

# First-time voters and electoral campaigns: Explaining online engagement in Romania

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## Abstract

This article aims to explain why young people engage politically with their preferred candidates during electoral campaigns. It uses an original survey conducted on first-time voters — as a group of heavy Internet users — in the 2019 Romanian presidential elections to identify determinants of such a behavior. Our statistical analysis argues and tests the explanatory power of three categories of determinants: importance of politics, information, and general political participation. We find that online engagement with a preferred candidate is an extension of young people’s regular activities on social media. It is driven by a genuine interest in what happens in politics and is the result of high levels of information. Online engagement of young people is not random, cannot be associated with boredom, and goes beyond clicktivism.

## Contents

[Introduction](#)

[Three arguments for online engagement](#)

[Research design](#)

[Analysis and results](#)

[Conclusions](#)

## Introduction

Young people participate less in politics compared to other age cohorts in society. They are alienated from mainstream political parties, have a growing disdain for formal politics, and rarely engage in traditional informal politics (Grasso, 2014; Huttunen and Christensen, 2020; Pickard and Bessant, 2018). The emergence of the Internet and social media provides new possibilities for political participation. Social media, such as Twitter, Facebook, or Instagram, create environments where displaying political opinions (slogans, logos, symbolic markers) are a feature of everyday life (Penney, 2017). As such, they have the potential to alter the behavior of young people (Raby, *et al.*, 2018; Valkenburg and Piotrowski, 2017).

Contemporary electoral campaigns are political marathons, which now take place also on social media (Kruikemeier, *et al.*, 2018). Young people can engage politically online to support and promote their preferred candidates, share content, or persuade others how to vote (Gibson and Cantijoch, 2013). They are more engaged, more preoccupied with being good citizens, more vocal, more “participatory” (Bowman, 2018). Online activities such as tweeting, blogging, or vlogging on political subjects are considered to be

easier than the tedious legwork of traditional campaign volunteering (Penney, 2017). So far, research has covered extensively the transformations brought by online possibilities of political participation to the life of young people. It also has attempted to explain why young people mobilize online for offline modes of participation such as protests or demonstrations.

However, little attention has been paid to the reasons for which young people engage online with candidates during electoral campaigns. Online engagement, known as digital activism, includes a broad range of activities such as using liking, posting, or sharing content (George and Leidner, 2019; Kaun and Uldam, 2018). It is relevant to understand this behavior in the short time frame of a campaign with great concentration of political events where voters can choose between a variety of options for engagement. In general, it is unclear if young people's online involvement is random, the result of careful consideration, or the extension of existing participatory behavior. This paper seeks to address this gap in the literature and aims to explain why first-time voters engage politically online with their preferred candidates during election campaigns.

This analysis uses individual level data from an original survey conducted on 664 first-time voters in the aftermath of the 2019 presidential elections in Romania. The survey includes those young people who could vote for the first time in the election at the national level and who actually voted. We sought to observe online political engagement of real, instead of potential, voters. Also, we were interested in the engagement with a given preferred candidate as citizens who do not vote may not have had one. Our statistical analysis argues and tests the explanatory potential of three categories of determinants: importance of politics, information, and general political participation.

The next section reviews the literature on political engagement and formulates six testable hypotheses. We then present the research design of this study with an emphasis on case selection and data methodology. The next section includes an analysis and interpretation of findings. The conclusions summarize the key results and discuss their implications for research on young people and online political engagement.

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### **Three arguments for online engagement**

There is a broad consensus in the literature that political behavior is linked to individual levels of knowledge, understanding, and interest in political matters (Dalton and Klingemann, 2011; Dalton 2017; Giugni and Grasso, 2022). There are no reasons to expect young people to deviate from these features. This section bridges the literature on political participation, digital activism, and electoral campaigns to identify three categories of causes for online engagement during electoral campaigns. For each of these categories of explanations we test the potential effects of two variables and we formulate hypotheses for each of them.

#### ***Political interest and saliency of elections***

Self-interest has been long considered as a motivating factor for political participation. This is our starting point in arguing that political interest may form the basis for online engagement. Explanations based on pure self-interest do not accurately describe reality (Fowler and Kam, 2007). Yet, there are two components of self-interest that can mobilize individuals: political interest and the saliency of elections. These two components can augment the benefits of engagement and decrease costs.

Those interested in politics use the features of social media to connect and communicate with peers about political issues throughout elections (Boulianne, 2009). Young people can develop and show their political identities via Internet and social media (Pickard and Bessant, 2018). Liking or sharing an idea as a meme or generating a discussion over a political post is, in this logic, a way for young people to express their opinions, attitudes, and preferences towards ideas or candidates. Expressing political opinions comes in handy, is easy, and requires low effort. Their engagement becomes a form of self-representation (Dennis,

2019).

