

Online and Offline Networks and Voting Decisions: The Case of Egypt's Post Revolution Parliamentary Elections

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1. Introduction

Egypt's revolution has been labeled a "social media revolution", with a powerful role accredited to Facebook and Twitter in particular. While online networks have been central in the context of understanding the Egyptian revolution, the sphere of offline "on-the-ground networks" of families and peers has received less attention. Studying these networks is important in order to place the role of online networks in perspective and provide a balanced mapping of the different drivers and their function in information sharing, decision-making and mobilization in Egypt.

This article takes the November 2011 parliamentary elections as a case study to assess the relative role of online and offline networks in shaping political decisions in Egypt. The purpose is to look deeper into the relative influence and ranking of the different networks in shaping the voting decision and choice, and assess the size, time and nature of interaction in each of the respective networks. The article does not suggest an exact parallel mapping of discourse between Egypt's revolution and elections.

Focusing on Facebook and Twitter as examples of online networks, I undertake fieldwork to analyze their relative role in comparison to offline networks such as family and friends. While I acknowledge the seminal role of the Internet in promoting political action, I argue for the existence of an overall public sphere in Egypt in which a confluence of both online and offline variables shape decisions - voting in this case. Indeed, online networks do not emerge out of a vacuum but, rather, out of a "pattern of life" that could not be considered independently of the socio-cultural localities that shaped them (Castells 2004: xvii). Hence it is imperative to study online and offline networks as correlated entities as well as the dynamics that bind them.

2. Networks and Voting: Egypt's Parliamentary Elections

2.1. Fieldwork Methodology

The study relies on fieldwork surveys conducted in 5 governorates (Cairo, Giza, Suez, Aswan and Alexandria). A total of 1025 valid responses were collected using a stratified randomized sampling method in order to capture responses representative of the country. Sampling within governorates was stratified to capture areas representative of class lines; a high income, a middle income and low-income area. Implementation in each governorate was undertaken at equal points before the election date between November 2011 and January 2012.

Out of the total sample, 40 percent were Internet users. This comes in line with figures

for Internet penetration in Egypt, standing at 35.7 percent in December 2011 (MCIT Portal 2011) (Table 1). The sample age distribution varied between 18 and above 65, with 40 percent of the respondents below 30 years of age. This to some extent reflects the actual population distribution by age in Egypt, where an estimated 60 percent of the population is below 30 years of age in 2012 (US Census Bureau 2012).

While the actual gender distribution in Egypt is 53 percent male and 47 percent female, the gender distribution of the sample (55.32 percent male and 44.68 percent female) is slightly biased in favor of male respondents. This bias is explained by a higher rejection rate from female respondents on the street due to security concerns.

Offline networks include family, friends, work, neighbors and other physical group affiliations. Facebook and Twitter were taken as examples of online networks as they are the most widely cited as drivers of collective action in Egypt. Questions related to Youtube's influence were also included.

2.2. Findings

Networks Influence on Voting Decisions

On the whole, figures suggest that physical networks were significantly more influential than digital networks in shaping voting decisions. As illustrated in Figure 1, results suggest that the family unit was significantly influential on respondents. Almost 55 percent of the sample identified the family as the network that *best represented* their thoughts about politics, with "friends" next at near 20 percent. Similarly, more than 50 percent of respondents indicated that the family is the network where they discussed politics the most, that helped them most in their decision on whether to vote, and that influenced their choice of representative. Other physical networks came next in ranking (Figure 1).

In comparison, the influence of online networks was limited. Of the surveyed sample, only 2.2 percent stated that "Facebook" was the network that *best represented* their thoughts about politics. Similarly, only 2.73 percent of the full sample cited Facebook as influential in their decision on whether to vote or abstain. Additionally, only 1.5 percent of respondents indicated that Facebook was the network most influential in their choice of representative. None of the respondents cited Twitter in any of these cases (Figure 1).

However, the impact of online networks, and Facebook in particular, becomes a little more pronounced when responses are measured against the subsample of Internet users. Of the Internet users subsample more than 12 percent stated that Facebook was their preferred means for political discussion, more than 6 percent cited Facebook as the network where they discussed politics the most, and almost 7 percent said that Facebook was the network that helped most in their decision on whether to vote or abstain. A similar 6 percent of Internet users cited Facebook as the network that best represented their thoughts about politics (Table 2). Figures for Twitter were negligible confirming that Facebook was more predominant in Egypt.

Looking at the time spent on offline and online networks also highlights correlations and differences in their impact on political perception. A comparison of the family and Facebook networks shows similar patterns of weekly time spent in each. Yet, while the number of Facebook friends is typically larger than the number of family members, the family unit still has a stronger impact on decision-making. Thus, size and effect in this case are not positively related.

