

Master's Thesis Media Management Political Campaigns and Social Media

Municipal Elections in Finland 2021 During the COVID-19
Pandemic

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<p>Abstract:</p> <p>The internet and social media have become vital communication channels for businesses, institutions, civil society, communities and governments. The world was struck by the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 and brought as a result virtual alternatives for telecommunicating, working, studying and leisure activities online. Politics were not excluded from this change and continued their democratic processes around the world using technology to interact with civilians. This study finds and analyzes the results of political campaigns and the use of social media during the spring 2021 municipal elections in Helsinki, Finland.</p>	
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1. INTRODUCTION

Political campaigns in the last decade have been accompanied by digital outreach through the internet by a highly competitive strategy wherein traditional forms have changed to faster and more precise digital strategies in media (Tromble, 2016). In Northern Europe, the political scene is different than the rest of the continent's; more laid back and even less outspoken than the rest of the area (Malmi, 2014).

In Finland, a country with a harshly divided political culture, the role of individual candidates influencing political support is high, and this influence gives more possibilities to well-known people within the community for a public electoral candidacy (Ruostetsaari, Mattila, 2002) similar to the United States of America or Western European countries with strong personal branding for public political figures.

In the Finnish politics, the situation turned out to be different during the Covid-19 pandemic. Political parties and candidates had to convert to utilizing social media channels in lieu of traditional strategies of carrying out public campaigns (Strandberg, 2019, 2012).

This study will investigate how social media was used for political campaigns in municipal elections in Finland in 2021. The municipal elections were calendarized for April 18th of 2021 and during that period Finland was enduring a difficult period of time due to the consequences of the COVID-19 crisis. The municipal elections were rescheduled to June 13th of 2021, and subsequently the campaigning period for candidates was extended as well.

The health risks of the COVID-19 virus forced Finland's government to impose public restrictions on the population which progressed into the cancellation of public events, shows, gatherings, travel, and all political activity necessitating close physical contact. This situation left digital channels as the safest way to interact with people. In this study, the focus will be on various political campaigns by municipal council candidates and their use of social media channels - Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter - as alternative methods to reach voters.

1.2 Problem statement and aim

This study aims to investigate the use of social media, advertising, interaction, creativity, outreach, and results from the votes of candidates in Finland's municipal elections in 2021, and the subsequent outcomes of their campaigns on social media during the COVID-19 pandemic. The candidates for this study will be chosen from the Social Democratic Party (SDP) of Finland which used social media as a major part of their electoral campaigns. The successes and failures of their methods will be analyzed thoroughly through the lens of social media and data collected from January to June of 2021.

The theoretical motivation for this study is to understand the impact of social media outreach and investment in political campaigns. More specifically the study seeks to understand such impacts in the context of Finnish culture. In addition, the study has implications for practice since it focuses on candidates of the Social Democratic Party and the possibility of them being elected to the cities' council positions. All political parties had equal footing during the campaign concerning the restrictions imposed by the government due to the health risks that arose from the pandemic. It was exceptional around the world as every close contact activity was restricted, and the safest alternative for people to interact and communicate daily was through social media. Social media channels or networks are the most common platforms where people connect, seek services, shop, and browse entertainment. Although internet traffic was constant, politics remain in a different category for users, and engagement needs a different approach than any other service provided by social media networks.

1.3 Research questions

- What type of social media campaign was implemented by the municipal election's candidates?
- Why were the results of their social media campaigns successful or unsuccessful according to the ex-candidates?

1.4 Research method and limitations

The method for this study will be qualitative, and it has been chosen to accomplish the data and consequently answer the research questions. Qualitative research techniques will be used to analyze the findings of the survey and interviews. The research investigates the successful and unsuccessful results of candidates in municipal elections in Helsinki and the use of social media in their campaigns.

The units of analysis will be the municipal election's candidates and members of the Social Democratic Party of Finland, the budget, and votes gained (results) by their social media campaigns on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. The variables will include the advertisements of candidates, their utilization of social media, and interaction of the public with their digital outreach. This study will be focused on Helsinki city. The empirical material consists of data collected from a literature review, a survey, and semi-structured interviews. A hermeneutic approach (Ricouer, 1991) was adopted for the analysis. This approach has been applied successfully in similar settings. For example, Raul P. Lejano and Ching Leong adopted a hermeneutic approach in their study on public controversies in Los Angeles, California. According to them, the approach respects "the inherent plurivocity and intertextuality of narrative," thus providing new inroads into controversial public issues.

The first step following this study was getting in contact with the executive director of Helsingin Sosialidemokraattinen ry (Helsinki SDP) to discuss the probabilities of this research on political campaigns and social media, and to explore the creativity, interaction, advertisement, and results of the candidates running for Helsinki city's council election. The executive director of Helsinki SDP would cooperate to have access to this information and will support this research as is beneficial for the party's unit and future strategy. On a personal level, I am an affiliated member of the Social Democratic Party of Finland and the Helsinki SDP department. This position grants me the trust to cooperate and gain information from the leadership and members to carry out research. Although the information will be used confidentially, a common agreement was made. This is an important part of the research process as permission and cooperation are vital for achieving results (King, Horrocks, Brooks, 2018).

The importance of following this methodology will respect both participants and data collection to be used with common consent. Additionally, this working ethic in research will give the study transparency and credibility as recommended by the authors King, Horrocks and Brooks in their book Interviews in Quality Research guidance for benefit of this research.

“Qualitative researchers tend to choose to use remote interviews for one (or more) of three reasons: physical distance from participants, availability of participants, and the nature of the interview topic.” (King, Horrocks, Brooks, 2018).

The interviews were performed remotely for different reasons as specified above and in concordance with post-pandemic working methods in place with computer devices and internet making telecommunicating easier, faster and more convenient for the parties involved. The recommendation by King, Horrocks and Brooks is up to date and efficient for the researcher to progress in their investigation.

