The Impact of Social Media in Creating Social Justice Reform in The South African Political Sphere During Election Campaigns

Amukelani Collen Mangaka

Ndivhuwo Doctor Sundani
University of South Africa

Abstract

This study focuses on the impact of social media in creating social justice reform in South African politics during election campaigns. The study seeks to (1) examine the impact of social media in creating social justice reform in the political sphere during election campaigns, (2) establish the influence of social media on voters' behaviour during election campaigns and (3) propose strategies that political parties can employ to enhance their communication strategies during election campaigns. Social media engagement (SME) theory was used as the main theoretical framework of the study. Qualitative research methodology was adopted in this study to achieve the study's objectives. Data was collected from the previous literature and was analysed through descriptive analysis. It was discovered that social media platforms do not only help to inform society but also to encourage political discourse and allow candidates and elected officials to not only communicate with but interact with voters in numbers. This study intends to contribute to the increasing knowledge on the efficacy of social media in creating social justice reform during elections.

Keywords: Election campaigns, social justice, social media, politics, reform

Introduction and background to the study

The advent of social media has certainly unravelled many possibilities for robust engagement, debate and collaboration in the political process. It has also brought more transparency and inclusivity in the democratic processes as well as significantly transformed existing patterns of political communication, political participation, political mobilisation and collective actions among voters (Dabula, 2016). Social media has had a significant impact on almost all areas of society, including political life (Mhlomi & Osunkunle, 2017:179). However, the political process cannot be discussed without political communication. In this regard, Alam and Yousuf (2021) define political communication as a body of knowledge that entails different elements such as sources, messages, channels, recipients and impacts. Similarly, Hlungwani (2021) indicated that political communication incorporates the production, distribution, receiving, and encoding of messages that can have a significant direct or indirect impact on politics.

In the past few years, there has been a drastic increase in the number of people using social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Pinterest), as they are collectively known, and this growth has impacted directly the way political campaigns are run and how politicians communicate with their electorate (Malherbe, 2015). In support of

the above sentiment, Alam and Yousuf (2021) allude that in recent times, the internet and social media are strong platforms that make strong interactive communication channels to circulate political news and information. Aduradola and Ojukwu (2013) indicate that political campaigns are an organised effort that seeks to influence the decision-making process within a specific group or environment. In support of the above definition, Saheed (2015) defines a political election campaign as an organised effort by political parties. Therefore, this study focuses on social media as a political campaign tool in creating social justice.

The term social media, according to Bohler-Muller and van der Merwe (2011:2), refers to web-based tools and services that allow users to create, share, rate and search for content and information without having to log in to any specific portal site or portal destination. These tools become social in the sense that they are created in ways that enable users to share and communicate with one another. Social media can act as a vehicle that helps to contribute to social justice (Lackovic, 2020) and it can help to promote political participation (Bennett, 2012). Social media platforms allow the publication of user-generated content and thus provide outlets for public opinion on any social and political issues, supporting multiple voices and activist community building (Lackovic, 2020). In addition to this, Dabula (2016) emphasised that social media can also act as the cornerstone to profound political opinions to attain and sustain a shared political discourse and trajectory. The above statements are supported by Kalyango and Adu-Kumi (2013) who indicated that social media such as Facebook and Twitter receive a record number of hits in African nations including South Africa during major political events, e.g. general elections. Tracey-Temba (2013) explained that the use of social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, MySpace among others has emerged as an important electoral campaigning tool in recent years in South Africa. Onslow (2021) revealed that 22 million South Africans are currently social media users, nearly all of whom do so through mobile.

Malherbe (2015) delineated that because of the power of social media platforms, political parties have adapted their communication and campaign strategies to acquire as many followers, likes and shares as they can, to ensure that their campaign messages are amplified by as large a base as possible – thus increasing their voter's turnround and enhancing social justice.

If these platforms provide outlets for public opinion, one can concur that they can also have a great impact in creating social justice reform in the South African political sphere during election campaigns. Moreover, this could be possible if citizens are involved and encouraged to participate in political activities, which in turn will lead to the improvement of government policies aimed at developing the country and improving the lives of citizens as posited by Mhlomi and Osunkunle (2017). As indicated by Malherbe (2015), it is therefore important for political parties to also position themselves against their opposition parties so that the public can understand why one party should be followed instead of another one. Thus, as long as elections involve humans, there will be a form of the political campaign of influencing electorate voting decisions before and even at times after the whole electoral process (Saheed, 2015:1). Dabula (2016) strongly believes that election campaigns are critical periods in the lives of democracies and ordinary citizens. Hence, the author adds

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that election campaigns select decision-makers, shape policies, distribute powers, and provide venues for debates and socially approved expressions of conflict about factional grievances and issues, national problems and directions and international agendas and activities.