The results therefore suggest that physical networks and especially the family are where politics are discussed the most, and clearly show as most influential in terms of affecting the decision to vote and the voting choice¹. Indeed, the significance of physical networks is emphasized when considering that almost 87 percent of the sample cited the “face to face” method as the top preferred means for discussing politics (Figure 2). Furthermore, “face to face” interaction was the preferred means of discussion for 87.5 percent of the sub sample of Internet users, as well as the non-Internet users (93%) (Figure 3). This comes in sharp contrast to the 5 percent of respondents who preferred Facebook. Yet, this small mass of Facebook advocates, is not insignificant as it represents 12% of the sub sample of Internet users and nearly 17% of the sub sample of Facebook users (Table 2).

Based on the above, I conclude that physical networks form the strongest force behind shaping public discourse for this sample, at least as viewed in the case of these parliamentary elections. Offline networks come out as highly influential on decision-making. The importance of identifying with members of family, the notion of identity construction in a given network and the impact of this on decision-making processes are certainly worth further probing.

Pervasiveness of Digital Networks: Tools of a small segment and political elitism

The prevalence of offline networks can be attributed to a number of factors that contribute to shaping Egyptian society and, in turn, voters’ political behavior. Indeed, low literacy levels and limited access to the Internet reflect on a lower Internet penetration rate, standing at the time of this survey at 36 percent of the country’s large population of 85 million people (Table 1). This makes the Internet a tool less pervasive than in countries with higher literacy and penetration rates. Moreover, social class possibly plays a part in the behavior of Internet users, who are on the most part a small segment of the population that are mainly educated and have white-collar jobs.

Looking in depth at the sample, Facebook users represented more than 70 percent of the sub sample of Internet users (Table 1). This is in line with published figure for Facebook users in Egypt in December 2011 standing at 67.6 percent of Internet users in the country

¹ These results did not change much when viewed in terms of subsamples of Internet versus non-Internet users.

(Social Bakers 2012). Furthermore, while Facebook users represented 29 percent of the total sample, the figure for Twitter users was a mere 3 percent. The total number of Twitter users in Egypt in 2012 was estimated to be 215,000 (Dubai School of Government 2012). Youtube users represented 67 percent of the Internet subsample and 27 percent of the total sample.

Facebook, Twitter and Youtube are not in any way a majority of the survey sample, nor do they form the bulk of the population of Egypt. Still, a good part of their use of digital tools is directed to political purposes. For example, 57 percent of Youtube use within the sample was dedicated to watching political debates and political talk shows as well as following political campaigns (Figure 4). Figure 5 shows how the usage of Facebook and Twitter remains to be mostly politicized in nature. However, within the political content found on Facebook and Twitter, results show that 73% of Facebook use and 68% of Twitter use was directed to *receiving* material while less than 30% of Facebook use and 28% of Twitter use was directed to *generating original political material* (Figure 5). Given such prevalent passive use of these digital platforms, there is no evidence in this particular sample of the presence of a powerful digital political elite, in the sense of originating material that triggers political action.

This poses the need to undergo extended research to test for the presence of a networked public sphere as depicted by Benkler (2006), where individuals become *actively* engaged in political debate and organization as opposed to being passive receivers of information. Nevertheless, what remains is the reproduction of online content within digital networks, which amplifies a particular message and has wider resonance amongst essentially larger circles. This is comparable to a more limited impact of reproducing information offline within the relatively narrower circle of family and/or friends, which brings up the need to further probe the inherently different architecture of online and offline networks and analyze the subsequent impact of these differences.

Online/Offline?

This work provides preliminary insights with regards to the interface between the digital and physical spheres and the need to further probe the dynamics of interaction between the two. In the present context, I undertook a preliminary exercise to explore what activities were solely taking place online, and whether they informed offline political action. Of the subsample of Facebook users, one third were members of groups that existed only online (Figure 6). A little over 40 percent of Facebook users indicated that the Facebook groups they belonged to influenced their political participation (Figure 7). A similar cluster (40 percent) of Facebook users indicated they were interested in the political messages that reached them through Facebook groups (Figure 8). When asked about the groups they belonged to, more than a quarter (28 percent) identified the famous 'Kolena Khaled Said' group as the top group followed by 'Shabab Al Thawra' or youth of the revolution (9.7 percent), then 6 April, the group representing the April 6th movement (6.5 percent). All of these groups have a political orientation (Figure 9). Additionally, 40 percent of Facebook users indicated that membership in these groups

influenced their decision to participate in the elections (Figure 7).