This method will include semi-structured interviews with the executive director of Helsingin Sosialidemokraatit ry (Helsinki SDP) and the SDP Helsinki campaign manager to have a deeper understanding of the construction of the electoral campaigns and the support for the candidates. The second source of data will be gathered from a specific survey where candidates will answer structured questions on what platforms they use in social media for their campaigns, videos, live streaming, daily interaction with voters and personal insights. The survey will find specific data and give a deeper understanding of how the group carried out their virtual campaigns on social media.

Furthermore, this study has the chosen focus group to understand social media use and the impact on its outreach to voters. The group has 120 members who participated as candidates during the municipal elections in 2021. Most of the members use social media in their campaigns, but there was a percentage of the group that used limited or close to no social media outreach whatsoever. In the group of candidates, there were both first timers and returning participants.

The limitations of this study are the collection of data and the outreach of the target group to respond to the survey. There were 120 candidates in the municipal election, however only 20 responded voluntarily. Additionally, the survey was online, anonymous, and unsupervised which may have affected the candidates' answers. The previous research studies on the subject were also limited to social media and politics. This method is limited to investigating the social media campaigns from the SDP municipal elections in 2021 and their results. The limitation is that this study will focus on the social media advertisements' post-reaction transformed into the concrete electoral vote with successful or unsuccessful results.

1.4 Sampling

The Sampling for this research will use the tools of survey and semi-structured interviews. As recommended by the author Groves in his book Survey Methodology Literature referring to errors in surveys as a benefit of this study.

“The quality components focus on two properties of survey estimates: errors of observation and errors of nonobservation. Errors of observation concern successive gaps between constructs, measures, responses, and edited responses. Errors of nonobservation concern successive gaps between statistics on the target population, the sampling frame, the sample, and the respondents from the sample” (Groves, 2011).

The survey will be applied to the data collection with a purposeful sample from the focus group members' SDP municipal council candidates in Spring 2021. The survey will have closed-ended questions as part of the quantitative method to collect specific answers from every participant. Additionally, it will have open questions where participants can give their opinion about social media outreach. The survey will have clear and concrete questions where the participants will mark different options delivering certain results in a limited scheme. This will guide the answer in a certain direction of convenience for the data collection. The survey will be structured in an online digital form with clear text, and it will be a maximum of four pages in size A4 with approximately 4-5 minutes to fill it on.

The semi-structured interviews will be made for the executive director of Helsingin Sosialidemokraatit ry (Helsinki SDP) and the SDP Helsinki campaign manager. The interview will give background information on the social media activity from the candidates' accounts on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram using data from their posts, engagement, interaction, followers and voting results for the municipal campaign in 2021. The data of the interviews will be analyzed to understand the SDP's actions and campaign preparation with candidates.

Ethics for this sampling are taken into account, and there will be specific notes at the beginning of the survey clarifying the purpose of the study and the use of the data. The information will safeguard confidentiality and anonymity of the participant's responses. The literature methodology will be referred to the sampling for the errors of observation and nonobservation (Groves, 2011).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Central concepts

In order to better understand the context of this study, this section defines some of the central concepts and actors that occur in research pertaining to political campaigns and social media.

Social Media

There are several definitions of social media. It is a computer and mobile internet-based platform where different networks and channels are created for communication, virtual interaction, commercial activity, and virtual socialization (Obar, Wildman 2015). Social media is also known as social networks (Sean 2019), where companies interact with their users on different digital platforms. "Social media websites help people to create, publish and share content and information with others" (Ghosh, Varshney, Venugopal, 2014, p.1). User-generated content on social media includes photos, videos, blogs, events, texts, messages, games, and audio.

Advertising

The definition of advertising is a way of communicating with the customers about a certain product or service (The Economic Times n.d). Advertisements are influential messages sent through media to reach a mass audience via internet, print channels, audio, events, TV, etc. The main goal of an advertisement is to expose a product or service to potential future consumers.

Facebook

Heyman, Pearson (2015, p5) explains Facebook as a social media platform with Web 2.0 technology providing internet networking service. It was created in 2004 as an innovation of the internet connecting people from all over the world using a digital platform and developing new tools for flexible business models connecting people, communities, businesses, publishers, application developers and advertisers (Heyman, Pearson, 2015).

Instagram

Instagram is a photo-sharing social network app created in 2010 for mobile use (Rose, 2017) and was purchased by Facebook in 2012. Instagram's main activity is picture and video sharing through different social media platforms and the interaction of its' users by liking and commenting on posts. Private individuals and companies use Instagram to promote their products and interact with the digital market (Rose, 2017).

Twitter

Twitter is a social network with the functionality of sending text messages, images, videos, and sharing different kinds of media items on its platform. Twitter has become a main communication tool for celebrities, authorities, global news channels, political figures, and communities around the world. Twitter has used hashtags with the symbol “#” to create trends across world since 2006 (Techopedia, 2013).

Marketing

Marketing is the action of companies, entrepreneurs, and individuals to create strategic plans of communication through digital and mass media channels offering products, and services to a society with the final goal of creating profits, brand awareness, and customer loyalty (AMA, 2017).

Digital Marketing

Digital Marketing is a new activity derived from traditional marketing, but it is applied digitally through data integration. Strategy and planification is created for online customers (Chaffey, 2022).

Politics & Politicians

Politics are the activities of a country's government. Politicians are those individuals involved in law-making institutions and official members. They are people who influence, direct, rule, and govern the agenda of a country (Cambridge, 2022).

Election

An Election is the process of voting for a person or party group to be assigned to a public and political position in a government or institution under the law of a country (Cambridge, 2022).

Personal Branding

Personal Branding is a marketing tool used to promote a person as a recognized marquee, brand, attraction, and public figure. It is an ongoing process of combining public reputation, personality, impression, leadership, or influence. It can be developed and treated as a brand by groups, companies, and individuals (Digitalmarketing.org, 2019).

2.2 Literature review

There is a vast body of literature exploring how and why candidates use social media (Graham et al., 2013, 2016; Lassen & Brown, 2011; Lilleker et al., 2011; Vergeer & Hermans, 2013). Most recent studies in this area have focused on candidates' actions, such as negativity in campaigns (Laaksonen et al., 2017; Rossini et al., 2018), contextual factors and campaign strategies (Rossini et al., 2018), and when candidates engage in reciprocal interaction (Graham et al., 2013, 2016; Tromble, 2018).