Social networks combine political interaction with socialization and create a “major reservoir of civic energy” (Bakardjieva, 2009). This civic energy becomes relevant during electoral campaigns as debates often move from TV screens to News Feeds. Informed and politically active users will believe that by engaging in online campaigns and online debates they will generate democratic mobilization that brings constructive change (Seib, 2012). As elections are considered great opportunities for change, those for whom elections are relevant can comment, share, and engage in candidate debates to support them but also to convince others to vote for their preferred candidates. They may share, comment, or engage in discussions on subjects because such activities reflect that they care. Their attention to political discussions is likely to grow (Holt, *et al.*, 2013) and they may use it to express their opinions regarding their favorite candidates. Based on these arguments, we hypothesize that young voters are likely to engage online with their preferred candidates during campaign when they:

- H1* Have high political interest;  
*H2*: Consider that elections are important.

### ***The quest for information***

Information plays a major role in individual decisions to engage online with candidates. Young people often engage in *ad hoc* issue-based campaigns rather than long-term organizational commitments (Vromen, *et al.*, 2015). Young people are likely to become involved when they receive information during campaigns and through social media. Electoral campaigns seek to persuade and to mobilize the electorate by raising awareness about issues and candidates (Hansen, 2011). Young people with a higher level of knowledge may be more vocal and more supportive of their candidates on social networks because knowledge empowers them and makes them more confident to express their thoughts. Reliable information acquired during campaigns could create interaction, peer to peer influence and encourage critical thinking (Penney, 2017). Critical thinking may generate informed voters, that are confident in their choices (the preferred candidate) and could eventually persuade others (von Borzyskowski and Kuhn, 2020).

Social media is young people’s favorite space to communicate about politics (Ferrucci, *et al.*, 2020; Vromen, *et al.*, 2015). During political events, social media content is widely circulated (Freelon and Karpf, 2015; Kreiss, 2016). Expressing political sentiment in social media affects both offline and online political participation (Kalogeropoulos, *et al.*, 2017). Social media has three mechanisms that affect youth political engagement: providing information, introducing social pressure, and enhancing discussions among peers (Allaste and Saari, 2020). Many teenagers get political news from a wide range of online sources including social media (Allaste and Saari, 2019; Valkenburg and Piotrowski, 2017). Receiving political information via social media mobilizes political engagement of young people and stimulates the general level of political information (Ohme, *et al.*, 2020). The extensive connectivity and access to a wide range of political content on social media provides users with the possibility to engage in political discussions, with candidates or with specific issues (Gottfried, *et al.*, 2017).

Social media allow users to undertake different forms of online political engagement. These range from liking or sharing a post to the creation of political groups or devoting hours to civic discussions (Dennis, 2019). The informed user becomes a professional communicator (Bode, 2016). According to levels of political knowledge, the professional communicator is able to construct stable and consistent opinions over time (Feezell and Ortiz, 2019). Consequently, we expect that the likelihood to engage politically online with their preferred candidate during campaign is higher among the first-time voters who:

- H3* Perceive the campaign as informative;  
*H4*: Use social media as a source of political information.

### ***A participatory profile***

Finally, we argue that people with a participatory profile are likely to engage with their preferred candidate on social media. The reasons for this behavior are that, on the one hand, they wish to distinguish their candidate from the rest, and, on the other hand, offline political participation instills online political engagement.

The “connective action” is the logic of political activities that rely on self-motivated sharing of personalized ideas, resources, images, and plans on social networks (Bennett and Segerberg, 2013). Connective action happens during campaigns, too (Kreiss, 2016). The campaign staff or party often seek to engage supporters, to mobilize them, particularly online by providing interactive spaces for participation and engagement (Jensen, 2017). In those interactive spaces, actions can be taken in favor of their own candidate (positive, acclaim-based) or against opposing candidates (critical, negative campaign) (Allaste and Saari, 2020). Campaigns on social media empower citizens as co-producers (along with campaigns managers) of campaign messaging. They become part of a horizontal space of communication (Jensen, 2017). Being more involved, they have the power and capacity to be senders of ideas and messages related to both their favorite candidate and others. Shared content becomes their creation; they take part in a battle of winning minds and they have the power to mobilize new supporters or to engage others. In other words, they are “mangers” of a campaign that has no real formal communication strategy, but it can be useful for candidates.

Previous studies reveal that people are closer to those who resemble themselves (McPherson, *et al.*, 2001). This means that they will follow, share, and comment on content related to their candidate. However, the dynamic environment of social media does not always restrict interactions to preferred candidates. Incidental or not, they will be in touch with “others”. They can engage in discussions related to other candidates to prove them wrong and to demonstrated their candidates’ positive qualities.