The above points to some evidence in terms of online sphere informing offline activity, at least in this particular case. In all cases and as mentioned earlier, respondents including Internet users preferred to engage in face-to-face communication. While we have evidence of an impact of a blend of the online and offline worlds, there is a need for further work to unpack the intricate dynamics of interaction between the two.

3. Conclusion

The present research relies on fieldwork in five Egyptian governorates to gauge the impact of offline and online networks in shaping voting decisions in Egypt's parliamentary elections in the fall of 2011. Following the escalated interest in the impact of social media on Egypt's January 25 revolution, this experiment is undertaken to test for an impact of offline networks, which are quite often ignored in the literature. More importantly, this study attempts at opening the door before the intricate dynamics between the online and the offline world and the corresponding informal hierarchies that eventually affect decision-making.

Based on this, I find a significant role played by physical offline networks within the overall public sphere. In particular, the family unit stands out as a primary driver of decision-making, at least for this sample. The survey results show that physical networks are relatively more influential than digital networks in shaping voting decisions. While the size of digital networks for the individual may be bigger than offline networks, the extent of pervasiveness of the Internet as a medium, and of Facebook and Twitter as platforms is still relatively limited, especially when compared with an obvious network, the family, followed by the extended family and friends. This may be expected, as Egypt is a developing country with limited connectivity and low literacy levels.

Nevertheless, a politicized sphere still exists in digital networks, despite its relatively small size. This is a mass that has undoubtedly played a role in Egypt's revolution, and that stands to grow and expand. Of particular importance is the role of digital networks in amplifying political messages and the multiplier effect gained from the networking nature of digital platforms.

As such, this study does not attempt to resolve around the question that one form of network is prevalent and hence the other is irrelevant, but acknowledges that both produce a confluence of effects. Indeed, the study does find parallel uses of online social media by respondents to those of offline networks. The study also finds that unlike offline networks, most respondents' uses of online networks are political in nature, which probes the necessity of zooming into these networks and studying their connection to the offline world. The nature of the study's findings, therefore, points towards the need to shift from whether and how much digital networks influence mobilization and contribute to the formation of a networked public sphere, to simply *how*.

It is also important to put these quantitative findings into a qualitatively analyzed political context, which can be the scope of further studies. The parliamentary elections of 2011 carried some of the political culture of the past, which includes the triumph of some tribal affinities in certain parts of the country and the luring of voters with religious messages across the board. More specific to these elections is an ongoing heavy political polarization particularly in urban centers between secular and religious forces. This polarization has informed voters to a certain extent and the prevalence of identity politics in the elections is an arena where offline networks can be considered a main player.

As much as it provides preliminary answers, this survey contributes to a series of critical questions and issues that need further scholarly investigation. These issues include how offline and online networks have different and comparable impact in divisive questions of identity politics (e.g. elections) as opposed to uniting issues such as demanding social justice (e.g. call for revolution). The survey opens the door for further research to identify methodologies specifically aimed at measuring the dynamics of decision-making processes in the highly mixed and integrated arenas of mass-mediated information, networked public sphere and inter-personal communication.

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Figure 8: Interest in political messages through Facebook groups

Figure 9: Facebook groups ranked by size (based on interviewees membership)

Table 1: Internet and Facebook users: Egypt and Research Sample (December 2011)

	Number	As a percent of total population	As a percent of Internet users
Total Population (Egypt)	85,000,000		
Internet Users* (Egypt)	30,354,000	35.70%	
Facebook Users** (Egypt)	9,544,400	14.30%	67.61%

	Number	As a percent of total sample	As a percent of Internet users in sample
Total sample	1025		
Internet Users (within the sample)	412	40.20%	
Facebook Users (within the sample)	295	28.78%	71.60%