The author of this study did used various literature together with an information specialist at Arcada library. Search terms included social media, personal branding, political campaign, and politics. We found that previous studies about politics and social media in

Finland were limited. Research available as Bachelor or Master theses were found from previous years. For example, one useful study was 'Social Media as a Marketing Tool & its' Impact on Politics' by Ramos, published in 2015. Additionally, 'Political Personal Branding in Social Media Under the European Parliamentary Elections 2014' by the author Malmi, published in 2014, proved to be an additional helpful study. Although, there exists plenty of information from different sources on politics and social media as a separate subject of study from a global perspective. Books, articles, journals and research were used for the support of this study.

We excluded studies done before the rise of social media. Studies relevant for this research were mostly focused on specific campaigns and were organized chronologically. For example, Stranberg's study focuses on the elections in 2011, while Malmi (2014) studied the Parliamentary Elections in 2014.

On a general note, it can be said that social media and politics are a relatively current topic in the world with different perspectives coming from different streams. Internet and technology development have changed the world, and politics are not excluded from the fast-paced role of social media interconnecting public figures and citizens (Graham et al., 2013, 2016; Lassen & Brown, 2011; Lilleker et al., 2011; Vergeer & Hermans, 2013; Turnbull-Dugarte, 2019).

Political parties around the world have been using social media platforms for large campaigns. For example, Instagram was a heavily used tool during the general elections in Spain in 2015 and 2016. Academic research has been done investigating different political parties' strategies and focusing on promoting their political candidates, policy positions and mobilizing their supporters (Turnbull-Dugarte, 2019). This made Instagram an important tool for political parties in the future to improve outreach to their followers, and it changed the perception of politics in Spain through the consumption of pictures and videos.

The congress of the United States of America had different methods as well concerning social media and the political public discussion, as Twitter has been used as an important communication tool. The communication dynamic was a simple message of 140

characters, or a “tweet,” which advertised politicians’ everyday duties, thoughts and activities. Eventually, Twitter transcended as a universally utilized tool by elected presidents, senators, congress members and most public figures (Lassen & Brown, 2011).

Political candidates have been developing their own personal branding and using social media platforms in a non-electoral and electoral capacity to build up their profiles as possible frontrunners for important positions (Vergeer, Hermans, Sans, 2013). This trend has been growing in the digital world for the last 20 years, stemming from blogging to creating short video content creation. Social media came to serve marketing purposes, but personal branding has been one of the biggest benefits when it comes to politics and campaigning (Turnbull-Dugarte, 2019).

In terms of Finland and social media, it is hardly surprising to find that in 2011 the use of social media in Finnish parliamentary elections was generally modest. Social media was relatively new, and citizens’ interaction in social media in relation to the results did not influence voters’ decisions. The impact of social media during the elections was “insignificant” (Strandberg, 2013). However, a change was observed some years later. Ramos states that: *“politicians and candidates also use social media to reach voters, and especially the younger generations”* (Ramos 2015, p25).

According to Ramos, the internet and social media has been an important tool to connect politicians and future supporters. Digital communication in Finland has taken over in population law proposals, reactions, protests, and electoral campaign results.

Social media is a great tool that has brought more power and voice to people. Political leaders, candidates, and parties can also benefit a lot from it. The interactive nature of Social media can help them to refine their program to respond better to people’s expectations (Ramos 2015, p25).

The younger generation is naturally connected by social media channels, and the stimulation of their opinions and rights are lined up with digital democracy. People having direct access to give feedback to policies affecting their country and everyday life has become essential. For example, the presidential electoral campaigns in the United

States in 2016 and 2020 were drastically influenced and controlled by social media networks and their use by both voters and candidates (Fujiwara, Müller, Schwarz, 2021).

Personal branding has been used in the last decade with strong emphasis in politics and marketing techniques to bring individuals into the public eye through internet platforms via social media. Celebrities, actors, political icons, musicians, and public personalities have used their influence on media to advocate for policies and social movements. Politicians are not excluded in this, as they have come closer to people through social media platforms further augmenting their followers and supporters. Increased growth in popularity and political strength ultimately leads to their likeability and capacity to act as good candidates and win elections (Malmi, 2014).

Candidates tend to share information and opinions and conduct overt campaigning, while voters, in turn, focus more on seeking information and opinions, critiquing, and expressing support for candidates or other political actors (Nelimarkka, Laaksonen, Valkonen, 2020).

Voters have a vital role in the current situation concerning social media and political campaigns. Public opinion is extremely important concerning what social media accounts talk about, and if people can identify. In Finland, this personal branding is more important than the party position, but it is also a situation where the politicians are responsible for carrying out their own democratic participation (Nelimarkka, Laaksonen, Valkonen, 2020).

3. SURVEY

A survey was created with structure and open questions directed towards the former candidates of the Helsinki city council election in 2021. The objective of the survey was to collect information related to social media use in their individual electoral campaigns and the subsequent results. The survey was constructed in an online platform to be filled out by candidates, and it consisted of 21 questions, both multiple choice and open-ended,

where candidates could express their experiences. The survey had an estimated completion time of five minutes.

3.1 Results

This investigation includes a survey in qualitative research as recommended by the author King, Horrocks, Brooks in their book Interviews in Qualitative Research.

“Ethical codes of practice emphasise the importance of gaining the informed consent of participants prior to taking part in the research. Participants should be giving their ‘knowing consent’” (King, Horrocks, Brooks, 2018).

The survey was shared via a social media platform Facebook where the candidates of the Social Democratic Party of Helsinki communicated and interacted with each other in a private, closed group. There were 20 participants from different gender and age groups, all from the former Helsinki city council candidates’ group in Helsinki.

The survey reflects the utilization of social media use, visual material, digital training, and support from surveyed individuals. Additionally, it also reflects the support given by the party in the process of campaigning and guidance according to the political situation during the Covid-19 pandemic.