Political participation is enhanced by online political communication and this is most likely to generate civic manifestations (Valenzuela, *et al.*, 2012; Vissers and Stolle, 2014; Yamamoto, *et al.*, 2015). Some consider that offline civic participation is positively associated with digital media use (Ferrucci, *et al.*, 2020; Harris, *et al.*, 2010) while others believe that the strength and direction of this relationship depends on the type of media, personal motivations, and level of usages (Holt, *et al.*, 2013). By personal motivations we refer to the gateway hypothesis, explained by Kim, *et al.* (2017). The gateway hypothesis states that online participation nurtures subsequent offline participation. It builds on the assumption that political experiences in the online sphere may “preheat” subsequent offline political participation. Once people have opportunities to learn skills to build on their underlying qualities, and to be psychologically empowered to engage in politics in a less demanding environment (*i.e.*, online), they are likely to make a similar attempt in a more demanding environment (*i.e.*, offline) (Kim, *et al.*, 2017).

Citizens who participate in politics often inform their peers about their activities. On election day, some people use Facebook’s feature “voting day” and inform those in their social networks about their electoral behavior, which can have reputational benefits (Dennis, 2019) in the direction of validation and recognition from others. They will brag about their behavior and expect validation and recognition from others. When active political involvement in real life is big, meaning that young people are party members and engaged in political campaigns, they will seek to augment the benefits for their party or candidates. Their offline commitment is likely to be transferred online. Their preference for a candidate can be expressed online in various forms like sharing content related to their candidate, creating original content about the candidate, changing their profile picture, and other symbolic gestures. Consequently, we expect the likelihood to engage politically online with their preferred candidate during a campaign to be higher among first-time voters who:

*H5* Engage on social media in general;

*H6*: Are politically active in general.

### **Controls**

In addition to these main effects, we control for the explanatory power of three variables that have been

identified in the literature as potential drivers for online political engagement: use of social media, left-right self-placement, and area of residence. First, the extensive use of social media for various purposes may increase the likelihood of online engagement during campaigns. The logic behind this mechanism is related to exposure and possibilities. Young people are exposed to this medium of communication and they use its functions. At the same time, those who use extensively social media may neglect the political dimension since they focus on other functions such as entertainment or networking (Craig and Cunningham, 2019). The right-oriented voters may engage online during campaign more than the rest because this mode of participation promotes individual action. Young people living in large cities may have more possibilities to engage online with candidates. This is due to their larger social networks, which often correspond to the number of social media groups to which they belong, and to greater exposure to campaign events that take place in their area.



## Research design

To empirically test these effects, we use individual-level data from an original Web survey conducted among Romanian first-time voters in November-December 2019. The survey was launched immediately after the second round of presidential elections and closed three weeks later. This analysis focuses on first-time voters in the Romanian presidential elections for three reasons. First, Romanians elect their president through popular vote and turnout is usually higher compared to the legislative elections. The popularity of presidential elections is usually connected with more personalized campaigns and to the possibility of attaching a familiar face to the office holder (Gherghina and Tap, 2021). Second, the 2019 presidential campaign had a relevant online component mainly due to the incumbent president who had this approach at previous elections and used extensively social media during his term in office. Third, in the most recent five years Romanian youth have been often linked to contentious politics, with important presence in street protests against various governments. There is little known about their preferences and behavior during presidential campaigns.

The survey included 664 young people who voted in the presidential elections. They were born between 1999 and 2001, being for the first time entitled to vote in national elections. The previous national elections were organized in 2016 when those born in 1999 did not reach the minimum age of voting (18 years old). Since we focused on young people who voted, we used convenience sampling. In the absence of official reliable statistics regarding the profile of young voters, we cannot know the features of the entire population and thus no probability of representative sampling. Instead, we used a convenience sample in which respondents were neither pre-selected nor part of a pool of available individuals. We distributed the online survey mostly through messages on Facebook groups or discussion forums, and e-mail messages sent to organizations or associations. While we are aware that such a sampling strategy confines the findings presented in this paper to our respondents, we consider the results informative and with important implications for the study of youth behavior during their first election campaign.

The dataset included only the respondents who completed the survey. The questionnaire was in Romanian; the average duration of completion was nine minutes. There was great variation in respondent profiles across all independent and control variables included in this analysis ([Appendix 1](#)) and in terms of other sociodemographic variables (*e.g.*, gender, area of residence).

## *Variable measurement*

The dependent variable was online political engagement with the preferred candidate on Facebook. This was a cumulative index of three actions that were part of the broad repertoire of online political engagement (Gibson and Cantijoch, 2013): like, comment, and share content of their preferred candidate. Respondents were asked in what form they engaged on Facebook with their preferred candidate during the election campaign. The preferred candidate was the one for which the respondents voted in any of the two rounds of

presidential elections. The available options were: likes to candidates' posts, comments to candidate's posts and share of candidates' messages to other Facebook users. The positive answer to any of these was coded 1. The cumulative index has values between 0 when a respondent did none of these and 3, which indicated that a respondent performed all three.

