From Agenda Setting to Melding: How Individuals Part of Certain On-line Groups Change Their Electoral Behavior amid the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract. Do certain on-line groups influence the individual’s behavior? Moreover, do certain on-line groups tend to influence his or her electoral behavior amid the COVID-19 pandemic? This article aims to assess how or whether being a specific on-line group member (Facebook, WhatsApp, or the equivalent) could hold any influence regarding the individual’s trust in authorities, voting behavior, and if these groups can be a catalyst in this sense. The theoretical part of the article begins with explaining how public perception and its emotional-based elements work, proceeds with analyzing throughout agenda setting, priming, framing, second-level agenda-setting to agenda melding theories. The practical part of the article consists of explaining how the on-line groups influence the individual throughout several focus groups involving young politicians and people involved in daily politics. The overall context focuses on local elections in Romania. This article proposes an explanation via aforementioned communication theories, on how mass media manages to shape the individuals’ set of opinions and eventually their behavior and how some individuals tend to change their beliefs influenced by certain groups. Mass media holds the ability to stir the public perception by using various techniques such as agenda-setting –
by emphasizing different effects of the Corona crisis, priming – by setting several topics’ evaluation frameworks such as infection rates, hospitals’ situation, framing – by using specifics frames and filters to picture the current pandemic and even pushing individuals to meld their own sets of values and doxies with the ones from familiar social groups. In other words, making them question whether it is safe to go and vote.

Keywords: Public perception; Social behaviors; Political efficacy; Political trust; Corona crisis.

Introduction

This article aims to assess how or whether being a specific on-line group member (Facebook, WhatsApp, or the equivalent) could hold any influence regarding the individual’s trust in authorities, voting behavior, and if these groups can be a catalyst in this sense. In this respect, the questions that arise are the following: How do certain individuals react during pandemic times when political-related news or messages flood their online groups? Do they tend to embrace the agenda-setting of a group or do they just switch towards different topics or news by melding different agendas?

Agenda setting (McCombs & Shaw, 1972) is the best pointer for the idea the public gets concerned about certain topics selected by the main decision-maker – the mass-media. In our case, the decision-maker is split in half: one is the mass media and, the other the on-line group, are the communicators. Therefore, the agenda-setting theory is not enough to catch the overall empirical analysis (the focus groups). Framing (Goffman, 1974) and priming (Iyengar, Peters & Kinder, 1982) also play a crucial role in shaping the individual’s choice of action but agenda melding (Shaw & Colistra, 2007), in the online context, plays the most crucial part: is the individual’s behavior influenced by one group or many combined?; in which manner these individuals melt their agendas with the groups?; and, eventually how these groups manage to dictate any behavior whatsoever?

This paper’s relevance comes in a time when due to the COVID-19 pandemic, voting behavior tends to change and individuals gather more information online. Since many individuals are working remotely, the usual social agoras disappeared, being replaced by online social media groups. In these groups, some profiles tend to shape behaviors and perceptions by posting, reacting, commenting, or sharing different articles. During an electoral campaign, these topics circulated in online groups could prove crucial for keeping or for changing an electoral behavior.
1. Public perception

“The medium is the message” (McLuhan, 1964). This is the best analogy struck by Marshal McLuhan, on how mass media holds the capacity to influence the way the message is perceived and understood by designated audiences. Allen Ginsberg (2007) stated, “whoever controls the media, the images, controls the culture”. Both quotes added together to produce a rough initial picture of the great power mass media bears over any given public.

Public perception is usually something very abstract but very important because it draws the fine line between reality and comprehension. Public perception is the main element that communication experts debate about when referring to a successful or unsuccessful campaign. Furthermore, public perception is usually more powerful in its effect if it manages to use emotional elements when constructing various messages (Cohen, 1998).

Individuals tend to gather information from various mass-media sources (mass-media sources encompass the whole information-sharing spectrum, on-line included). The risk here is that without proper information balance as regards various media sources, even on biased ones, the public perception can be molded easily for a long period with unwanted consequences in terms of the public’s acceptance for any given topic (Cohen, 1998).