9. Millä somella alustalla käytit maksettuja mainoksia (kuvia, videoita jne)?

[More Details](#)

Facebook	13
Instagram	5
Twitter	1
Ei mikään yllä olevista	7



Figure 1. A graphic displaying social media platforms used for paid advertisements (Survey, 2021)

The survey was designed with questions emphasizing the different options that candidates used for their social media campaigns. Candidates used free posts for their daily engagement with followers on social media. For those candidates who had experience with social media and large social circles inside of the different platforms, it was likely easier to create their public political profiles. On the other hand, for candidates without any previous experience or presence on social media, it was difficult to create their profiles from scratch and focus on making connections and accumulating followers.

Most candidates used Facebook as their main platform for outreach, meanwhile a second sub-group used Facebook and Instagram. Few used Twitter for the trending online conversations, and the remainder used no social media marketing whatsoever. The internet habits of the former candidates are noticeable according to their answers concerning age and digital literacy skills. A portion of the answers differed from others and the impact it had on their social media campaigns that gave both positive and negative results.

The electoral campaigns were affected by the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions imposed by the ministry of health and government of Finland. The impossibility of people meeting up face to face change the approach to reach out to potential voters for all candidates. Former candidates opted for creating strategies including paid advertisements on social media platforms, especially on Facebook and Instagram. Paid advertisements consisted of photos, videos and different online events. A budget for the campaign was essential in obtaining positive results and not incurring extra expenses. For some candidates the budget was considerably higher, above three or four numerical figures, focusing on the higher possibilities that social media gives with paid advertisement. For other candidates, it was an unknown area to consider, and online paid advertisement was limited or not even included in their strategy.

11. Kuinka paljon käytit rahaa sosiaalisessa mediassa kampanjointiin?

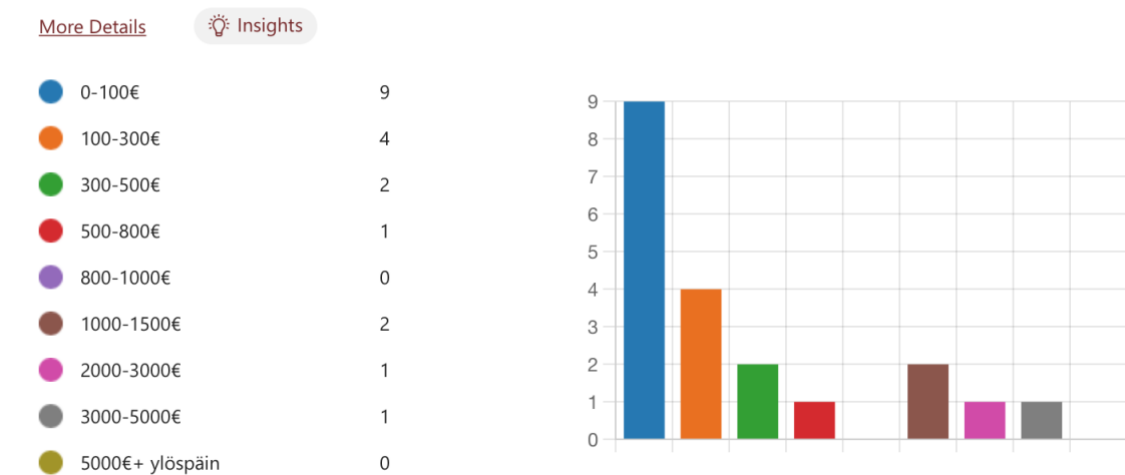


Figure 2. A graphic displaying budget used for paid advertisements (Survey, 2021)

Candidates experienced many difficulties during the COVID-19 pandemic due to quarantines, social restrictions, and risk of catching the virus. Every candidate had their freedom to decide what to create in their posts and how to interact with voters.

Mitkä asiat tuntuivat vaikeilta sosiaalisen median kampanjoinnissa? Esimerkiksi, vaikeudet olla kameran edessä, aika, kuvien hallinta, ...
Erottua joukosta tuntui vaikealta.
Kameran edessä oleminen piti opetella.
aika ja ideat.
Saada riittävästi tuntumaa lyhyehkössä ajassa markkinointiin.
Kuvien tekeminen oikean kokoiseksi oli haaste
Aidon kohtaamisen puute
Vei paljon aikaa: järjestelyt, käsikirjoitukset, teemojen valinta, kuvauspaikkojen miettiminen, sopivan sään odotus, tekniset haasteet...
Facebook livet olivat uusi juttu ja ne vaativat opiskelua
It-taidon puute. Facebookiin maimostilin luominen epäonnistui. Se harmitti.
-
Ajan puute
Paljon uutta piti opetella, mutta ei minään tuntunut liian vaikealta.
Aikapula
Teknisen taidon, välineiden ja ajan puute.
Vaikeus olla kameran edessä
Puute IT- taidoissa.
Epäselvä SDP:n ohjeistus
Facebookin rajoitukset mainonnassa.
Yksin tekeminen ja tuen puute.
Kaikki yllä mainitut

Table 1. A table displaying results from candidates' difficulties in their social media campaigns (Survey, 2021)

Frustration from candidates was a large and expected result seen during the survey, as some did not have the basic computer skills to manage their own social media campaigns. It was also reflected by the candidates' age difference and their computer literacy background which affecting everyday content creation being labeled as "difficult" or

“frustrating.” Additionally, personal duties at work and with their own families were very difficult to maintain while simultaneously keeping a campaign running. It seems that younger candidates, in many cases single or without children, were able to manage the pressure of the campaigns better for the city council.

