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The phantom effect of social media: the impact of no "likes" on politicians' responsiveness to public opinion

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ABSTRACT

Popularity metrics, such as "likes" are key features in social media (SM). In the political sphere, politicians use popularity metrics as indicators of the extent to which opinions and agendas are widely held by the public. However, popularity metrics have an inherent potential to increase rapidly, making today's not-so-popular content tomorrow's potential hit. Hence the lack of popularity indices or their low values may not indicate the full popularity potential of any specific SM content. This is crucial for politicians as they aim to identify and respond to popular public opinions in their constant effort to boost and maintain public support. Considering SM's ever-growing role in politics, and the significant portion of SM content with no popularity metrics, exploring politicians' responsiveness to public opinion in SM with and without popularity metrics may shed light on contemporary democratic process and their impact on representation and policy making. Based on Prospect Theory of choice under uncertainty, and the lack of an anchor to base their perception of popularity on, we claim that politicians will be more responsive to public opinion content without "likes" than with "likes." Findings of a survey-experiment of 100 Israeli politicians support this claim. Possible implications are discussed.

KEYWORDS

Public opinion; Social media; Popularity metrics; Representation; Responsiveness; Facebook

Responsiveness to public opinion and social media

Responsiveness to public opinion is one of the pillars of normative democratic theory (Dahl, 1956). Scholars agree that responsiveness to public opinion is mostly motivated by strategic considerations of politicians seeking to guarantee the future of their public careers (i.e., reelection), and to maximize their electoral support (Stimson, Mackuen, & Erikson, 1995). Social media (SM) has created new opportunities for better responsiveness, as it enables both the public to voice and convey its will to its elected officials, and enables the elected officials to monitor the preferences of the public (Freelon, McIlwain, & Clark, 2018; McGregor, 2020; Mergel, 2016).

The accuracy and authenticity of SM in reflecting public opinion and agendas, is often challenged (Kraft, Krupnikov, Milita, Ryan, & Soroka, 2020; Lazer et al., 2018). Yet, studies have confirmed congruency between SM expressed public opinion and opinion polls (O'Connor, Balasubramanyan, Routledge, & Smith, 2010). More importantly, SM-expressed opinions were found to be perceived by political figures as indicative of public opinion (Anstead & O'Loughlin, 2015; Serazio, 2015) and research has found supporting evidence for politician's responsiveness to and prioritization of social-media-expressed public preferences and issues (Barberá et al., 2019).

One of SM's main features, and presumably one of its persuasive ones, are popularity metrics, e.g., "likes," "comments," "shares" and "friends" (Kim, 2018; Waddell, 2018). They indicate the distribution and/or social (dis/)endorsement of specific sites, people and content, and define the behavioral norms and dynamics of SM users (van Dijck & Poell, 2013). Politicians use popularity metrics as indicators of the extent to which opinions and agendas are widely held (Keller & Kleinen-von Königslöw, 2018). However, a significant part of SM content, in various fields and contexts, does not receive and display any popularity indicators (Gruss, Abrahams, Song, Berry, & Al-Daihani, 2020; Gutiérrez-Martín & Torrego-González, 2018; Li & Xie, 2020), and in some cases the latter are accumulated only after a certain period of time (Aldous, An, & Jansen, 2019; Massey et al., 2020).

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As politicians constantly aim to identify and respond to contemporary popular public opinions in their effort to boost and maintain public support (Jacobs & Shapiro, 2000; Stimson et al., 1995), they are always on the lookout for sensing and adopting upcoming trends and opinions. Therefore, a politician's encounter with SM content that has no-"likes", may not necessarily be interpreted as unpopular, but rather as not yet indicative of the true potential popularity it may gain.

