provokes reactions and interest, to increase engagement and followers. This has the effect of increasing divisiveness and toxicity in the political debate, as strong and contradictory messages are promoted more. Social media can be a liberalizing tool, used to spread information and knowledge, but it can also be a tool of suppression, used to disseminate distorted information and fake news.

We must realize that Facebook, Instagram, Tik Tok and Twitter do not reflect the society, it is not society as a whole, but a place that we choose to see, from our friends on Facebook who often share the same beliefs and same social concerns, from videos on TikTok showing us based on our own preferences.

Can anyone wonder if the 2 million votes are representative of the 9 million registered voters? Surely, it is according to basic democracy rules of electoral system. Because it's up to the voters what they choose, and those 4 million citizens who didn't vote, many because they couldn't, others because they didn't want to, are also responsible for the result. Thus, let's discern the real life practices from the complaints and derisive videos on social media, and let's see what people choose, each one of those who exercised their right to vote.

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