Political interest (*H1*) was measured on a five-point ordinal scale based on the following question: "How interested are you in Romanian politics?" The possible answers ranged between "not at all" (coded 1) and "very much" (coded 5). The importance of elections (*H2*) was measured with answers provided to the following question "How important was the 2019 presidential election for you?" The answers were coded on a four-point ordinal scale between "not at all" (1) and "very important" (4). The informative character of the election campaign (*H3*) was operationalized as the answer to the question "How informative do you consider this campaign for presidential election was for you?" The available answers were coded on a five-point ordinal scale that ranges between "not at all" (1) and "very much" (5).

The use of Facebook for information purposes (*H4*) was derived from the question "What is the reason for which you use Facebook?" The respondents had several available answers such as communication, information, relaxation/entertainment, etc. For each of these, respondents indicated the extent to which they use Facebook for that reason. To measure the use of Facebook for information purposes, we focused on the item of information and respondents could choose five possible answers between "not at all" (1) and "very much" (5). The engagement on Facebook with other candidates (*H5*) was measured similarly as the dependent variable. Political participation was a cumulative index of three modes of participation: vote in referendum, protest, and petition signing. Respondents who identified one of these modes of participation were coded 1 so that the values on this index ranged between 0 and 3.

Turning to controls, the use of Facebook was measured with the help of the question "How often do you use Facebook?" Available answers were recorded on a five-point ordinal scale from "never" (0) to "daily or almost daily" (4). The left-right self-placement was measured with the usual question about positioning in politics, measured on a 0 to 10 scale. The area of residence was measured on a four-point ordinal scale as follows (codes in brackets): "village" (1), "small city/town of up to 100,000 inhabitants" (2), "medium city with 100,000 to 300,000 inhabitants" (3) and "large city with more than 300,000 inhabitants" (4). All these were relative to the Romanian population in cities and respondents were asked to indicate the location in which they spent most of their time. For all the variables, the "DK/NA" answers were treated as missing values and were excluded from analysis.

## **Methods**

Empirical analysis started with a general discussion about the distribution of the young people's engagement on Facebook during the campaign. It was followed by inferential statistics that included bivariate correlations and ordered logistic regression to test the effects of hypothesized effects and of the controls. In addition to the controls included in the analysis, we also tested the effect of other variables that were mentioned as potential drivers for online political engagement by previous research, *e.g.*, gender, media exposure, knowledge of politics, or voted candidate. There was no empirical support for any of them and they were not reported in the findings, to keep the explanatory models parsimonious and easier to interpret.

The statistical models included the entire sample of respondents at the national level; we did not run city-level models. One could argue that respondents who lived in large cities — especially in the university cities — could have a different type of online political engagement during the campaign compared with others. Some reasons behind such a difference could be exposure to information, broader networks, or more possibilities for engagement. We tested for the effect of the city on the likelihood of Facebook engagement by using locality dummies. The results showed no sizeable effect and thus we dropped them from analysis.

Before running the regression, we tested for multicollinearity and the results indicated no highly correlated predictors, *i.e.*, the highest value was around 0.31. There were theoretical reasons to expect a correlation between some of the independent variables. For example, interest in politics and the importance of presidential elections could be in theory related since they both referred to a proactive attitude of individuals

in seeking information. In practice, at least in this survey, such a relationship existed, was positive, but not very strong. The independent variables did not correlate at a level that could raise problems in multivariate regression analysis. The values of the Variance inflation factor (VIF) test for multicollinearity were smaller than 1.28, which is well below the generally accepted cut-offs that range between 3 and 10 depending on model specifications (Thompson, *et al.*, 2017).

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## Analysis and results

Before the analysis, it is useful to provide an overview of the electoral campaign for presidential elections in Romania and use of Facebook. The country president is elected directly by citizens through popular vote once every five years, in a two-round system. Presidents of Romania are allowed a maximum of two terms in office. Since the regime change in 1989, all presidents who ran for a second term have been re-elected. In November 2019, the incumbent president, elected for his first term in 2014, ran for re-election and won a second term in office. In the first round there were 14 candidates belonging to almost all parliamentary parties, some extra-parliamentary parties, or running as independents. Out of these, only four candidates were likely to receive more than 10 percent of votes. The others were fringe, *e.g.*, six of them received 0.5 percent or less of votes. The incumbent president had a substantial advantage in the polls before the campaign started, he was popular among the electorate, and had higher chances to win. The main opponent was a former prime minister of the country who was dismissed after losing a vote of confidence in Parliament one month prior to elections.