Previous research on the effect of low vs high popularity metrics is abundant, and evidence indicate a stronger persuasive or engagementenhancing effect for high popularity metrics under certain conditions compared to low ones (Haim, Kümpel, & Brosius, 2018; Luzsa & Mayr, 2021). However, the existing work on the effect of popularity metrics on viewers' persuasion or engagement focuses mainly on the field of marketing and e-commerce (Haim et al., 2018). In addition, though some studies examine the effect of low vs high popularity metrics on perceptions of public opinion, they do so for perceptions held by members of the public and not by politicians (e.g., Luzsa & Mayr, 2021). Furthermore, studies that investigate the effect of no-popularity metrics (e.g., zero "likes") are scarce and usually focus on the publishers' affect and response, but not on those of the viewers (e.g., Reich, Schneider, & Heling, 2018).

The way viewers' and particularly politicians, perceive SM with no-popularity metrics, is of particular importance since behavioral psychology literature suggests that the lack of popularity metrics may have a different effect than that of low and high ones. The anchoring heuristic (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974), one of the most robust and investigated cognitive biases (Teovanović, 2019), relates to the "influence on decision makers to make judgments that are biased toward an initially presented value" (Furnham & Boo, 2011, p. 35). That is, when humans are presented with a preliminary (anchoring) piece of information they tend to rely on it to greater extent than on information that may be presented to them later on, before making a decision. In the context of SM, popularity metrics may act as anchors for the perceived popularity of specific content, and thereby affect the way the latter is perceived and valued. When

popularity metrics are not presented, one lacks the anchoring value and therefore struggles to assess the current or prospected popularity of the content, particularly given their accumulating nature. In other words, the lack of a specific value of popularity metrics may enhance uncertainties regarding the content's popularity.

These above-mentioned gaps in the literature, combined with the widespread presence of SM content with zero popularity metrics and politicians' heightened attention to public opinion trends, stress the need to explore the effect SM content with no popularity metrics may have on politicians' perceptions and responses.

This need is further stressed given Facebook's, the largest and most popular SM platform worldwide (Statista, 2019), recently available "likeshiding" option in its user interface properties, which can make a post with a million "likes" seem as publicly supported and popular as a post with a single "like."¹

While some popularity metrics, such as the number of comments a post receives, may indicate the number of people who chose to respond to the message positively or negatively, they do not indicate the level of popular support the posted message received as the "likes" count does. In other words, the "likes" count provides a quick and straightforward indicator of popularity and support of the post's content. Since there is no "Dislike" button on Facebook, any inference regarding the extent of opposition to the post's content could only be achieved by an in-depth analysis of the comments the post received. Hence, the ambiguous situation Facebook's "likes"-hiding feature may generate, is similar to the uncertainty of potential support content with currently no-"likes" may eventually gain.

SM has been shown to play a central role in the political arena as it influences political attitudes, shapes public opinion and agendas and, as mentioned above, is often used by politicians as a means to assess public opinion and to communicate with the public (Barberá et al., 2019; Klein & Robison, 2020; Kraft et al., 2020). Therefore, uncertainty regarding the prevalence and support of specific opinions, which may be caused either by a no-"likes" or a hiding-"likes" count content that was published by the public, may impact the political sphere, and particularly responsiveness to public opinion dynamics and issue priorities.

Blindfolded politicians will choose the safe bet

Since popularity metrics, and particularly "likes," provide politicians with indications as to the acceptance of the advocated message (Kalsnes, Olof Larsson, & Enli, 2017; Kelm, 2020), once hidden or non-existent (i.e. a situation which may be interpreted as one in which "likes" have yet to be accumulated), as mentioned above, politicians will not be able to assess the level of support for the specific issue and thus the appropriateness of a specific response to it, enhancing feelings of uncertainty. We harness Prospect Theory (PT; Kahneman & Tversky, 1979; Tversky & Kahneman, 1992), a seminal theory of psychology of choice in behavioral economics, to predict politicians' behavior in this situation. PT asserts that people make their decisions based on the relative prospected gains and losses they attribute to their alternative actions, and not based on the absolute outcomes they foresee for their choices. That is, when forced to make a decision under uncertainty, people will consider the relative loss, compared to the relative gain entailed in each of the behavioral alternatives they face. A main principal in PT is *loss aversion*, which regards the human tendency to prefer avoiding losses over gaining equal benefits. Therefore, according to the PT, when faced with a risky behavioral choice, individuals will be more loss-minimizing oriented than gainmaximizing oriented (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979; Tversky & Kahneman, 1992). That is, they will prefer the modest but safer bet than the ambitious but risky one.