As put forth by Lackovic (2020), social media platforms mediate information exchange; therefore, they are mediating artefacts. Lackovic's statement proves that social media can help exchange political messages with voters during elections and this could help to create social justice reform in the South African political sphere. Lackovic (2020), further explained that Twitter can contribute to the creation of social justice. Social justice, according to Abbott (2014), includes a wide variety of social goals, including full and equal participation of individuals in all social institutions; fair, equitable distribution of material and non-material goods; and recognition and support for the needs and rights of individuals. The United Nations (2006) emphasised that social justice is seen as a substitute for the protection of human rights.

Badaru and Adu (2020:20) explained that social media, undoubtedly, have become an important instrument for increasing participation in all forms of political activities in such a way that civic participation is now witnessing changes in this era of the information age defined by digitisation processes. Moreover, Kalyango and Adu-Kumi (2013) concur that the roles of (social) media platforms continue to be useful in mobilising and drawing citizens to focus on issues that are perceived as important and in priming public opinion among many Africans to get engaged in the political process of governance and democratisation.

Dabula (2016:17-18) explained that social media tools must be seen as enablers that political parties can fully utilise to develop an in-depth understanding of potential voters and to communicate with them in ways that would rebuild trust and loyalty, resulting in votes. Moreover, the author also expressed that in applying the principles of products and services marketing to elections, political parties or candidates make promises to the electorate through election campaigns using social media among other methods.

Problem statement

South Africans have been exhibiting low participation in the conventional political processes in the first 20 years of their country's democratic experimentation as a republic (Badaru & Adu, 2020:19). Furthermore, the aforementioned authors emphasised that South Africa's nascent democracy is at risk if its citizens continue to show apathy towards participation in politics. Lackovic (2020) opines that social media platforms need to be critically examined because they also contribute to social injustice by being hegemonic and "non-neutral" in terms of discourse. Further, Lackovic (2020) delineates that if their negative roles are considered, social media platforms can easily support moral panic, othering and divisions in society. In contrast, Dabula (2016) emphasise that it is of vital importance for political parties in South Africa to use social media to engage and interact with voters, answer questions, seek input and build profound connections. However, this study was conducted to help propose strategies that political parties can employ to enhance their communication

strategies on the usage of social media platforms during elections to create social justice reform in South Africa.

Social media in creating social justice during election campaigns

According to Lackovic (2020), digital technologies and social media can offer a space for emancipatory information. This is supported by Tracey-Temba (2013) who indicated that social media and digital communication are increasingly being used as tools for election campaigns. Mhlomi and Osunkunle (2017:179) are of concern that politicians use social media as an effective tool to reach out to potential voters with political campaign messages. The aforementioned authors further indicated that social media provides politicians and the electorate with a sustained and fitting platform where they go beyond the campaigning or pre-election period to the post-election era where the citizens can express their opinions and views on certain issues of concern to the society or their communities.

The study conducted by Dabula (2016) in South Africa revealed that social media platforms have the power to influence voters to support political parties during elections. According to the above-mentioned author, due to their abilities to deliver effectively coordinated political actions and expansive media visibility, social media platforms have advanced the influence of political participation and social justice. Tracey-Temba (2013) is of concern that a big change in political campaigning since South Africa's last national elections has been the rise in social media. As discovered by Dabula (2016), social media such as Twitter lends itself to activity and participation at all hours of the day and night as people share tweets and retweets, hence the message is likely to reach an enormously large group because of its viral benefits.

Dabula (2016) further explained that social media platforms such as Facebook are more appropriate for conveying and imparting meaningful, profound and richer information because they possess mechanisms that encourage and heighten interaction, two-way communication, comments and responses, which in the long run strengthen trust and loyalty to political parties. Tracey-Temba (2013) explains that South Africa's political parties still have more to gain than lose in entering the social media sphere in the run-up to the elections. As put forth by Dabula (2016), the benefits offered by social media platforms in the political arena are boundless because they are cost-effective in the dissemination and retrieval of political information and discourse. Authors such as Badaru and Adu (2020) explain that mass media including social media are very critical to raising awareness about political issues and encouraging the political participation of the citizenry in the democratic processes.