If the camera always tells the truth and mass-media role is to reveal the truth towards everyone (Lang & Lang, 1953), then public perception is crucial in explaining an individual attitude as regards different perspectives in society, even daily.

1.1 From public opinion towards agenda setting

Individuals with the same opinion form a social group, and groups, which have the same opinion over a topic, form an initial public opinion pattern. Usually, public opinion stems from public perception. Whilst public perception over a specific issue can be shaped to last a long time, public opinion is volatile and easily changeable in terms of individual judgments (Bernays, 2003). To stay relevant for targeted audiences, mass media needs to control and carefully shift the public opinion’s volatility by applying different techniques. The agenda-setting theory is a good example in this regard.

1.2 Agenda Setting

Agenda setting is one of the most refined and used media effects theories over the last 40 years. Besides the ramifications proposed by McCombs and Shaw (1972), the best summary for agenda-setting is that mass media is the main connector between world events and images inside the minds of the public (Lippmann, 1922). According to agenda-setting, the public becomes concerned with topics selected by the main decision-maker, the mass media (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Therefore,
if a topic is more present in the media, the public is going to consider it increasingly important. Media manages to influence the public in three different ways: by awareness, priorities, and salience. (McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

Mass-media works with attributes and usually, these attributes are called frames (McCombs & Stroud, 2014). Therefore as long as mass-media focuses on a certain topic, the subject becomes more important for the target audience and its agenda.

With all these new theories and premises, the understanding of the concept changed as well. Agenda setting, priming, framing, and second-level agenda rely on frameworks and regarded salience for the concerned objects, while agenda building as well as melding focus on the individuals encountering these objects. Currently, mass media is going through profound changes since it needs to come proactively forward towards all target audiences, fighting for relevance. New media’s development and independent journalism focused on on-line information sharing has transformed the classic, conservative media into a changed hybrid media. In current times, the consumer is king, and all media outlets must adapt accordingly.

1.3 From agenda setting to priming, framing, and second-level agenda setting

The priming theory refers to the perspective of public opinion. To put it another way, the priming theory (Iyengar, Peters, & Kinder, 1982) argues that the most discussed topics throughout the media can easily become the evaluation framework and criteria in the eyes of the public. The priming theory has its core foundation in objects’ perceptual pairing or herding. Priming usually creates direct empathy with different publics by presenting positive, negative, associative, repetitive, perceptual, or conceptual patterns. Therefore, priming means that mass media supplies its publics with the potential framework for discussion or topic tackling, thus making the individuals more prone to particular issues. Priming is directly linked to context as well, simply because topic perception is directly influenced by what is taking place on a wider scale of events (Iyengar, Peters, & Kinder, 1982).

As for political priming, mass media is the perfect environment for candidates’ or institutions’ evaluation by establishing different reviewing thresholds based on salience. Mass media constantly emphasizes the standards that the public needs to rely on and relate to, by appraising and assessing while pushing forward different elements. The same process takes place during political campaigns as well, when mass media assumes a similar role by giving salience to different perspectives. However, an evaluation framework does not solely influence the public’s eye. Using specific frameworks, through framing, mass-media manages to shape any given topics or issues even more.

Framing theory, while related to agenda setting, enlarges this initial setting by placing different topics within a window of significance using frames and filters.
Mass media, through framing, touches upon the public perception (and opinions) over a set of issues. Therefore, mass media becomes the public’s attention guider, as mentioned earlier (Iyengar, Peters, & Kinder, 1982).

This interpretation is set throughout a primary framework (Goffman, 1974) made up of two distinctive parts: a natural framework and a social one, which has the role to make the individual in question understand and translate surrounding events. Numerous authors went further than Goffman and tried to explain how mass media and social media’s foundations are based on framing. The result was that framing theory influences opinion leaders by framing different topics or issues, using different assessments or viewpoints. Furthermore, the frames themselves can be part of a wider informational spectrum (Entman, 1993) based on salience even by using tautologies of familiar associations. Good framing is typically associated with metaphors – framing by comparison; storytelling – framing by imagination; tradition – framing by day to day rituals; slogan – framing by catchy phrases; artifacts – framing by symbolism; contrast – framing by opposing or rotation – framing by judgment values (Fairhurst & Sarr, 1996). To sum up, framing is closely tied with the agenda-setting theory, drawing the public’s attention towards a specific set of topics. The difference is that through framing, mass media creates an explanation and interpretation environment.