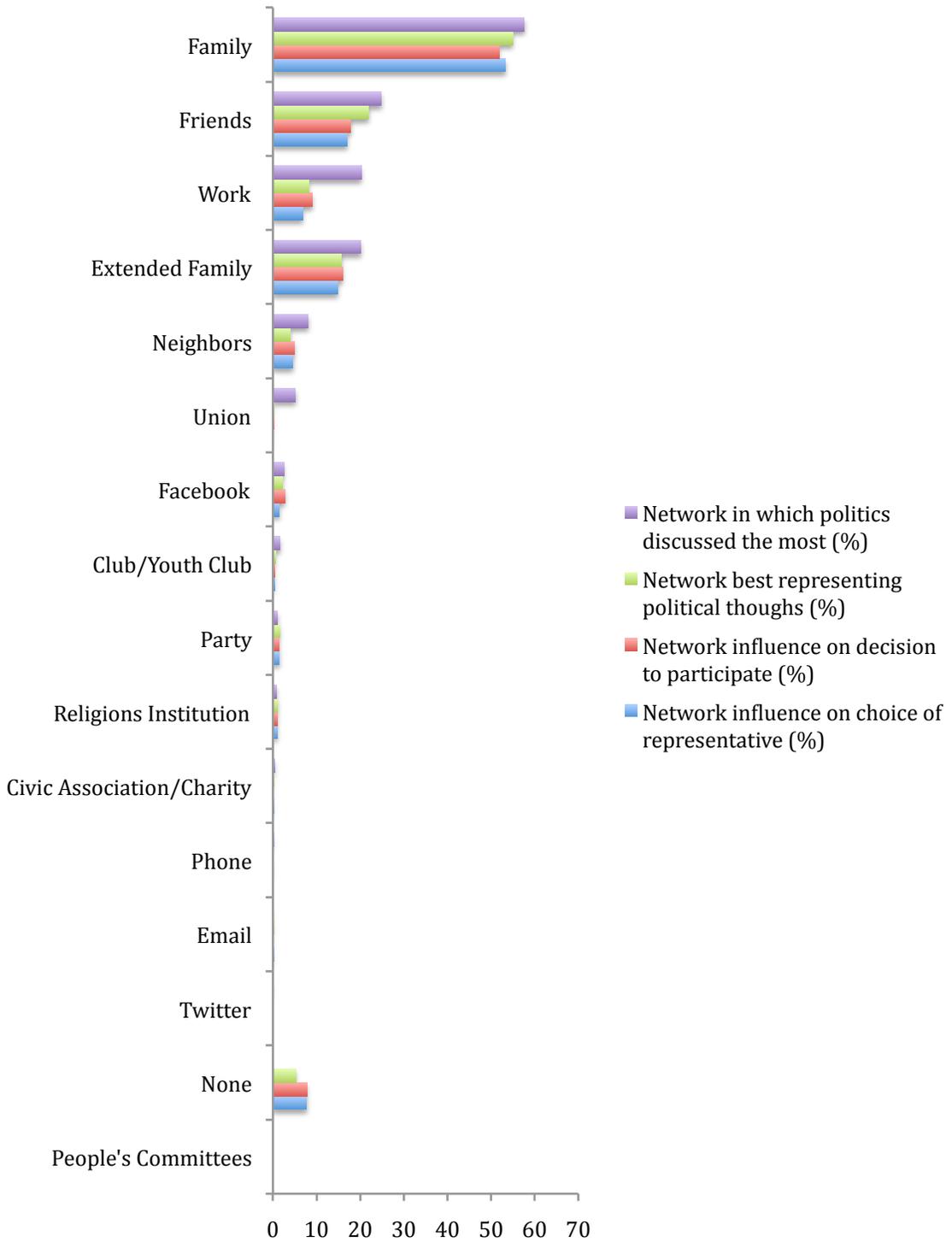
*Source: MCIT Portal 2012, conceived from:
http://www.mcit.gov.eg/Upcont/Documents/Publications_2922012000_Eng%20Fl yer.pdf

