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**IN GOD’S NAME: AN ANALYSIS OF RELIGION USED AS DISCURSIVE
INSTRUMENT IN ROMANIAN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS**

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Abstract: The relationship between religion and politics has been subjected to diverse research approaches, the manners in which one influences the other being thoroughly analyzed. The present paper was focused on the same relationship, but in the presence of a third element, social media. Analyzing how these three interact, what can be found within the relations created between them and the effects of these interactions on society were the key objectives of the study. These types of information could be found and interpreted through a critical discourse analysis, done in a time, space and context frame relevant for the matter. The chosen frame was represented by the 2025 Romanian presidential elections campaign, the rerun organized after the cancellation of the 2024 rounds of elections. A strongly religious country, in a complex and complicated political moment could offer the right habitat for an in-depth view. By analyzing the Facebook posts of the four most voted candidates in the first round of elections, patterns and differences in how religion is used as discursive tool were identified and explored. Results showed that religion is a strategic favorite of Romanian candidates running for president. Even if they handled it in different ways, religion was present in an almost mandatory manner in the discourses posted by candidates on their social media pages. Even if the separate analysis of each candidate’s use of religion offered information about their strategies, perhaps the most interesting aspects were found in the posts responding or referring to the opponents and to the content circulating online about them. Social media was proven to be the main element changing the realities of religion and dictating how it is used in political discourse, a lot of room for future research being left in this virtual space of interaction.

Key words: religion, mediatization, critical discourse analysis, Romanian politics, social media.

1. Introduction

The “what” and the “how” of political communication have been elements approached in research throughout a multitude of domains, from political science to sociology or even to psychology. An important presence, within the “what” of political communication is religion. Its influence, adapted to spatial, temporal and cultural frames, has generated more and more conversations, from casual debates to scientific studies. The current one is meant to look not only into the “what”, but also into the “how” of religion in political communication, considering the latter just as valuable. The spatial, temporal and cultural frames behind this paper are extremely relevant to its topic and objectives, because they build a context in which certain dimensions of religion can be accessed. The frame of a strongly orthodox Romania (Institutul Național de Statistică 2021), a Romania recently faced with a cancelled presidential elections process and organizing a rerun (Autoritatea Electorală Permanentă 2024), a Romania fighting the rise of populist and extremist voices (Armeanu 2025), is a frame which captures religion at the center of each of these elements (Gherghina & Mișcoiu 2022). The increase in populist views and representatives is a reality in many countries from Europe and from around the world, Romania being no exception. (Piacentini et al 2024) However, the case of Romania is very important, given its geographical position and the defense role played in organizations such as NATO or EU. (Oehler-Sincai 2023) What is more, studying the relationship between religion and politics in Romania can be useful, because it can give insights into how these two influence each other and into how they dictate aspects of people's lives, individually and together. Religion is still an essential part of the lives lived by people in Romania, that is why any involvement in politics hold immense power. (Drobot 2023) This paper approaches one dimension of this involvement, specifically the one in political discourse. By analyzing the ways in which religion is used in political discourse, especially in a crucial political moment such as the rerun of presidential elections, the strategies and power of populist discourse can be better understood. This is the main goal of the paper, but all its objectives revolve around understanding and unraveling the ways in which popular, powerful elements such as religion can ensure the popularity, the power of parties and politicians. If the “what” of the paper is represented by religion, studied in the micro-universe of political discourse, the “how” is represented by the realities of the discourse itself. One of the most important realities is the extraordinary influence of technology, particularly of social media platforms, on the development of political communication. (Hjarvard 2008a) Another reality is that discourse is one of the

most powerful parts of a political campaign. (van Dijk 2011) Again, the power is found not only in what is delivered, but also in how something is delivered. That is why listening and reading what a candidate, especially one that runs for presidency, is of great importance, for research and for all citizens. When analyzing how an aspect such as religion is used in a religious country to convince, persuade or manipulate, similar situations may become easier to anticipate, to recognize or even easier to fight at earlier stages. The theoretical relevance of the paper relies on the relationships formed within and because of this reality, while the frames mentioned earlier in the paper ensure additional layers of value. The interactions between religion and social media, between religion and political discourse, between social media and discourse have at least the same amount of potential as the elements on their own, when it comes to the insight they offer. Romania as space, a year of crucial, complicated presidential elections and a context of populist rise are all factors that contribute to the relevance of the study. The paper aims to discover and uncover the strategies used to instrumentalize religion, from combinations of words to the tone of voice or to stylistic choices.