As expressed by Dabula (2016), for users, social media platforms offer more accessibility to political information. In addition, it was revealed that for political parties such as the Economic Freedom Fighter (EFF) during elections, its campaign strategy focuses mainly on social media platforms, particularly Twitter, to reach voters. In line with the aforementioned sentiment, one can stress that there is an impact that the political parties such as EFF are making to create social justice reform during election campaigns through social media platforms. As indicated above by Lackovic (2020), social media such as Twitter can contribute to the creation of socially supportive networks, including the ones advocating social justice. In support of

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the above statement, Dabula (2016) concurred that the relationship between social media and politics is rooted in the desire for change as citizens are using online information and social networks to find change.

Social media and voters' behaviour during political election campaigns
Social media is also used to improve candidate behaviour and improve candidate-voter interaction (The Electoral Knowledge Network, 2021). Similarly, Ahmed, Lodhi and Shahzad (2011) indicate that political candidates are using social media and it has a significant impact on their voting behaviour. New media and social media are growing in importance as tools for campaigning (The Electoral Knowledge Network, 2021).

Political parties are integrating social media in their political marketing strategies to appeal to voters (Dabula, 2016). Hence, Dabula (2016) expressed that voting behaviour and decisions are driven by myriad environmental dynamics which include demographic factors, an image of political party and leader, political knowledge, political party partisanship, government policies and performance, access to information both online and offline, sentiments and emotions, among others.

To achieve some of the above-mentioned dynamics, one can concur that social media across the globe, and South Africa to be specific, seems to be the hub of promoting an image of political party leaders in public. Malherbe (2015) wrote that (social) media plays a significant role in making the public aware of a candidate's position, plans and campaign strategy. In summary, social media gives a glance and scope of what the political party is all about. Similarly, Adegbola and Gearhart (2019) emphasise that usage of social media in the political sphere may lead to engagement by providing political information and increasing knowledge but also by linking social media users with like-minded individuals, political actors and partisan institutions.

Looking at how social media influences voters' behaviour during elections in South Africa, Dabula's study also revealed that ahead of the 2009 general election parties such as the African National Congress (ANC) and the Democratic Alliance (DA) amongst others created Facebook pages as part of their online campaign strategies. Similarly, LSE Idea (2021) revealed that the 2019 election campaign also underlined both beneficial and deeply troubling aspects of social media's reach into the broader population. Social media is attractive to parties such as the ANC and the opposition parties such as DA and EFF as it can potentially be used to mobilise their supporters by both overt and covert means.

According to Dabula's study finding, among many purposes for creating social media pages by the aforementioned South Africa political parties, was to communicate directly with voters. In addition to this, Dabula (2016) found that by using social media, political parties sought to engage with the youth where they were (on social media platforms) and use their language to inspire robust political discourse. Following the 2009 elections, Dabula (2016) further revealed that through social media, politicians were able to publish their opinions on social media platforms. In line with what has been reported above, one can concur that social media are powerful communication platforms used by politicians to influence voters during political campaign elections in South Africa.

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Strategies that political parties can employ to enhance their communication strategies during elections

As expressed by Tracey-Temba (2013), understanding the electoral power of social media could prove very rewarding for political parties, particularly in the lead-up to national elections. Dabula (2016) is of concern that for political parties to successfully leverage the benefits offered by social media platforms, trust and loyalty must be fostered and when there is trust and loyalty, intention to vote is amplified. In support of the above statement, one can posit that parties should use social media platforms in such a way that it does not promote confusion because if social media users who are members of political parties start mistrusting communication disseminated online, political parties might lose supporters. In other words, political parties in South Africa must use social media wisely to promote social justice reform during election campaigns.

Dubula's study further revealed that when voters have confidence, trust and are loyal to a party, they become inclined to have a strong intention to vote for that political party. Furthermore, the above-mentioned author discovered that when trust does not exist, voters either vote for the opposition or simply do not vote. According to Malherbe (2015), different political parties and politicians can use social media for different purposes, thus some can use social media not only for engagement online or wanting to grow their political parties or support base but rather to increase their offline participation in gatherings such as rallies and sometimes riots that have large consequences in political and social justice of ordinary.