Saavutitko odottamasi tavoitteet vaaleissa? Tulitko valituksi kaupunginvaltuustoon?	Saavutettu äänimäärä
Varalle ja saavutin.	322
En.	En muista enään.
En	110
Kyllä, ensikertalaisena odotettua enemmän ääniä. En tullut valituksi.	102
Saavutin tavoitteen, en tullut valituksi	88
Minimi tavoite toteutui, sain jatkaa vammaisneuvostossa	108
Kyllä.	Riittävästi.
En	200
En 158 ääntä. Yli 200 ääntä odotin. Ensimmäinen kerta vaaleissa.	158
En täysin.	183
Sain luottamuspaikan ja hyvän tuloksen ensikertalaiseksi	191
En	Noin 200
En päässyt valtuustoon, mutta äänimäärä vastasi ennakoarvioitani	n. 140
En	178
Tulin valituksi varavaltuutetuksi, eli tavoite ei aivan täyttynyt. Ensikertalaisena ääniä tuli kuitenkin kohtuullisen hyvin.	493
En	139
En, en.	42
En.	80
Ei	150
Sain enemmän ääniä kuin odotin	250

Table 2. A table displaying results from SDP candidates' voting results (Survey, 2021)

The main function of the survey was to explore concrete answers from candidates concerning their voting' results and if they were positive or negative results according to their own plans and expectations. Referring to the answers in the survey, the difference of votes between the 20 candidates was the top score of 493 votes and the minimum score of 42 votes. For some, there was no data available. The answers of the survey also transmit the sentiment of former candidates as to how high their expectations were or how the experience played out for those who enlisted previously as candidates. First timers may not have had the results they wished for, but some of them passed through substitute positions for different boards in the municipal governance in Helsinki city.

4. INTERVIEWS

Two semi-structured interviews were conducted for this study with the purpose of getting detailed information on the political campaigns organized by the Social Democratic Party

of Finland for the Helsinki city council elections. The two people interviewed were the executive director of Helsingin Sosialidemokraatit ry (Helsinki SDP) and former SDP Helsinki campaign manager, who were both involved in the campaign work and organization in 2021.

4.1 Strategy and campaign work

This study includes interviews as recommended by the author King, Horrocks, Brooks in their book Interviews in Qualitative Research, referring to the ethics and the use of data collected from participants.

“Ethical codes of practice emphasise the importance of gaining the informed consent of participants prior to taking part in the research. Participants should be giving their ‘knowing consent’” (King, Horrocks, Brooks, 2018).

In the interview with the executive director of Helsinki SDP, he explained the party’s strategy to increase the followers within the suburbs of the city. The percentage of voters in suburbs has been low compared to other areas of the city, and the plan to raise the number of voters via social media in 2021 was a priority. SDP wanted to be known as an alternative for new residents and old residents, and social media created a more appealing image of SDP candidates.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, election day was moved to a later date in June 2021, previously scheduled to happen in April 2021. There were two months more during the election period for working on the campaign and to reach more voters. The extension period also translated into a long-winded campaign that had good and bad sides.

According to the SDP Helsinki campaign manager, the candidates' activities outside of social media were considered as well. There was a car reserved for daily and weekly campaigning to support the presence of the party not only on social media, but face to face as well (as much as the pandemic situation would allow). Due to the COVID-19, it was difficult to have a clear strategy, as restrictions were ever changing. Budgeting and planning were some of the most challenging parts of campaign work as nobody knew if

it would be possible to meet people in person, or if they should refrain from physical communication and rely solely on social media.

The party provided the campaign car to visit different spots around the city daily and weekly, plus the training for the social media and internet tools for candidates to do everything by themselves. Helsinki SDP does not have the biggest support as a political party in the city, and the strategy was to stay at least in the top 3 of voters' preferences.

In May 2021, COVID-19 restrictions loosened in the Helsinki capital area, allowing groups to gather outside while maintaining mask use and personal distance. The government of Finland and the political parties agreed on carrying out the campaigns in the traditional face to face way, giving the opportunity to all candidates to reach out to their target groups. Parties installed stands in Kamppi Market Square (narikkatori) decorated with their logos, slogans, and flyers. The installations acted as meeting points for them and citizens.

4.2 Support for candidates on social media

The party hired people to help candidates as “digital tutors” to create their Facebook or Instagram pages, pictures and videos, and digital advertisements. Additionally, the party offered different workshops that focused on the use of social media tools and content creation.

According to the SDP, Helsinki campaign managers in different circles of the party were supporting their candidates and providing a vast amount of material for online workshops and training for the candidates. The online workshops were meant to support how to manage trends and new ways of how to interact with people on social media, which was key for voter outreach. Candidates were added to Facebook groups to interact with competitors candidates, discuss questions, and give information. Candidates were also asked what support they needed for their social media endeavors.

Helsinki SDP had an online website where the information was reachable, and it was possible to upload candidates' personal websites with their campaign themes, pictures,

videos and social media account links. This was vital for those who did not have any knowledge about digital marketing or website management. SDP invested in this technology for their candidates to get the most out of digital campaigning.



Figure 3. Video produced for electoral campaign in Spring 2021 (Helsinki SDP Youtube channel 2021).

4.3 Resources

The different Helsinki SDP departments support their candidates by paying candidates' fees to enroll for the election. The party shared its bank information, serving as background material for candidates' general knowledge. Written material was created and provided from the SDP party to all candidates to support their answers with facts for election machines (vaalikone). All candidates answered the election machines, which are produced by different newspapers and national media and touch on different areas and perspectives of the candidates for certain topics. The fields included were healthcare, education, public policy and municipal resources.

According to the SDP, Helsinki campaign manager candidates received official pictures for the candidature to use for public media. The pictures were taken for each candidate, and it was paid for by the SDP party. Candidates could use their official pictures for advertisements in Canva and create all kinds of advertisements for all platforms. Video advertising was offered as well for candidates for their last month of campaigning to be displayed online or by paid advertisement. SDP invested heavily in their group to reach more voters with this resource, which was vital during the pandemic.

4.4 Monitoring candidates

There was no monitoring of candidates. The focus was more on how the party could support the needs of its individual candidates. For example, connecting people for tutoring in the utilization and creation of different digital content and the best way to manage it was pivotal to the success of the party's campaigning efforts. The information background, or “message,” is what the political party creates in their own perspective, and it wants its candidates to work in the same way. Candidates running for positions like mayor portrayed the message and image of the party. Although, each individual candidate had the freedom to have their own opinions. Usually, every candidate has a team for their campaigns, and they have agendas of visits and meetings lead by the party. There is a constant dialogue within the party's leadership to moderate the main topics of discussion for the citizens of a certain area or city.