For political framing, mass media creates the climate by highlighting important topics while the candidates enroll to accept or reject these topics. The electoral results will show how politicians managed to tick all issues chosen by the media. The best political framing tool is opinion polls as the involved public is going to be directly influenced by how different questions are asked or the questions’ order (Zaller, 1992). In conclusion, framing is a dynamic process (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). Via different frames, the same topic can hold plenty of meanings in the eyes of the public. And, to go further, agenda-setting holds two different levels, with equal importance.

McCombs and Shaw (1993) argue that the agenda-setting theory has two levels: the first one regards salience transfer towards different objects (or topics) whereas the second level refers to the salience of attributes or features for the same set of topics. The difference between these two levels of agenda-setting consists in focus and zoom: the first level is about focusing on issues, events, or political figures of the agenda and how these could impact the audience’s perception (McCombs, 1992), whereas the second level zooms in on attributes, characteristics, and properties of a specific object, thus describing it (Kim & McCombs, 2007). Second-level agenda setting refers to what the public opinion needs to concentrate on. Framing theory is more prone to biased interpretations.
1.4 From second-level agenda setting
towards agenda building and agenda melding

Who sets the agenda and with what consequences? (McCombs, 1994). Agenda building is a concept emerging from the PR world where information is traded as an economic good. Trading information could create supply and demand.

Agenda building is a relationship among various sources perfectly described by Berkowitz and Adams (1990, 724) as a “symbiosis among friendly adversaries” when talking about different sources such as political parties, governmental institutions, or different organizations. Agenda building or third level agenda setting focuses on how the relationship between the media and its sources is constantly developing (Shoemaker & Reese, 2003). In theory, the public has infinite sources of information, all connected:

− Traditional media (TV, radio, newspapers) and even some on-line media emerged from the traditional one (websites);
− Opinion leaders;
− Personal environments where each individual becomes an information supplier or aggregator. One suitable example is when traditional media picks up something shared by an individual and transforms it into a newsworthy story.

Media’s influence sits in the audience’s opinion on various topics and whether / how these audiences decide to include the topics in their agendas (Foss & Littlejohn, 2009). Therefore, as the new media emerged in importance, the on-demand information began spreading (Schivinski & Dabrowski, 2014).

These individual sources became more and more prominent in the online spectrum, users developing into genuine agenda traders, fully-fledged information dealers. The online has become the most suitable place for individuals to build agendas. The traditional role of mass media is changing while the classic media is no longer the reins keeper in terms of topic and issues agenda. Instead, the opinion leaders and individuals are gaining ground in terms of relevance towards any given public. For example, news websites need to adapt to social media such as Youtube, Facebook, or Twitter platforms. However, what happens when these sources are individuals having the same set of information and interests? As aforementioned, their agendas combine and meld, forming a new set of dynamic inputs, setting the traditional media on an active defensive to stay relevant.

1.5 Agenda Melding

Individuals are becoming increasingly careful when selecting different sources of information. Real-time information sharing via different on-line platforms allowed people around the globe to easily find and interact with others having similar agendas (Ragas & Roberts, 2009).
Individuals have different social needs whereas one of the most important is affiliation to certain groups. Therefore, individuals will eventually lay down their agendas for the bigger, more complex ones in the groups they will affiliate with. Groups usually dictate what the individuals think of and about (Shaw & Colistra, 2007). Leon Festinger (1962) underlined in his theory of social dissonance this phenomenon arguing that individuals constantly tend to reduce any discomfort, to avoid any dissonance, and to establish harmony in attitudes and social settings. Therefore, an individual is prone to reduce this social discomfort by adhering to designated groups, which meet different social particularities.