Badaru and Adu (2020:20) are concerned that politicians should use (social) media because it has the potential of informing citizens of their political rights and civic duties to the state. Moreover, it encourages active political participation among the members of the democratic society. Therefore, this serves as the strategy with which ordinary citizens can contribute to democracy. According to the aforementioned authors, to achieve this, political education is imperative, and the mass media (social media) can serve as a vehicle to promote and deliver politically relevant content for increased political knowledge and effective participation in the political discourse. In this regard, The Electoral Knowledge Network (2021) explained that new media and social media are used by political parties as tools for voter education.

Malherbe (2015) indicates that political parties need to have a very active social media communication strategy in place to ensure that good news is amplified and bad news suppressed. As put forth by Dabula (2016), political parties must consider engaging the services of very senior individuals with extensive experience in marketing and digital media, who will develop and implement a comprehensive, cohesive, highly focused and continuous digital strategy. Political parties should prioritise using smartphones because they could enable political parties to extend their reach and thus include a large number of people in the political discourse. Due to a large number of citizens owning smartphones, people can access information wherever they are, therefore mobile technology has a significant advantage of speed and transmission of real-time information (Dabula, 2016).

Another strategy that political parties can employ to enhance their communication

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strategies during elections, according to Dabula (2016), is reputation management. Reputation is a very important asset, notwithstanding its intangibility. The political party must always be aware of its online reputation. In line with this, Malherbe (2015) emphasised that political parties have to become very transparent and clear about their message and goals to ensure that they are not burned at the stake by their followers.

Theoretical framework to the study

Using social media for political communication is not new in modern politics. Globally, social media platforms have exhibited the power to influence change in societies regarding politics and governance, among other areas (Lubinga & Baloyi, 2019). These authors further state that to determine the impact of social media on politics, one needs to look at the role played by social media during the election campaigns of Barack Obama and Donald Trump and in 2019 in South Africa's general election. Looking at the roles that social media play in society, the study adopted SME theory as a theory that is appropriate and relevant to the study. As such, this theory explores the link between social media as a communication tool to promote social justice reform during elections.

According to Di Gangi and Wasko (2016), SME theory accounts for the role of technology as underlying platforms needed to facilitate social interactions among users that are globally and temporally distributed. Furthermore, these authors indicate that those social interactions from the experience of users foster personalised relationships among users, serve a transparent means of communication, provide access to social resources including friends, acquaintances, and family members, among others. Therefore, Di Gangi and Wasko (2016) emphasise that social interaction among the users can be regarded as providing meaning and guiding the user and evaluating how intensely involved they wish to be. The above-mentioned authors delineated social engagement interaction as the communication among users through social media.

Di Gangi and Wasko (2016) argue that this theory consists of two critical factors that form the user experience derived from the social interaction and the experience derived from the technical features. In this regard, it was further argued that technical features provide the users with the tools to enable interactions and impact the magnitude and scope of benefits for individual users and the organisation. Lubinga and Baloyi (2019) stated that most social media platforms were developed to foster social interaction between family and friends, and those other members of communities who are met, followed, liked and socialised online.

The above-mentioned authors further suggested that the main purpose of social media has changed, with organisations and political parties realising the potential use of social media. In this regard, social media can be considered as a communication tool that fosters social justice reform during elections. As stated in the introduction, social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook can help to bring social benefits, such as virtual connectedness that are empowering, fruitful and a catalyst for collaborations and positive change. Moreover, the author states that social media can play a vital role in alleviating loneliness, a grave problem of the modern human,

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by providing platforms where people connect and meet in real life (Lackovic, 2020). Thus, this clearly shows that social media plays a significant role in bringing social justice reform to society as it promotes user engagement and political participation.

Adopted methodology

Research methodology indicates the logic of development of the process within which the research is conducted (Haradhan, 2017). This study is non-empirical in nature and qualitatively it has explored the impact of social media in creating social justice reform in South African politics during election campaigns. According to Haradhan (2018), the purpose of qualitative

research is to describe and interpret issues or phenomena systematically to generate new concepts and theories. Data for this study was obtained from the previous literature. Specifically, researchers selected data from journal articles, organisation reports, online sources, dissertations, and theses ranging between 2006 and 2021. Before the data was used in this study, the researchers checked the authenticity of the sources consulted.