When a politician is exposed to SM content with high levels of popularity and support (i.e., "likes") he/she is more likely to adopt and prioritize the opinions and issues presented in this content to his/her agenda, in an attempt to respond to the public's will and gain more popular support. In this case, ignoring a popular opinion may cost the politician significant electoral support. On the other hand, when a politician is exposed to SM content with little support, he/she is more likely to ignore it or to minimize his/her response, as it may not reflect the will of many constituents and acting

upon it may not benefit him/her. It should be noted that a low number of "likes" does not represent lack of support in terms of opposition to the posted content, but rather a public indifference or low levels of public engagement (Kalsnes et al., 2017; Kelm, 2020). Prioritizing an opinion or an issue with little popularity will not necessarily harm the politician, as the specific issue may not be of interest to many people and therefore the politician's response may go unnoticed. However, when a politician is exposed to sans-"likes" SM content, he/she can attribute either high or low levels of popular support to the content, either current or potential, and thus is faced with two main behavioral alternatives, i.e. to adopt/prioritize the issue to his/her agenda or to ignore it and leave it at its current position (or lack of such) in his/her agenda. When considering the potential outcomes of these uncertain situations, it is clear that the biggest loss will be caused by ignoring a popularly-supported SM content, and therefore missing the opportunity to strengthen his/her popular support. This loss is likely to be perceived as far greater than the one prospected form complying with non-popularlysupported opinions and issues, and it will be the risk the politician will try to minimize (See Figure 1). Hence, we hypothesized that SMexpressed public opinion without a numerical value of "likes" will have a stronger effect on politicians' responsiveness, as represented by his/her agenda priorities, than SM-expressed public opinion with "likes."

Method and procedure

We deployed an experimental approach in order to isolate the effect of the popularity metrics and to obtain more authentic results (see Figure 2). We randomly sampled 34 out of 255 (13.3%) municipalities in Israel and e-mailed our surveyexperiment to all 504 councilors in these municipalities (out of the 2,564 acting councilors in the country, i.e., 19.6%). We collected data over 12 months, completing the data collection in December 2019, three months after the first reports on Facebook's intention to hide the "likes" counts, but prior to its actual implementation in Israel^{1,2} 100 politicians completed our survey (a response rate of 19.84%), a sample size that although modest,



Figure 1. Potential losses and gains for ignoring and complying with a post without a "likes" count.



Figure 2. Illustration of the experimental procedure (6 steps).

is often used in studies examining media-affected attitudes and behavior (e.g., Sülflow, Schäfer, & Winter, 2019).

Inspired by studies on media-types effects and popularity metrics effects (e.g., Cho, Shen, & Peng, 2020; Waddell, 2018) and upon an ethics committee approval (#435/18) of the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Haifa, participants underwent an online survey-experiment exposed to one of three randomly allocated conditions – two conditions in which a Facebook post was presented to them, one with and one without popularity metrics ("likes"; N = 32; N = 31, respectively), and a mass media condition (newspaper report; N = 37), which was meant to control for cross-channel responsiveness level tendencies (Sevenans, 2018). In the "likes" condition, the portrayed number of "likes" was 57 which is the average number of "likes" municipal politicians received on their posts in the year which preceded the study. In the sans-"likes" condition the "likes" area was removed, and designed as a post with zero "likes," that is without any numeric or graphic indication of "likes." A manipulation check performed after the data collection, indicated that the sans-"likes" condition may have been perceived both as a post with no "likes" or as a post with an unknown number of "likes". A convenience sample of 120 Facebook users was presented with a post with