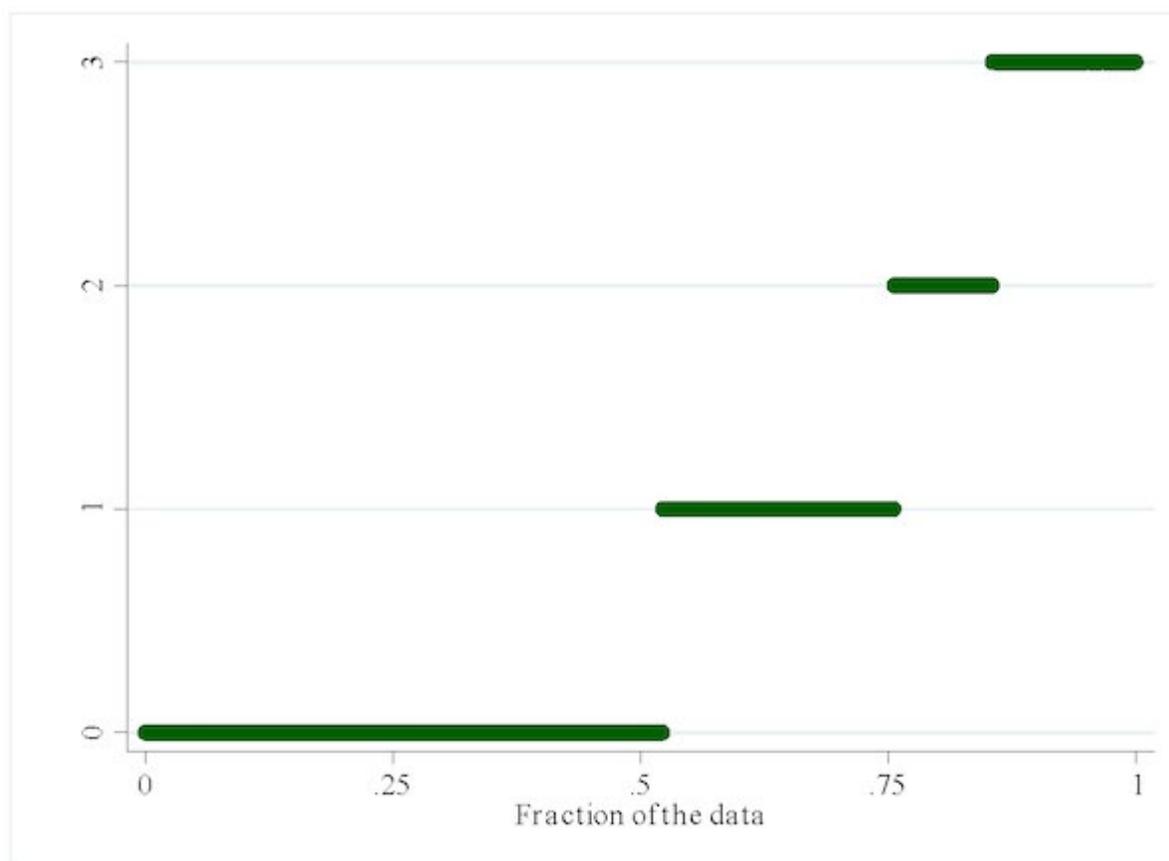
Nevertheless, the campaign was intense and had a major online component. The country president favored online communication with his electorate and many of his actions were often explained through social media. His campaign in 2014 was also conducted heavily online and he kept that line. A large majority of his 2019 campaign took place online and other candidates followed him. The real battle for challengers was about those who could reach the second round with the incumbent. Overall, there was a combination of positive and negative campaigning. Two of the candidates were the incumbent president and prime minister who played the card of achievements in office. They also attacked each other since the previous term in office was a co-habitation of a liberal president with a government led by social democrats. Another candidate was the leader of an opposition party with appeal to the young electorate in the most recent legislative elections. He mixed attempts to capitalize on the growing popularity of his party with negative rhetoric oriented against the main counter-candidates.

Facebook is by far the most used social media platform in Romania. In 2019 Facebook had more than 95 percent of the social media market share in the country (StatCounter, 2019). The same year, which coincides with the presidential election covered by our study, roughly 50 percent of the country's population used Facebook; the percentage increased to approximately 66 percent by 2022 (Internet World Stats, 2022). All these indicate that Facebook is the social medium used the most by young people in the country. Insights about their online engagement increase an understanding about how young people use Facebook and how they practice politics.

### *Descriptive and bivariate statistics*

[Figure 1](#) includes a quantile plot that depicts on the vertical axis the degree of engagement with the preferred candidate during the campaign for the 2019 presidential election. The horizontal axis notes the fraction of the data. The distribution indicates that roughly half of the first-time voters who answered our survey were apathetic when it came to this type of activity and did not engage at all. Approximately one quarter displayed only one form of Facebook engagement towards their preferred candidate, which was many cases a “like” to their posts. It was unexpected that the share of respondents who engaged in all three types of online activities towards their preferred candidate exceeded the percentage of those who engaged in two. A rational resource allocation strategy suggests that the costs of engagement are proportional with the

number of activities. According to this, we expected fewer respondents as the number of modes increased.