The descriptive analysis method was utilised in this study to analyse collected data. The researchers have chosen this method because it attempts to examine the situations to describe the norm as emphasised by Baha (2016). This method was used to explore how social media platforms are used to create social justice reform during election campaigns in South Africa. As put forth by Baha (2016), the descriptive analysis describes what exists and tries to pave the ground for finding new facts and it includes gathering data related to situations or experiences and then organising, tabulating, depicting and describing the outcome.

Findings and discussion

The findings of this study are based on, firstly, the impact of social media in creating social justice reform during election campaigns; secondly, the influence of social media in voters' behaviour during the political election campaigns; and lastly, strategies that political parties can employ to enhance their political communication strategies during elections.

In this study, it was discovered that social media platforms have an impact on creating social justice reform during election campaigns. Among many impacts, researchers revealed that social media platforms encourage political discourse and allow candidates and elected officials to not only communicate with but interact with voters in numbers. Also, the study found that social media platforms have the power to influence voters to support political parties during elections. Furthermore, the study discovered that social media can deliver effectively coordinated political actions and managed to influence and promote political participation and social movement, as supported by Dabula (2016).

Moreover, the study discovered that Facebook and Twitter are more appropriate for conveying and imparting meaningful, profound and richer information because of their speed and cost-effectiveness. Most importantly, the study found that social media platforms can contribute to creating socially and politically supportive networks, including the ones advocating social justice reform. In terms of voter behaviour, the study discovered that voters' behaviour and decisions are associated and driven by

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countless environmental dynamics which include the image of political party and leader, political party partisanship, policies and performance, among others.

In this regard, the study also found that social media plays a significant role in public awareness regarding candidates' positions, plans and campaign manifestos. Moreover, it was also revealed in the study that social media usage may lead to engagement by providing political information and increasing political discourse and participation among the voters. The study discovered that political parties such as the ANC, DA and EFF, among others have adopted social media platforms as the arena for political engagement and social justice reform. More so, most of the literature consulted revealed that for political parties to successfully take charge and enjoy the benefits offered by these platforms, parties need to use social media effectively to gain trust and loyalty from the voters. The study also found that social media plays a vital role in enhancing political education. Therefore, it was also established in this study that political parties need to embrace the advancement of technology and ensure that they have active social media platforms as suggested by Malherbe (2015).

In the literature consulted, it was also found that political parties need to consider establishing effective public relations that will advance and promote election campaigns and digital communication strategies. This study also found that most politicians use social media not only for engagement online but rather to increase their offline participation in political events.

Conclusion, recommendations and limitations of the study

This paper has explored how social media platforms create social justice reform in the South African political sphere during election campaigns. As such, social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter were found to be the most used mediums of communication by political parties in advancing their election campaigns and promoting social justice reform. In support of the above-mentioned statement, most researchers cited in this study concur that social media can make a difference in the South African political sphere. Furthermore, it was discovered in this study that social media platforms have a massive impact on promoting political change and creating social justice reform in society.

Thus, to create strong social justice reform through social media in the South African political landscape during election campaigns, the study recommends the following:
• Political parties should positively use social media to develop alternative engagements towards the creation of social justice reform in the political sphere, especially during elections. This could be possible if political parties embrace and improve their digital communication strategies through running dedicated social media channels such as Twitter, Facebook, among others;
• To fully comprehend and use social media platforms effectively, public relations practitioners for political parties need to advance their skills by attending courses such as digital marketing and multimedia;
• Public relations practitioners need to prioritise social media as an integral part of their communication planning and strategy as most people are exposed to digital technologies. Consequently, this could assist in advancing the image of political parties and increase voters' turnout during elections;

- All political parties need to ensure that they develop social media programmes to train their members to utilise social media effectively. Additionally, the programmes should also help members of political parties to report hate speech or negative comments that may tarnish the image of their respective political parties;
- Political parties should benchmark with established political systems in developed countries to use social media platforms in a way that promotes social justice reform.

As indicated in the abstract, this study was conducted to propose strategies that political parties can employ to enhance their political communication strategies on social media platforms during political campaign elections and to promote social justice reform in South Africa. However, the study was limited to the current desktop literature on social justice reform in the South African political sphere. Since South Africa is still battling with inequality and the digital divide, it is significant that access to the internet and political education should be prioritised to allow every citizen to have a voice in a democratic state. Thus, there is limited literature in this field, therefore there is a need for researchers to continue conducting more studies on social media and social justice reform to promote political participation and political engagement and to strengthen growing democracy in South Africa.

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