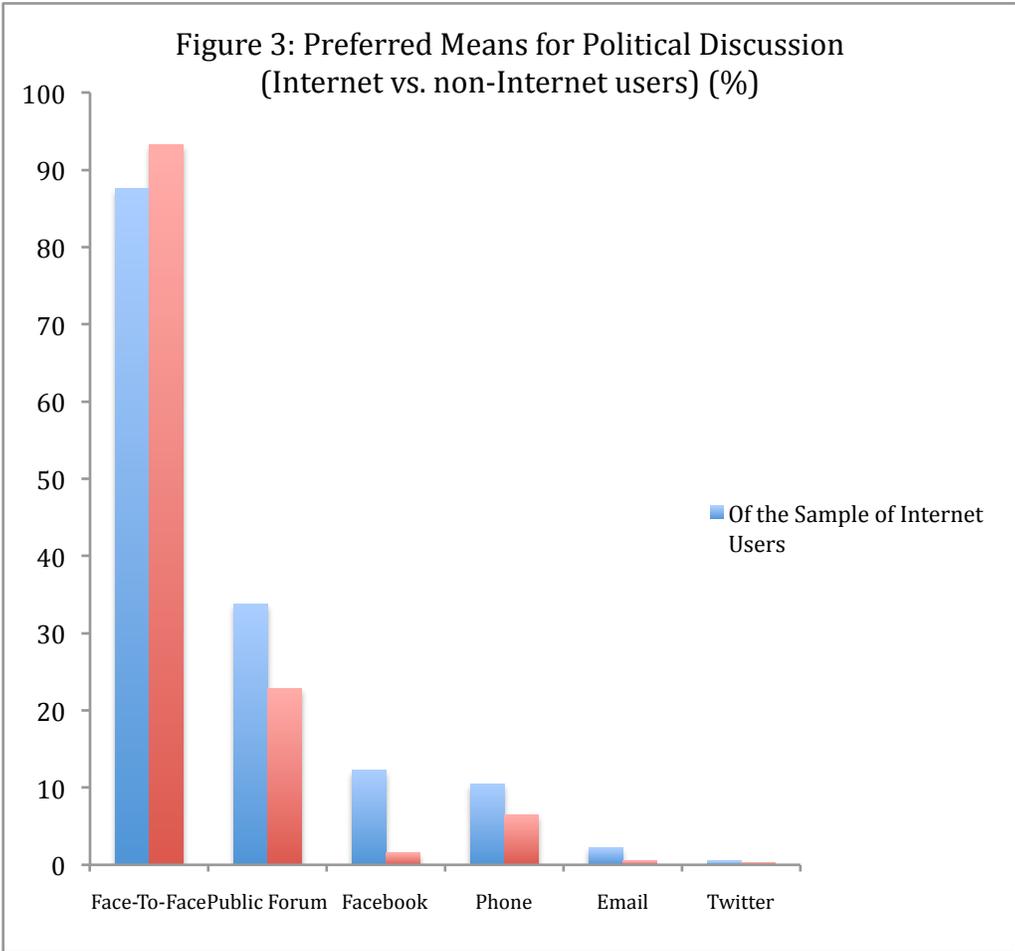
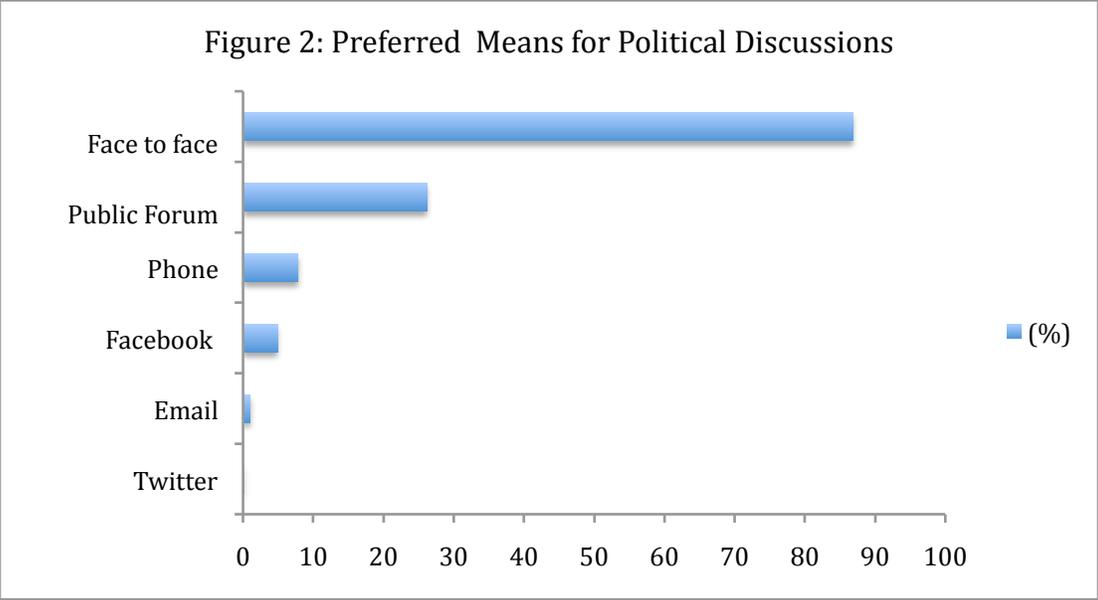
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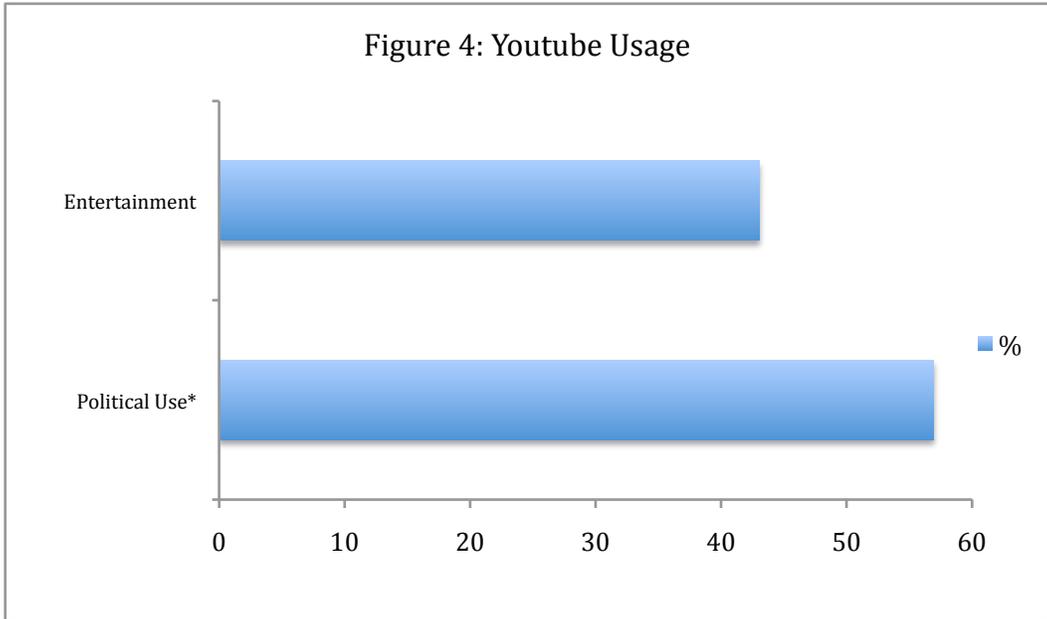
Table 2: Political Influence of Facebook