Concisely, agenda melding is the aforementioned individual need for affiliation towards a group, which eases up the need for this harmony-seeking tendency. Agenda melding refers to groups’ agendas, which start creating different individuals’ agendas creating a meld if the groups in question match the initial social needs and expectations of its members (Shaw, McCombs, & Bradley, 1999). This is a reversed-like agenda setting; however, agenda melding does not replace the agenda setting-effect (Teter-Novak, 2016).

The public is becoming the main issue or topic holder, the public decides what is relevant while the media has to adapt accordingly. Agenda melding changed the initial agenda-setting paradigm: the public no longer passively waits to receive relevant topics or issues but instead, they actively engage in searching different sources of information. Furthermore, David Weaver (1980) questions how different individuals are attracted to a certain set of topics over another one. Agenda melding is answering the same question: why certain individuals prefer certain groups with certain agendas. The need for learning can be one of the answers (Shaw, 1999). Individuals inside a favorite group can become influencers and opinion leaders if the learning process is dully fulfilled.

In conclusion, agenda melding helps individuals to select sources of information whereas becoming more critical towards any given traditional media as part of an increasingly bigger network of groups on- and offline. From agenda setting to agenda melding, mass-media influences people’s behavior, people’s daily choices, and people’s perception over certain issues or topics. In the era of social media, although individuals actively search for topics of interest, mass-media still holds the influencing capacity through various groups where certain people actively push for some topics, hence making a perception impact. The social media algorithm usually shows posts shared on different groups, therefore blending a mixture of digital agenda-setting with agenda melding. Individuals tend to be more influenced by what information they are reading detrimental to what their agenda is. We wanted to assess how on-line groups where individuals tend to gather information from, how groups influence their options, behaviors, or even certain perceptions. Moreover, all the above-mentioned theoretical elements are part of the overall context.
pinpointing how on-line groups distribute various topics and how these framed and primed topics could reveal some members’ behavioral patterns.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research questions

This article aims to answer to the following research questions:

RQ1: Do individuals tend to embrace a spiral silence behavior as a certain group member and decide any voting intentions based on the group’s voting intentions?
RQ2: How do individuals tend to embrace any on-line group influence in their voting behavior?
RQ3: How do individuals refer to their voting behavior if they trust/distrust the authorities’ Corona-related approach?

2.2 Method

The research was carried out through a series of focus groups organized before the campaign for the Romanian local elections in 2020. The subjects were individuals involved in politics, candidates, party members, and future volunteers registered for training sessions on political communication, thus we used a convenience sample comprised of participants who agreed to take part in the present research. The eight focus groups were organized via the Zoom platform, and occurred on a weekly basis, along eight weeks. At the end of each sessions, the subjects were given two scenarios to assess, in order to further elicit qualitative data: (1) If individuals do not trust the authorities’ measures dealing with the Corona crisis, they will not go and vote; and (2) Despite individuals thinking the authorities took the right measures dealing with the Corona crisis, they will not go and vote since some specific groups (on- and off-line) bear a certain amount of influence over their behavior.

2.3 Focus group interview grid

The focus-groups aimed to point out the fact that and mechanisms through which certain groups influence individuals while conditioning some specific actions, opinions, and even direct approaches on various topics: in the present case – the voting behavior.

The questions addressed from the debriefing will seek any behavioral patterns and are followed by further in-depth discussion on the topics under analysis. Some of the questions used within the focus-group guide are the following ones: Are you optimistic or pessimistic about the current Corona crisis?; Do you think Romanian authorities took good care in handling the current situation?; Do you wish to go and vote for local elections?; Which online groups are you a member of?; Why did you choose these groups in the first place?; What are the main topics usually dis-
cussed in these groups and why?; How they think these topics bear any influence over topics’ perception?; Who / What could change your decision?

2.4 Target audience

The individuals who took part in the focus group were men and women, aged between 18 and 50, earning medium to high incomes, actively involved in Romanian politics. The focus groups took place after the on-line meeting/training, lasting about 20 minutes with all involved individuals directly answering questions. This study is directly related to the hybrid way of debriefing since it followed a 90 minutes-long on-line meeting and all individuals could have been influenced by the discussion topics (see below). Some 55 individuals answered the questions, over an eight-week long time during which lockdown was imposed (March-May 2020); 35 were men and 20 were women. 35% had high school as their last graduated educational institution, 55% graduated college and 10% had post-graduate studies. 90% were pleased or content with their income situation while 10% posted a low-income situation. 100% had internet access. 55% posted they interact with politically related news shared on social media at least once a day, 40% at least once at three days, and 5% once every 5 days. 100% of participants were Facebook group members on various themes or issues: education, economy, miscellaneous, politics.