**Figure 1:** The distribution of online engagement with the preferred candidate.

In practice, the nature of digital engagement could provide an explanation about the higher number of respondents who did all three as opposed to only two. The first mode of engagement was liking a candidates' post, which was the most popular type. The second mode of engagement was commenting to the preferred candidates' posts, which was likely to take place in conjunction with sharing content from the preferred candidate. Both commenting and sharing required more resources than liking a post. The distribution in [Figure 1](#) indicates that more first-time voters in Romania decided to do them together rather than separately.

Bivariate correlations in [Table 1](#) indicate the existence of empirical support for all six hypothesized relationships. The highest values of the correlation coefficient indicated that young people who engaged politically on Facebook with other candidates (*H5*), who were animated by a general interest in politics (*H1*), and who considered the presidential elections important (*H2*) were more likely to engage on Facebook with their preferred candidate. These suggest that those first-time voters who were politically active in the online environment and those who saw a stake in the elections were more inclined to like, comment, and share content of their candidate on Facebook. The values of the coefficients for *H3* and *H4* revealed the existence of a positive relationship between information seeking and acquiring, and the digital involvement. The perception of campaign as informative and securing information through Facebook were both associated with higher levels of online engagement. In line with findings from previous research, offline political participation was positively associated with online political engagement but at a somewhat lower

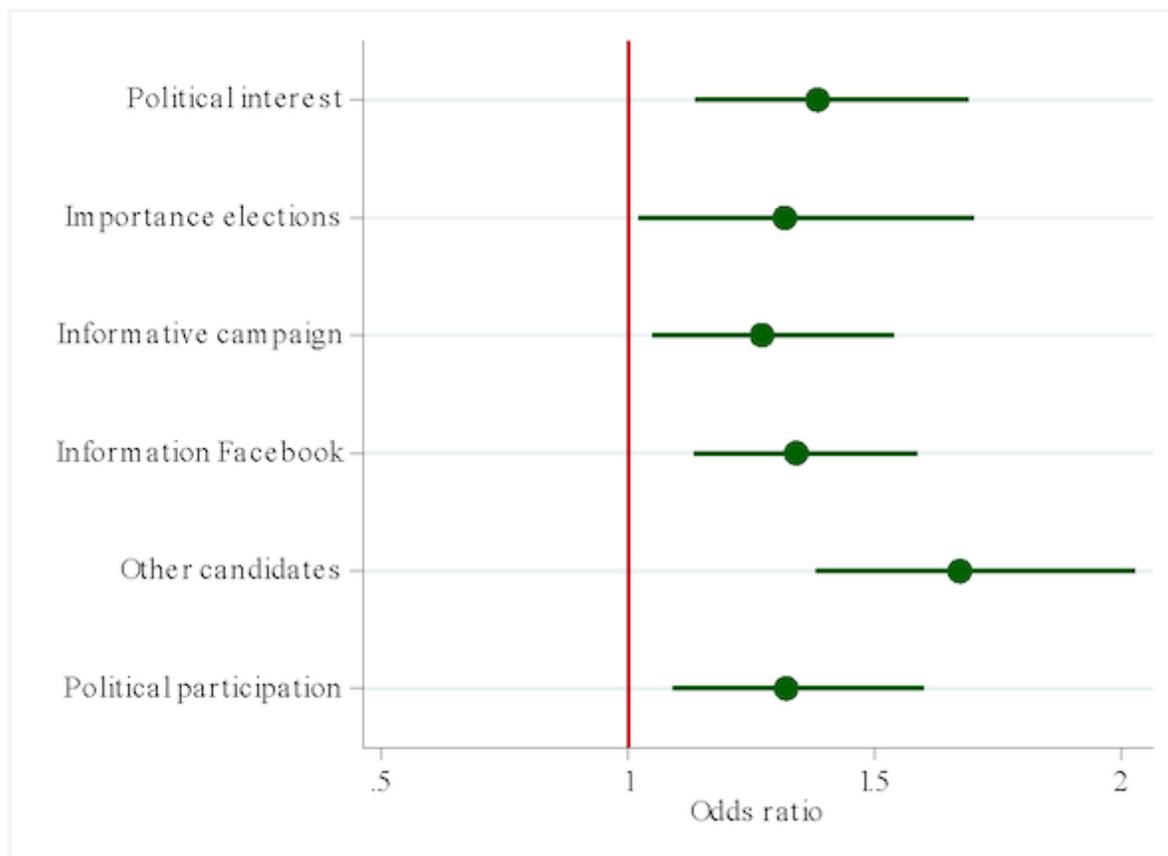
degree than the other variables. All the main effects were statistically significant at the 0.01 level.