<i>Survey Question</i>	Number of people who responded with "Facebook"	Percent of total sample (out of 1025)	Percent of sub-sample of internet users (out of 412)	Percent of sub-sample of Facebook users (out of 295)
<i>In which network did you discuss politics the most</i>	26	2.54	6.31	8.81
<i>What was your preferred means for discussing politics?</i>	50	4.88	12.14	16.95
<i>Which network helps you the most in your decision to vote or abstain?</i>	28	2.73	6.80	9.49
<i>Which network influences you the most in your choice of representative?</i>	15	1.46	3.64	5.08
<i>Which network represents your thoughts about politics the best?</i>	23	2.24	5.58	7.80

Figure 1: Political Influence of Networks







*Political use refers to watching videos with political connotations, talk shows, debates and political campaigns.

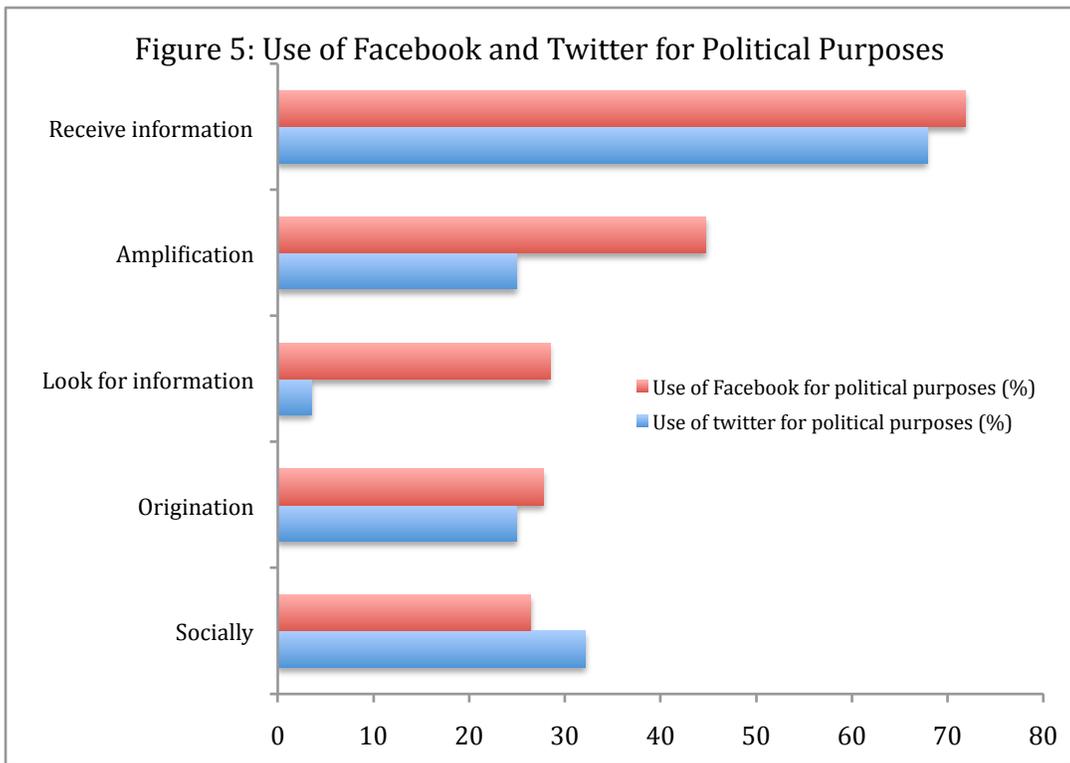


Figure 6: Membership in Facebook group that exists only online (%)