According to the SDP Helsinki campaign manager, there was constant contact with most candidates regularly depending on different needs and tasks. There are different candidates depending on the election and candidates with experience, such as members of parliament or city mayor. Every candidate with a weight to their public name has campaign teams, and they coordinate the main message of the party themselves, as well as their own message as an individual candidate. Unfortunately, it is impossible to monitor all candidates and their actions, but for those with needs there are possibilities to seek help.

4.5 Results of social media use

Helsinki had 120 candidates running social media campaigns. Overall, the SDP party gained another place in Helsinki's city council. Positive results for the party arrived as election day closed, as more votes than ever were cast for the party, and new candidates acquired positions on city council. Young candidates were also part of the success of the campaign, as they were more vocal on social media and connected more with the younger

demographic of voters. Additionally, the candidates were elected in a balanced gender quota which is supported widely by the party's leadership.

According to the SDP Helsinki campaign manager, gaining one extra seat for Helsinki city council was a successful endeavor for the party.

4.6 Improvements

In the opinion of the executive director of Helsinki SDP, there could be improvement in the future. Uniform visual campaigns using similar styles are likely to be more successful as time goes on, although right now candidates have used different color palettes and images to represent themselves. There is always a difference between people and how they portray themselves to the public. The campaigns are just as good as they were in previous years, but they could gain more power if everyone used the same format. Although, candidates have the possibility to choose three topics of their interest, and that makes a difference with each position. It was disappointing that in some areas of Helsinki less than 40% of people voted in the municipal election. This is what the party needed to improve in the future to reach those who are not voting

According to the SDP Helsinki campaign manager, they strongly believe in the need to bridge personal contact with social media. The interaction is needed for the success of SDP candidates in the future. Social media will be key for future campaigns, and candidates will need all the relevant tools and skills. It will be vital to have meaningful interactions with followers, not just creating information channels to distribute information. It is important to discuss ideas, but being present on social media is the best way to interact with the real world now.

5. DISCUSSION

The results found in this study came from the interviews and survey showed different perspectives from the Social Democratic Party SDP executives and the former candidates

from Helsinki city's municipal elections. Candidates were running a campaign with the support of the party direction in different areas to gain success in the governance body in Helsinki city. Factors that affected the results included COVID-19 restrictions, lack of digital literacy from former candidates, and ineffective strategy plans.

Social media and politics are a current trending topic around the world, and the use of these platforms to reach new followers and interact with them is an essential practice to be considered for any political position. This involves new digital channels to catapult political policies, ideas and a higher number of supporters. According to the results of the survey and interviews, the intention to include social media as an extra boost for political campaigns is one of the main targets for campaigning, but creativity and consistence is required to achieve any positive result. The case of different candidates not canalizing time and marketing skills with social media may not have been equally successful for everyone (Turnbull-Dugarte, 2019).

In the case of Twitter, most of the former candidates did not use or have the maximum interaction with potential voters through social networking. This differs in the importance taken by the United States politicians at communicating with Twitter and taking public discussion, public policies, and opinions of their followers (Lassen & Brown, 2011). Twitter is an essential part of interaction with the public, and it was included in campaigns of former candidates of the younger age group, but for senior candidates it was not an important communication tool. The survey responses reflect the lack of use of Twitter as part of social media strategy and placed it as the least used platform. See more in Figure 4.

5. Mitä some alustaa käytit?

[More Details](#)

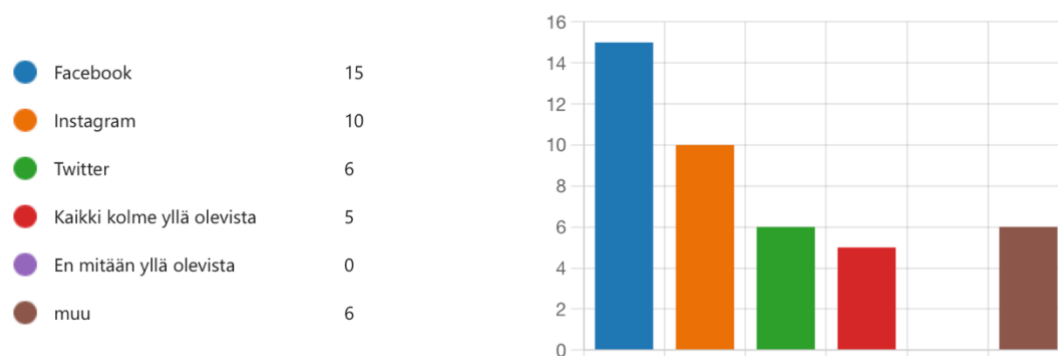


Figure 4. A graphic displaying social media platforms and their use by former SDP candidates (Survey, 2021)

Results according to Figure 4 showed the preference Facebook as the most used social channel for former candidates, followed by Instagram. Facebook is the most used platform in the world according to Statista (2022), and it is still the most used platform in Finland today. Facebook is used for different purposes, including marketing, campaigning, advertising, branding and interacting with civilians (Heyman, Pearson, 2015). Former candidates run their campaigns on social media with the purpose of reaching out to people living in their area or specific areas of Helsinki to gain their trust and support.

Furthermore, the results also showed former candidates wanted to reach out to more voters, but they were not skilled enough to create engaging campaigns, and this proved difficult for most of them. Creativity is a big part of social media work, and former candidates need to plan how much time will be used for posting pictures, creating videos, and interacting with followers. During the COVID-19 pandemic, social media became a field of creativity where different digital forums were created, and interaction was done completely online. The political campaigns were also part of this online creativity, and the time dedicated to it was uncountable (Fujiwara, Müller, Schwarz, 2021).