similar features to the ones presented in the sans-"likes" condition, and were asked to report whether the post had zero "likes" or whether it was impossible to infer the number of "likes" it had received. 60% of the respondents replied it was impossible to know the number of "likes" and 40% replied that the post had zero "likes". A significance test showed that this result was significantly different than a "chance" response (Z = 2.1; p < .05; CI[0.51-0.69]). While this may not fully validate our intended manipulation, it supports our assumption regarding the uncertainty effect that posts with no "likes" may induce. Before the participants were exposed to one of the experimental conditions and following Thomas, McGarty, Reese, Berndsen, and Bliuc's (2016) technique for measuring perceived issue saliency, participants were presented with a list of 5 policy domains which are under municipal government responsibility in Israel (education, health, infrastructure, welfare and sports) and were asked to rate them according to their perceived importance to them, from least to most important. This was considered as the participants' baseline agenda priorities. Then, each participant was presented with content regarding public opinion on a policy issue

in the domain he/she rated in the 5th place, in a visual display which simulates the specific condition he/she was assigned to. The presented issues were of a large public consensus and not controversial ones, as we aimed to neutralize any issue biases. The texts in all experimental conditions were identical aside for minor styling adjustment for newspaper/Facebook post (see Figure 3). Then, participants were presented with several deflective questions regarding their perceptions about their responsiveness to public opinion and different public opinion channels. Next, participants were asked to re-grade the same policy domains presented to them prior to the manipulation. The politician's change in agenda priorities was derived from the change in the rating of the domain that was previously rated as the least important policy domain, i.e., a score ranging from 0-4 (with 0 indicating no change in priority and 4 indicating that the pre-manipulation least important domain was rated as most important after the manipulation). Our focus on the least important domain enabled the maximal range of change in our dependent variable. The survey was concluded with questions regarding SM use-profile and demographics.

Figure 3. The manipulations presented to participants who rated Welfare as the least important policy domain, in the three conditions (translated from Hebrew). Note: On the right a Facebook post without popularity metrics. In the middle a Facebook post with popularity metrics. On the left a local newspaper report (shown to the control group).

Results

Results indicated that 20% of all participants changed their agendas' priorities and promoted the domain presented to them in the experiment. Most of the participants (75%) who changed their agendas, did so by one level, i.e., they upgraded the domain they initially rated least important (5th place) to be secondleast important (4th place). Hence, we transformed our dependent variable into a dichotomous one: either the presented domain was promoted in the participant's agenda or not. A Chi-Square test revealed a significant difference between the groups in terms of such promoted prioritization of the target domain ($\chi^2_{(2)} = 6.98$; p < .05). 35.5% of the sans-"likes" condition participants upgraded the priority of the target domain in their agendas, while only 15.6% in the "likes" condition and 10.8% in the newspaper control condition did the same. The difference between the sans-"likes" group and the "likes" group was significant (χ^2 (1) = 3.28; p < .05). The difference between the sans-"likes" group and the control group (newspaper report) was also significant ($\chi^2_{(1)} = 5.97$; p < .05) and the difference between the "likes" group and the control group (newspaper report) was not significant $(\chi^2_{(1)} = 0.35; p = N.S.)$. These findings support our hypothesis. Politicians who were presented with public opinion without popularity metrics were more responsive to public opinion than politicians who saw public opinion with popularity metrics.

In order to make sure the above results could not be explained by demographic or other SM related variables and the policy domain by which the experiment was operationalized, we conducted a logistic

Table 1. Logistic regression with responsiveness (whether there was a change in agenda or not) as the dependent variable.

	В	SE	Exp(B)
Intercept	.543	2.229	1.721
Gender	177	.874	.838
Age	011	.033	.989
Tenure	079	.060	.924
MASS MEDIA ¹	114	.847	.893
Social Media ²	670	1.001	.512
Health v. Sports	1.870*	.818	6.487
Infrastructure v. Sports	2.969	1.528	19.463
Welfare v. Sports	.983	1.566	2.672
Newspaper v. SM without "likes"	-1.754*	.890	.173
SM with likes v. SM without "likes"	-1.620*	.938	.198

Reference group for experimental cell: SM without "likes"; Reference group for selected policy domain: Sports; the "Education" category was not selected by the participants and hence was not included in the analysis; *p < 0.05; ¹ A variable indicating if the respondent uses mass media as a method to understand public opinion; ² A variable indicating if the respondent uses SM as a method to understand public opinion.