<b>Table 1: Correlations for online political engagement with the preferred candidate.</b> <b>Note: Correlation coefficients were non-parametric (Spearman); ** p&lt;0.01; * p&lt;0.05.</b>		
	<b>Coefficient value</b>	<b>N</b>
Political interest	0.24**	664
Importance of elections	0.20**	662
Informative campaign	0.18**	662
Information Facebook	0.17**	645
Other candidates (engagement)	0.31**	664
Political participation	0.17**	664
Use of Facebook	0.08*	656
Left-right self-placement	0.12**	601
Area of residence	0.07	660

Controls were weakly associated with digital engagement with the preferred candidate. Coefficient values were positive, which meant that those young people who used Facebook on a regular basis for all sorts of activities, those who were more right-wing, and those who lived in large cities were likely to display such a behavior. All the values were considerably lower than for the main hypothesized effects. The highest coefficient value, which was only statistically significant at the 0.01 level among the controls, was for left-right self-placement. Right-wing respondents engaged more online than left-wing respondents. In Romanian politics, right-wing stands as the opposition to the social democratic party, a successor of the communists. The discourse of political elites enhanced such an attitude: the liberals portray themselves as being right-wing. Young people usually oppose the social democrats in Romania, illustrated both through real-life examples of protest and voting but also through the average for our respondents on this variable (6.47, see [Appendix 1](#)).

### *Understanding the effects*

[Figure 2](#) depicts the effects of six independent variables on young people's engagement with a preferred candidate on Facebook. These confirm to a great extent the observations from bivariate analysis and provide empirical support to all the hypothesized relationships. The odds-ratios presented in [Figure 2](#) correspond to a statistical model without controls. Both models — including the one with controls — can be found in [Appendix 2](#). All hypothesized effects are statistically significant at either the 0.01 or the 0.05 levels. The regression coefficients indicate that the strongest effect can be observed among first-time voters who engaged on social media with other candidates (*H5*). Those who did the latter were almost 1.7 times more likely to engage also with their preferred candidate compared to those who were apathetic about digital involvement in a campaign. This means that young Romanians who were active online throughout the campaign were more oriented towards the candidate for whom they voted. This observation is strengthened by the positive effect of information received through Facebook (*H4*): those who used social media for information purposes were 1.3 times more likely to engage with candidates during a campaign.



**Figure 2:** The effects on online engagement with the preferred candidate.

Recently, young Romanians have become politically active both online and offline. For example, in the 2019 elections for the European Parliament young voters were the targeted audience of several online campaigns about the importance of political participation. The relatively high turnout of young people — compared to previous elections — could have been also the result of these campaigns. Young people may have watched mobilization campaigns online. Another example reflecting the importance of online campaigns for young people's engagement is the strategy used by the incumbent president at the 2019 presidential elections. His online campaign was the most substantial in terms of content and the most dynamic compared to that of other candidates.

Political interest (*H1*) and the importance of elections (*H2*) had important positive effects on engagement with the preferred candidate during campaign. First-time voters with high interest in politics and for whom the elections were important were 1.3 to 1.4 times more likely to engage with their candidate on Facebook compared to those without interest and who were indifferent about the elections. These two effects are important because they reveal that engagement on Facebook during campaigns was not driven solely by high activity on social media as indicated by *H4* and *H5*. Instead, Romanian young voters were also motivated by a genuine interest for politics in general and for the electoral competition in particular. In 2019, young people had shown great interest in politics by voting more than usual. In the European elections organized in May 2019, there was record turnout for young people; on this occasion the number of voters belonging to this category was almost 60 percent higher than in the 2016 legislative elections (HotNews, 2019). In the 2019 presidential election, the turnout of young voters between 18 and 35 years old ranked second when compared with the other age group categories (Biroul Electoral Central, 2019), which

is rare in Romania.

As such, it is not surprising that offline political participation had a positive effect on digital engagement throughout the campaign. The Romanian young voters who were politically active outside the online environment were 1.3 times more likely to engage on Facebook with their preferred candidate. These findings indicate that both attitudes (interest in politics, importance attached to elections) and active behaviors (participation) fostered digital engagement. At the 2019 referendum in Romania, organized simultaneously with the European elections, the media explored the extent to which young people from the Z Generation moved beyond social media to cast their first vote (Dobreanu, 2019).

The involvement of Romanian youth in protests on various social and political issues is quite frequent over the last few years (Soare and Tufiş, 2021). The most recent protest was in solidarity with the global movement for climate action. In September 2019, the protesters asked the government to take immediate measures to limit negative effects of human-caused global warming. The most prominent involvement of Romanian youth in protests was in the anti-government demonstrations in January-March 2017 under the “#resist” label. The protest was oriented against the government’s desire to amend the laws of justice. The anti-government protests continued in 2018 and 2019, with young people becoming mobilized online and offline.