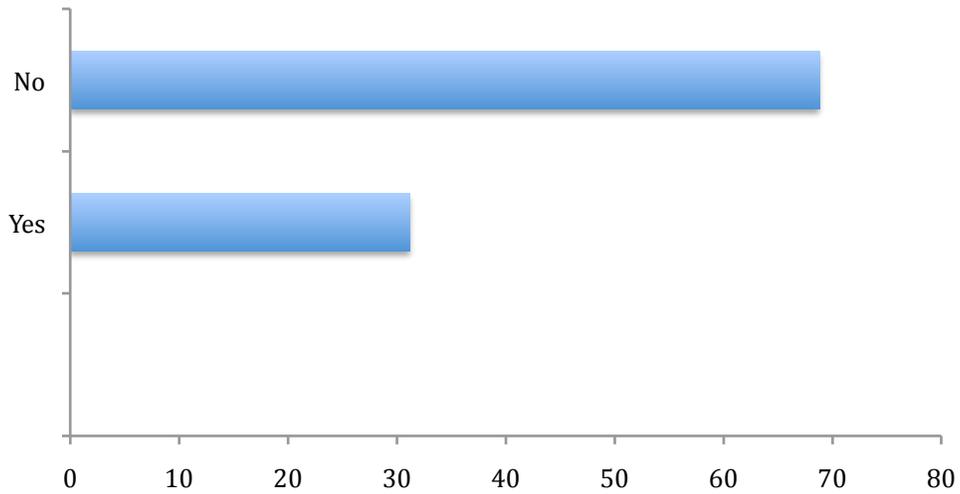
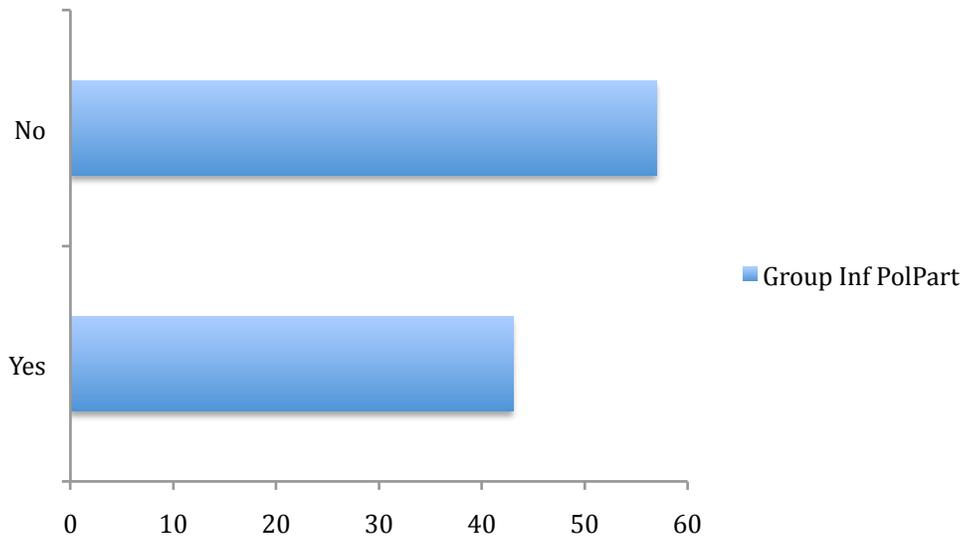
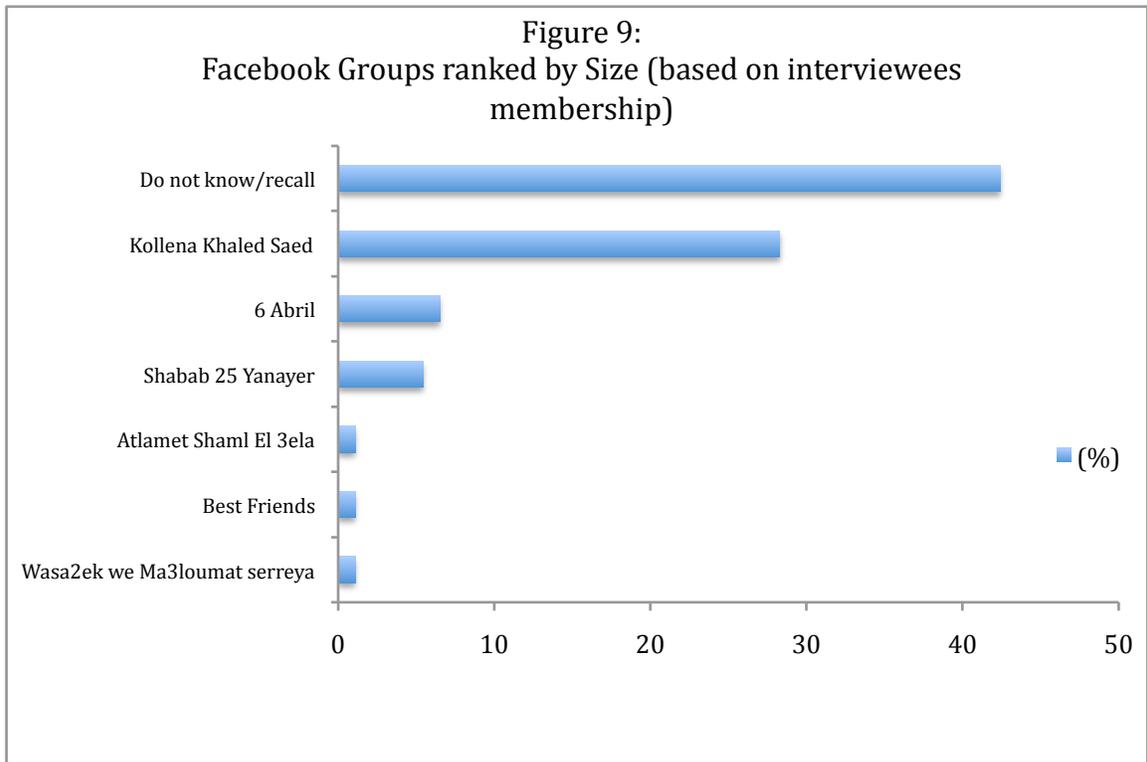