regression in which we included control variables (age, gender, tenure in office, use extent of social and mass media to infer public opinion), as well as the type of policy domain in which the manipulation was applied (according to the participants' selection), in addition to the manipulation indicators (Table 1). None of the control variables were found to be related to the change in agenda priorities, except for the "health" domain. In comparison to the "sports" domain, public opinion on health issues provoked more responsiveness (i.e. an upscale change in agenda prioritization). Yet, above and beyond all these control variables, the variable indicating whether the respondents participated in the newspaper condition vs. the SM without "likes" condition was significantly different than zero (b = -1.75, SE = 0.89, p < .05), as well as the variable indicating whether the respondents participated in the SM with "likes" condition vs the SM without "likes" condition (b = -1.62, SE = 0.94, p < .05). The odds of a politician changing his/her agenda after being exposed to a SM message with "likes" or to a newspaper article is 0.20 and 0.17 times (respectively) lower than after being exposed to the same message in SM without "likes."

Discussion and conclusion

Although our manipulation recorded only mild changes in reported agenda priorities, it revealed a stronger effect of SM without popularity metrics on politicians' agendas, compared to SM with popularity metrics, and mass media. It seems that without a number serving as a popularity "anchor" (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974), SM content generates uncertainties regarding the estimated popularity of the post. In addition, our findings indicate that in accordance with PT (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979; Tversky & Kahneman, 1992), politicians prefer taking the risk of responding to opinions that may have little public support (or extensive public indifference), than not responding to opinions that may be widely supported. They do so by prioritizing to a greater extent SM-expressed public opinion which represents either no public support or an unknown extent of public support. This could indicate a "Phantom effect" of SM on politicians, in which they rather assume current or prospected high and not average or low popularity to SM

content, even compared to mass media (the newspaper report experimental cell). It should be noted that the "age" of the post, i.e. the time that passed since its publication, may affect politicians' uncertainty regarding the (potential) popularity of its content. The "older" a post is, the less uncertain politicians are likely to be, since "old" posts with little or no "likes" are less likely to gain significant additional support in the future as time goes by (Massey et al., 2020; Zhang, 2018). Since politicians are familiar with "social media logic" and affordances (Jost, 2022), they may perceive such posts as if their popularity has been fully exhausted, leaving less room for popularity uncertainty. While this study does not control for the "age" of the posts, its results indicate that the "Phantom effect" of posts with no "likes" is still very much present, regardless of the perceived "age" of these posts.

Despite methodological limitations, such as a single country sample and a small sample size, the findings of this study should be seriously considered, given the prominent role of SM in politicians' actions, the significant portion of SM content with no popularity metrics, and the new option to hide posts "likes" numbers. According to our results, if and when politicians encounter a post with no or unknown "likes" number with political orientation (but not only), they may be more responsive to them, compared to posts with "likes" count. In this scenario, they are likely to be equally persuaded by and responsive to content that represents the opinion of the minority, or even a single person, or by a massively supported content. This result could presumably challenge the democratic principles of representation by producing policy that does not represent the will of the public. The fact that the persuasive effect of no-"likes" was not associated with any of the examined control variables, may hint to a cross-sectional trend once the "likes" are indeed absent and should be given strong consideration.

As the possibilities for hiding and manipulating popularity metrics expand, it is not clear whether politicians will keep considering SM-expressed public opinion or will they eventually disregard it as being unrepresentative of public opinion. Will they keep favoring sans-"likes" content over posts with popularity indicators? Will Facebook reinforce its prominent presence in the political sphere, or will it lose its dominance? While these questions remain to be answered, the effect of the "likes uncertainty" is evident, to some extent, from this study. Future research should investigate the effect of popularity metrics of politicians in other SM platforms, in different electoral systems and cultures.

Notes

- 1. https://edition.cnn.com/2021/05/26/tech/facebookinstagram-hiding-likes/index.html.
- 2. https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/26/technology/face book-hidden-likes.html.

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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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