2.5 The focus groups

We divided the focus group into two distinct parts: the initial, introductory part being the training per se while the second part was the debriefing including the afore-mentioned questions. This approach aimed to have all involved people fully on board. Since the pandemic context restricted the interview setting to an on-line focus group gathering volunteers, the author announced the staging before the training began.

The first part – the training – took place for 90 minutes while the second part lasted 20 minutes with a total of around 110 minutes. The training focused on political campaigning, how to communicate properly during the pandemic, tips, and tricks on how to adapt the message under the current social and health-related circumstances. The training followed a presentation that lasted for 90 minutes, with no interruption for Q&A. Therefore, we assess all presented topics that influenced the subsequent debriefing since some participants evaluated whether they can or cannot face the current pandemic conditions while campaigning for a party or endorsing a political nomination. The closed-end answers were addressed first to test if the initial training had any influence over the individuals’ answers. During the first and second part of the meeting, all participants had a 10 to 12-minute break.

This break was important since the author deemed it tiresome for the subjects, after 90 minutes of sitting in front of a screen, taking notes, paying attention, or
just listening. After the break, we underlined that all participants are to take part in a focus group and asked for their consent to answer the questions. All participants gave their consent in an equal amount of time.

3. Results

A significant part of the respondents stated they were pessimistic about the current Coronavirus crisis and its outcome. The author aimed to see whether this pessimism is established over a certain pattern of issues or just generally speaking pessimism. Therefore, we asked individuals what aspects they think the Corona crisis hits the hardest. The answers are shown below:

![Figure 1. Corona pessimism](image)

Few individuals voiced optimism about the Corona crisis, the vast majority saying Romania will not face any severe consequences (Health or economic related). We divided this pessimism versus optimism into two batches, so we can further assess the answers. Some of the answers are quoted below:

“*The crisis will hit jobs mostly and it will create economic uncertainty*, “*we don’t know what to expect since all jobs took this hit creating economic uncertainty*”. (male)

“*The crisis will clog the medical system*, “*the economic shutdown will face huge economic impact and consequences*”. (female)

Regarding the Romanian authorities’ measures in handling the Corona crisis, the pessimistic batch answered differently compared with the optimistic individuals. The answers are shown in Figure 2.

As an initial conclusion, the individuals are split into three parts: the ones who think the Government took the right decisions on all three layers of problems – Health, Economic, and Social Issues, the individuals who think the Government was wrong on all three layers of issues and the neutral ones who don’t think the Government is right or wrong. Interestingly enough, among the pessimistic indi-
individuals, there is a solid amount who were confident about the measures imposed. As expected, though, the majority of individuals are not confident about the imposed measures.

The most pessimistic individuals who resent the Government’s measures pinpointed the issues on the Economic level. Therefore, we can assess that the aforementioned results in which jobs and economic issues were put forward as root causes for pessimism are the main reasons for Governmental distrusts. The second place is health issues so this answer, in our opinion, becomes important over local elections’ context.

Social issues could also be a decisive factor for not going to vote since if an individual doesn’t trust the Government’s actions on economic or health layers, social distrust is merely only a consequence.

The Optimistic answers resemble the Pessimistic answers. All individuals perceived the Government’s actions – right, wrong, or neutral, mainly the same.

The optimistic individuals believe the Government made some mistakes. This could prove problematic in the upcoming elections scenario, since these perceived mistakes can change the voting presence.

All involved individuals accused the Government of economic and health-related consequences. Some answers are quoted: “by imposing a curfew without specific measures, the Government will face scrutiny and will destroy small and medium-sized enterprises”, “the Government should have increased spending in the healthcare system since we are facing a pandemic”, “no real measures were taken to help the economy recover”, “we cannot blame the Government for everything but they failed into containing the economic and health-related consequences”.