Another important aspect of the results is the budgeting and creativity of the social media campaigns. The marketing, and in this case digital marketing techniques needed to be part of a strategic plan with considerable budget for successful results (Chaffey, 2022).

Personal branding is the promotion of a public figure, brand or recognized marquee building up trust and reputation for its market inspirations and consumers (Digitalmarketing.org, 2019). According to the survey results, the budget of most of the former candidates was low or non-existent concerning social media paid advertising. This shows the lack of trust of digital platforms, or simply lack of knowledge of digital marketing (Figure 2).

For the former candidates, the successful results were attainable at the time of planification, considering the success of their personal branding. Unfortunately, according to the survey's results (Table 1) most of the former candidates lacked the professional digital marketing skills and investment in personal branding development to be successful in the campaign. Social media's main role for politicians is to communicate and interact with supporters and followers. This is key for any public figure to expose their own ideas and opinions to the public (Malmi, 2014). Communication is key to interconnecting our global digital world, and politics are not excluded from that.

6. CONCLUSION

The research questions of this study were directed to investigate the politics and social media use in the political campaigns for the 2021 Helsinki city hall candidates from the Social Democratic Party SDP Helsinki.

What type of social media campaign was made by the municipal election's candidates?

The former candidates, according to the interviews and survey, made their social media campaigns focus more on Facebook and Instagram. Twitter was the least used platform for most of the former candidates. Paid advertisements were used mostly on Facebook, meanwhile it was not utilized for Instagram and Twitter. Budgets reflected a lack of

resources for social media campaigns using paid advertisements. Thirteen out of twenty former candidates used paid advertisements (Figure 1). Eleven out of twenty had a budget for social media campaigning, as displayed in the survey's responses. Nine candidates had a budget of zero to one hundred euros. Four candidates had a hundred to three hundred euros in their budgets. Two candidates had from two hundred to five hundred euros in their budgets. One candidate had five hundred euros to eight hundred euros in his budget. Five candidates had a bigger budget range from one thousand to five thousand euros (Figure 2). Five to six former candidates had a considerable budget to run a short-term campaign with a marketing target to outreach voters.

Concerning creativity and marketing skills, four candidates used professional services for marketing purposes according to the survey. The rest did not use any professional services. Most of the candidates used their own time to create, post and produce texts, pictures, videos or anything relevant to their campaign targets. Some candidates had help from friends or family members, but most of them did it themselves (Figure 5). Photo and video posts were on the top of the list of strategy for social media according to the survey (Figure 5). Text was the third most used for candidates, as creativity in writing and knowledge of municipal topics was important for most of them.

14. Oliko sinulla sosiaalisen median strategia? esimerkiksi:

[More Details](#)

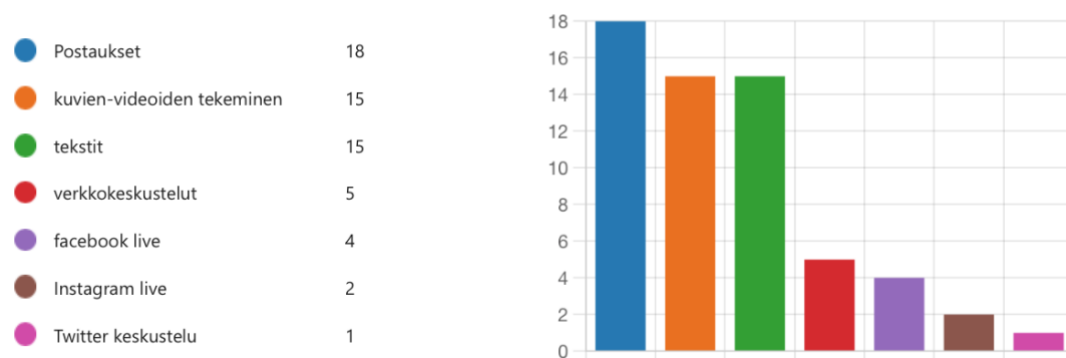


Figure 5. A graphic displaying social media strategy and tasks (Survey, 2021)

Target groups were different for the candidates. Most of the results showed the candidates were focused on middle-aged people and working-class people, followed by young

adults, families with children, and retired people. Immigrants were the least targeted group for the former candidates. The target audience is the essence of creativity, as without knowing the target group it is impossible to make a strategy with concrete goals and fuel interaction with followers. For younger candidates, the results reflected that social media was used largely to create and interact, compared to the older candidates that barely used any social media for interaction or any new feature including video streaming.

Why were the results of their social media campaigns successful or unsuccessful according to the ex-candidates?

Results of the survey (Table 2) showed that ten out of twenty candidates did not get the results they were expecting from the election's votes. This was according to the different answers in the survey. The maximum number of votes received by a candidate was four hundred ninety-three, and the minimum number of votes for a candidate was forty-two. Although, the votes received were in some cases more than expected for the first-time candidates. Some of the former candidates wrote that they were satisfied, even though they were not elected to the Helsinki city council, and that they gained a significant number of votes to be elected as a trustee for an official position representing the party in the municipal governance.

Concerning social media, the data collected from the survey and the interviews proved unsuccessful. Most of candidates who responded to the survey (Table 1) were not organized well on social media or lacked knowledge on how to run paid advertising campaigns. The strategy and planning of the electoral campaign were necessary during the COVID-19 pandemic, and social media was the main channel available during Spring 2021 due to the restrictions in Helsinki. The Success of the social media campaign depended on budget constraints and the time invested in creating interaction with followers. The results of the survey (Table 1) showed former candidates explaining the difficulties they faced including the time needed for interacting on social media accounts, creating posts, taking pictures and videos, and learning IT skills, among others. The main results determine that half of the sample had a successful run, and the other half's efforts proved unsuccessful. This is reflected in questions number seventeen and twenty (appendices).