None of the control variables had a sizeable or statistically significant effect on the dependent variable (Model 2 in [Appendix 2](#)). This finding is relevant because it shows that the use of social media, self-placement on the right-left axis, or the area of residence did not matter when engaging with the preferred candidate. Instead, the variables that mattered were those related to substantive issues in politics and political activity of young people. Consequently, digital activism during a campaign appeared to have meaningful political attitudes and behaviors among the Romanian electorate. Although some of the controls (the left-right placement) correlated positively with the digital engagement, their explanatory power in the regression analysis was very limited. Explanatory power loaded on some of the variables for which we hypothesized relationships. For example, the effects of political interest and of engagement with other candidates increased when adding controls. However, the controls (Model 2 in [Appendix 2](#)) did not have an effect of online political engagement with the preferred candidate.

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## Conclusions

This paper sought to identify what determined first-time voters to engage politically online with the preferred candidate during an electoral campaign. It used individual level data from the most recent presidential campaign in Romania to test for the explanatory power of three major causes: importance of politics, information, and general political participation. Previous research concluded that participation trends for young people were complex and not homogeneous (Gaiser, *et al.*, 2010). Our findings revealed that the explanations for young people’s online political engagement are complex and quite homogenous.

The results indicate that all three categories of determinants had positive effects on the likelihood to engage politically online. It is not surprising that young people who use social media to engage with other candidates or as a source of political information were more likely to become politically engaged with their preferred candidate. The latter could be considered as an extension of young people’s regular activities online. While the relationships between information seeking or acquiring and online engagement are not new, our findings illustrate that the under-investigated case of Romania is not an outlier. We confirm the conclusions of previous research, but we also add some nuance especially with respect to polarization that does not seem to make a difference. Such a conclusion may indicate a more robust and longer lasting development of the theoretical avenues explored in this article.

It is relevant to point out that the importance of politics for young people, either in general or in particular

relative to the investigated election, leads to more political engagement. This shows that online political engagement is not random and cannot be associated with boredom. On the contrary, it is driven by a genuine interest in what happens in politics. It is another way for the young people to become involved in something that matters to them. Equally important, those who are engaged in offline political participation are more likely to engage online. This confirms conclusions of previous work where politically active citizens use both online and offline means. This observation has important empirical implications for the study of online engagement by young people. It shows that this form of engagement during a campaign cannot be associated with clicktivism because there is a great deal of effort and commitment behind this action.

The findings also have important theoretical implications, which go beyond the single case study analyzed here. This paper suggests a framework to explain online political engagement during campaigns, which can be examined by further research. This framework is not context sensitive and can travel across various political settings. It shows the relevance of three key features that inform the actions of first-time voters and provides the possibility to be enriched with other determinants.

Further research could examine the discussion in the direction of explaining causal linkages. This paper identifies the potential determinants for online political engagement but does not explain how young people decide to engage in this way. Such an explanation requires different types of data, which could be collected with semi-structured interviews. These can focus on motivations of young people and on opportunities available through online engagement. At the same time, future research could follow the path of complementing the explanatory model with other variables that may be of importance for young people. For example, a future analysis could account for the activities that young people start on social media and how they understand politics. There is also room for cross-country comparisons that can reveal important similarities and differences across political contexts. 

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<b>Appendix 1: Descriptive statistics for variables included in analysis.</b>					
	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Standard deviation</b>	<b>Minimum</b>	<b>Maximum</b>	<b>N</b>
Online political engagement	0.87	1.09	0	3	664
Political interest	3.83	0.91	1	5	664
Importance of elections	3.43	0.69	1	4	662
Informative campaign	3.51	0.86	1	5	662
Information Facebook	3.95	0.96	1	5	645
Other					

candidates (engagement)	0.43	0.81	0	3	664
Political participation	1.63	0.81	0	3	664
Use of Facebook	1.26	0.76	1	5	656
Left-right self-placement	6.47	2.41	0	10	601
Area of residence	3.36	0.99	1	4	660

**Appendix 2: The ordinal logistic regression models for engagement with preferred candidate on Facebook.**  
**Note: Regression coefficients are odds-ratios; \*\* p<0.01; \* p<0.05.**

	<b>Model 1</b>	<b>Model 2</b>
Political interest	1.38**	1.52**
Importance of elections	1.32*	1.25
Informative campaign	1.27**	1.27*
Information Facebook	1.34**	1.35**
Other candidates (engagement)	1.67**	1.70**
Political participation	1.32**	1.32**
Use of Facebook		0.99
Left-right self-placement		1.06
Area of residence		1.05
<i>N</i>	645	586
Pseudo $R^2$	0.07	0.08
Log likelihood	-719.65	-654.05

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### Editorial history

Received 8 August 2022; revised 13 April 2023; accepted 31 August 2023.

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First-time voters and electoral campaigns: Explaining online engagement in Romania  
by Sergiu Gherghina and Bettina Mitru.

*First Monday*, volume 28, number 9 (September 2023).

doi: <https://dx.doi.org/10.5210/fm.v28i9.12741>