The question is aimed directly at linking the voting presence with the Corona Optimism or Corona Pessimism. We intentionally left three answering possibilities:

**Figure 2. Corona pessimism in respect to Government’s actions**

[Image of bar chart showing voting preferences linked to government actions and issues]

- The Government did the right thing
- The Government did a lot of mistakes
- Neutral position

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<th></th>
<th>Health Issues</th>
<th>Economic issues</th>
<th>Social issues</th>
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<td>The Government did the right thing</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Government did a lot of mistakes</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral position</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
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Yes, No and Maybe to see whether there is a link between voting presence, optimism/pessimism, and specific issues.

The focus group was video-based on the Zoom platform, after the training. We opted for this approach since participants already took part in the initial session on Zoom and all were comfortable with this approach. The answers’ transcript was done live by the same person who addressed the questions who is the same person taking the initial training. This approach was intended to ease all participants’ way of answering while keeping them as involved as possible.

The results were biased with “Yes” and “No” answers scoring low in numbers while maybe gathering numerous answers. Considering the individuals are actively involved in daily political life, part of them being members of different parties, this could mean a widely spread discontent.

In both situations, the “Maybe” option scored the highest points in individuals’ acceptance. As an intermediate conclusion, we can say that both parties – the Pessimistic and the Optimistic are on stand-by regarding the upcoming elections. Despite being discontent on various issues, despite being optimistic or pessimistic about the pandemic outcome, many individuals do not have a solid decision taken on voting.

Another interesting conclusion is when pessimistic individuals say they will go and vote. This is directly linked with discontent and the individual needs to change something throughout the voting procedure. During these focus groups, we did not assess any party specifics: whether people have any established political favorites or if they advocate for a certain party. These individuals could further influence the campaign outcome by rallying behind a specific political cause.

An important dimension for question number 3’s results is the Optimistic individuals who stated they will not go and vote. Again, this is linked to political or

![Figure 3. Corona optimism in respect to Government’s actions](image-url)
governmental discontent. Despite seeing a bright light at the end of the Corona tunnel, these individuals are somehow disappointed overall with the political offer. These individuals could further influence the campaign outcome by convincing others to stay home on election day.

**Corona Optimism and Corona Pessimism**

We divided into two sections all individuals taking part in this focus group to see whether their Corona situation perception has any influence on the overall results. Therefore, to keep track more easily, we proposed Corona optimism and Corona pessimism terms depending on what they think the current situation will lead to if they view the Corona situation as something episodic with minimum consequences on economic and social levels, we addressed them as Corona optimistic individuals. On the other hand, if they foresee the current pandemic having a significant impact on all levels, with profound changes on all social and economic layers, we named them Corona pessimistic individuals. In short, all individuals taking part in the focus group have an opinion on the consequences this Corona crisis will bring. Fewer think everything will turn out ok for them and the society as a whole, the majority perceive the Corona-situation as something with long term implications.

Since the “Maybe” answer had the biggest chart pie in both parties, it’s best to put forward the open answer on “Who could change your decision?”. The results are not surprising since Health and Economic success stories are the most important topics both for Optimistic and Pessimistic individuals and not necessarily the political offer.

**What are the main electoral drivers for Pessimistic individuals?**

- Good handling on the Corona situation; The absence of a second wave; If they manage the situation properly; The safeguarding impression; No big economic consequences; Helping in keeping the jobs in place; No more lockdown measures; A more flexible curfew and so on.

In other words, all Corona Pessimistic individuals are waiting for some positive news to work as a form of voting presence catalyst.

**What are the main electoral drivers for Optimistic individuals?**

- Depending on the situation; depending on who is running; depending on the pandemic and governmental outcome.