Future implications for further research would be to investigate and interview more candidates with successful and unsuccessful results. The interviews could explore the individual experiences of the former candidates, their actions and their ideas in a deeper manner. It could show the comparison of what candidates were doing right and wrong at the time of executing strategy, and for social media planning in their political campaign. Additionally, city council elections have different candidates from different political parties. The future research could investigate in more detail the candidates from other parties and compare their social media campaigns to find the successful and unsuccessful results according to their planning and strategy. Although, it will be implied that there will be permission from candidates of different parties to share their data from actions and results for further research to achieve its main objective.

Personally, was an interesting topic to research due to the nature of the situation during the extraordinary restrictions of COVID-19 and the high use social media platforms. This gave a special interest for the researcher to know more about social media influencing results for political electoral results and the candidates creating their own personal brand gaining votes in the city of Helsinki. In the future, the investigation could analyze social media accounts from candidates, followers and statistics from social media insights. It could be focused on candidates running for Finnish parliament elections or European parliament elections, as was investigated by the authors Ramos and Malmi in previous years. Personal branding and social media are still developing in the marketing field with new techniques, insights and focuses. Politics have arrived at the palm of everyone's hand by the simple action of creating an account on the social media platforms of our preference.

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APPENDICES

Interviews to Executive director and Campaign manager – SDP Helsinki

- 1.What was the general preparation and strategy for the 2021 municipal election campaigns due to COVID-19 situation?
- 2.Considering the COVID-19 restrictions in Helsinki, how was the SDP's plan and support for the candidates switching their campaigns to internet/social media channels to reach voters?
- 3.What resources were given from SDP for those candidates with no IT/internet/social media skills?
- 4.How did SDP manage the monitoring of the candidates? Known personalities, new candidates?
5. Was SDP social media campaign successful in 2021? What can be improved for future?

Helsinki SDP's Survey for former candidates of Municipal elections 2021

Kysely 2021 SDP:n Helsingin kuntavaaliehdokkaille

Kyselyyn vastaaminen vie noin 4 minuuttia.

Kaikki tämän kyselyn tiedot ovat anonymoivia ja vain akateemista tutkimusta varten.

The survey will take approximately 4 minutes to complete.

All the information of this survey will be anonymous and for academic research only.

* Required

1. Olitko ehdokkaana SDP:n kunnallisvaaleissa Helsingissä 2021? *

☐ Kyllä

☐ Ei

2. Sukupuoli *

Select your answer



3. Ikä *

Enter your answer

4. Tiesitkö kuinka käyttää sosiaalista mediaa ennen kampanjaa? *

☐ Kyllä

☐ Ei

5. Mitä some alustaa käytit? *

☐ Facebook

☐ Instagram

☐ Twitter

☐ Kaikki kolme yllä olevista

☐ En mitään yllä olevista

☐ muu

6. Käytitkö SDP:ltä valmiita kuvia/videoita(Kuvapankki)? *

☐ Kyllä

☐ Ei

7. Saitko apua/tukea SDP:ltä sosiaalisen median teknisissä asioissa? *

☐ Työpajat

☐ Verkkomateriaali

☐ Canva

☐ Henkilökohtainen opastus jne.

☐ Muu

8. Käytitkö maksettuja mainoksia sosiaalisessa mediassa? *

☐ Kyllä

☐ Ei

9. Millä somella alustalla käytit maksettuja mainoksia (kuvia, videoita jne)? *

☐ Facebook

☐ Instagram

☐ Twitter

☐ Ei mikään yllä olevista

10. Oliko sinulla osa budjetti vain sosiaaliseen mediaan? *

☐ Kyllä

☐ Ei

11. Kuinka paljon käytit rahaa sosiaalisessa mediassa kampanjointiin? *

- ☐ 0-100€
- ☐ 100-300€
- ☐ 300-500€
- ☐ 500-800€
- ☐ 800-1000€
- ☐ 1000-1500€
- ☐ 2000-3000€
- ☐ 3000-5000€
- ☐ 5000€+ ylöspäin

12. Käytitkö ulkopuolisia markkinoinnin asiantuntijapalveluita kampanjassasi? *

Enter your answer

13. Teitkö kaiken digitaalisen materiaalin itse vai saitko apua ystäviltä tai sukulaisilta? *

Enter your answer

14. Oliko sinulla sosiaalisen median strategia? esimerkiksi: *

- ☐ Postaukset
- ☐ kuvien-videoiden tekeminen
- ☐ tekstit
- ☐ verkkokeskustelut
- ☐ facebook live
- ☐ Instagram live
- ☐ Twitter keskustelu

15. Tavoittitko kohderyhmäsi? *

- ☐ Kyllä
- ☐ Ei
- ☐ jossain määrin

16. Mitä kohderyhmiä tavoittelit? *

- ☐ lapsiperheet
- ☐ nuoret aikuiset
- ☐ keski-ikäiset
- ☐ eläkeläiset
- ☐ työkäiset henkilöt
- ☐ maahanmuuttajia
- ☐ muu

17. Mitkä asiat tuntuivat vaikeilta sosiaalisen median kampanjoinnissa? Esimerkiksi, vaikeudet olla kameran edessä, aika, kuvien hallinta, videon tekeminen, ideat, IT-aidon puute - *

Enter your answer

18. Saavutitko odottamasi tavoitteet vaaleissa? Tulitko valituksi kaupunginvaltuustoon? *



Enter your answer

19. Saavutettu äänimäärä *

Enter your answer

20. Millaista tukea olisit kaivannut sosiaalisen median kampanjallasi? *

Enter your answer

17. Mitkä asiat tuntuivat vaikeilta sosiaalisen median kampanjoinnissa? Esimerkiksi, vaikeudet olla kameran edessä, aika, kuvien hallinta, videon tekeminen, ideat, IT-taidon puute - *

Enter your answer

18. Saavutitko odottamasi tavoitteet vaaleissa? Tulitko valituksi kaupunginvaltuustoon? *

Enter your answer

19. Saavutettu äänimäärä *

Enter your answer

20. Millaista tukea olisit kaivannut sosiaalisen median kampanjallasi? *

Enter your answer

21. Mitä muuta haluat sanoa sosiaalisen median kampanjoinnistasi? * 

Enter your answer

You can print a copy of your answer after you submit

Submit