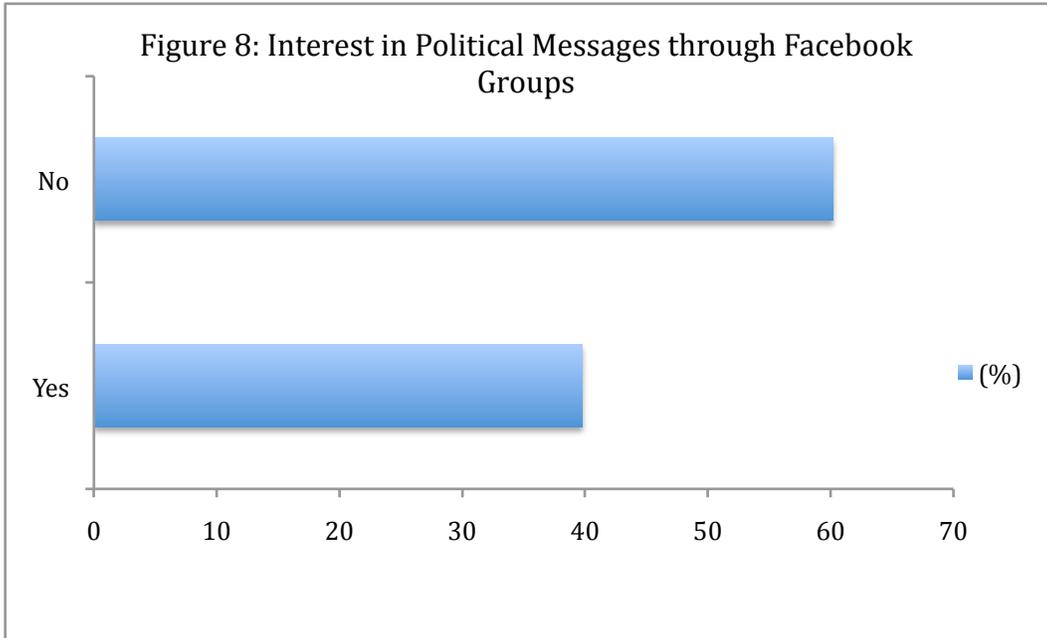


Figure 7: Facebook Groups Influence on Political Participation





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