The Pessimistic individuals are more prone to vote compared with the Optimistic one. This is the first breakthrough: the voting presence is related more to what the country’s policies are or how any major party or Government manages to handle the crisis properly. The pandemic (as a whole) is only a reason for evaluation and not a reason itself. In other words, if a candidate doesn’t manage to motivate the electorate, both pessimistic and optimistic individuals will not go and vote. Remember these individuals are involved in every-day politics and these answers are a good litmus sheet.
Since we drew this conclusion, we wanted to take a deeper dive and seek how groups influence these individuals. Therefore, we addressed the same group-related questions which we asked the individuals who ticked the “Yes” or “No” answers: Which online groups are you a member of? The question is an open answer one. Here, most individuals (both optimistic and pessimistic ones) answered with groups related to work, family, or various hobbies; nothing relevant to politics.

We continued to seek why they chose those groups in the first place. Some of them answered friends and family (or work colleagues) introduced them in those groups, part of them sought for certain hobby-related groups. Therefore a 70/30 split between passive and active group engagement.

Continuing, we assessed what were the main topics usually discussed in these groups, and why? All individuals stated the topics are mainly focused on the group’s themes and rarely (once or twice per week) some politically-related articles or discussion emerges. Therefore, we continued to see how they think this topics’ density bears any influence over the topic’s perception.

The same “maybe” / unknown / stand by idea appeared: all individuals stated the perception is neutral and no one (members of these groups) are not trying to change any opinion.

Moving forward with individuals who answered “Yes” or “No” to the voting presence question, we analyzed both optimistic and pessimistic individuals on the aisle. The results are shown below (remember, the “Yes” answer is higher in number on both categories):

**Which online groups are you a member of?**

All individuals pointed towards three categories: hobby related, work-related, and politics related groups. This is another important breakthrough since there is the first link between voting decisions and group membership.

**Why did you choose these groups in the first place?**

The vast majority of individuals stated the membership was a passive choice (80/20), however, the remaining 20% stated they needed more information on various topics (politics included). This is the second link on voting decisions and group membership.

**What are the main topics usually discussed in these groups and why?**

All individuals stated that each group has a specific area of interest and usually topics stay in that area.

**How do they think these topics bear any influence over topics’ perception?**

All individuals who ticked the “Yes” or “No” answers stated at least one friend, or one relative is part of a certain group, therefore they tend to trust topics that are discussed in that specific group more.
Conclusion and further research

Voting is a complex behavior. Individuals, politically involved or not, tend to mix political trust with agenda-setting and melding to draw their conclusion about voting. During the focus group, we saw that none of the participants who also took part in the local elections’ training spoke anything about local elections. All individuals were focusing on the Government’s measures as a litmus paper for political trust and eventually, voting behavior. All participants pointed towards how the Government manages to handle a crisis on Health, Social and Economic levels as the trust measure. Interestingly enough, the focus group participants, although actively involved in politics, did not show any biased political opinion about any party – power or opposition. Furthermore, most individuals stated voting is an option but depending on what situation or context this moment will bring. In other words, although they understand that voting is a key part of any democratic community, they do not have any real option crystallized. For a given candidate this is both an opportunity and a risk since the Corona-situation changed the classic way of campaigning.

Political trust and agenda melding

Groups influence people. This is the main conclusion we drew from the focus group. Moreover, discussion topics influence people’s beliefs, behaviors, and opinions. Each group, whether it’s on or off-line exists on a blend of agenda-setting and melding. Members are subjected to agenda setting since the group contains only a certain amount of issues or topics while individuals tend to filter the information according to their own beliefs or opinions. The vast number of individuals who were group members stated they tend to trust that specific group more since at least one friend or one relative is also part of the group. In conclusion, groups influence people but groups having closed-related people can change members’ behaviors and beliefs.

At the time of this research, the Coronavirus pandemic is not over hence its consequences are not over. Therefore, voting behavior will change according to what measures the Government will impose. The health and economy will have consequences if Cabinet representatives fail to create a trust bridge between citizens and institutions.

Individuals will go and vote or will refuse to go and vote considering some factors, not only the measures imposed by authorities. Therefore, who ticked the “Maybe” answer, despite being involved in the daily political life, will wait on stand-by. Pessimists and are more prone to voting compared with Optimists while the on-line groups influence the voting decision, despite the Corona crisis. This could be investigated further: why Pessimists, despite their grim outlook for the future, decide to change something while Optimists are undecided? Moreover, how could an on-line group influence the “Maybes” into any electoral behavior?
References