Regarding the state of religion and religiosity in the digital age, we notice the existence of a double trend. On one hand, although there is no incompatibility between religion and technology, as they have developed complex relationships throughout history, Alina Preda reveals that with the formation of transnational religious communities, with the increasing influence of education on the development of cultural intelligence, and with the privilege of communication technologies, the internet, robotics and artificial intelligence in everyday life, we can observe a diminution or even a decline of religiosity, especially in its traditional forms of manifestation (Preda 2024). On the other hand, Iulia Grad highlights the fact that mythical and religious elements can be found in metamorphosed or camouflaged forms in various manifestations of the imaginary or in ritual behaviors in the most unexpected places, such as advertising, the development of commercial brands or personal branding, or other forms of behavior of young people in virtual spaces and social networks (Grad 2023).

In order to find as much valuable information as possible, the analysis needs to be done while taking into consideration the other realities around and outside the discourse, such as cultural aspects or current societal challenges. Even though the elements approached in the paper are found in different contexts throughout the covered literature, the ways in which religion, political discourse and social media interact with and affect each other are the aspects that offer the most information about Romanian politicians, about Romanian citizens and about the current state of communication within this geographical, cultural and ideological space.

2. Theoretical Framework

The ways in which religion and politics influence each other has been an aspect of great interest and its development, adapted to societal changes, continues to generate questions. (Arnal, McCutcheon 2013; Arnason, Karolewski 2014; Wuthnow 1991; Norris 2011; Margolis 2018) Framing elements such as religion and political discourse is a process dependent, as previously stated, on spatial and temporal framing. Ideologies, political directions and discourse shifts come, go and change according to the changes in the social, economic and cultural levels of a society. (Katz 2024, 23) When it comes to religion, the area discussed in this paper is extremely relevant, given the strategic and cultural position of a country such as Romania. On one hand, religion is fundamental to countries similar to Romania and to Romania itself when it comes to the everyday life of its citizens, to whom and what they believe, to how they behave and to where they are going in terms of societal movements and choices. (Bean 2014; Djupe, Gilbert 2003) On the other hand, former Eastern Bloc states have given religion special roles, such as the ones of reflecting and shaping society's values and core characteristics, and have experienced religion in a continuous dialogue with politics, these two actors becoming closer and closer. (Haynes 2022, 78) The dialogue between two of the most important elements reflecting and shaping a society such as Romania, politics and religion, is built and maintained through discourse. When disseminated, ideas and directions created by the dialogue between religion and politics can alter the present and the future of a society. (80) The relationship between political discourse and religion, in particular, is one of codependence, because political discourse nowadays needs religion in order to reach and convince audiences, while religion needs political discourse in order to maintain a great amount of influence on people's minds, on the choices they make. (81) This phenomenon can be observed especially when looking at populist discourse, one of the most successful ones in recent years, a perfect example of what can be generated by the dialogue between politics and religion. Eastern Europe has been experiencing an increasing success of populist views and voices, especially when it comes to right-wing populism. Also, the distance between the realities and movements of society have become less and less separated from the realities and movements of politics in the context of the rise of right-wing populism. (Ujházy 2024) The influence of religion, for instance, is more and more visible in the relationship between politics and citizens, becoming one of the most present factors in political discourse, in policy making, thus influencing how people perceive the world, life itself and others. (Schwörer 2024; Siles et al. 2021; Domke, Coe 2008) This phenomenon can be noticed in the ways people currently relate to each other. The separation between 'pure' and 'corrupt' people can be associated with religious views of the world, while political discourse en-

sures that populist voices are the advantaged pole in this opposition relationship. (Mudde 2017, 31) Political discourse has increasingly used the rhetoric of 'us' versus 'them', while also evoking a strong connection to religious values and ideas. The distance between politics and religion has decreased, leaving space for a relationship of codependence, within which politics and religion contribute to each other's influence on people and society as a whole. (Piacentini et al 2024; Schwörer, Fernández-García 2021) The closeness between religion and politics, manifested especially in political discourse, is also strongly influenced by technology, specifically by social media. The internal realities of social media greatly impact the external realities, also contributing to the constant reshaping of society. On the basis of mediatization theory, religion mediatization is one of the key theoretical dimensions of this paper. By acknowledging the fact that social media influences not only the behavior and content creation process of political actors, but also the status and nature of religion itself, studying the relationships between the approached elements can be more efficient. Religion, just as political communication, is shaped by platforms such as Facebook or TikTok, having to adapt to algorithms, to trends, to the logic of each social media platform. (Hjarvard 2008b; Hjelm 2013) Therefore, the key element in the analysis of religion used as political campaign instrument is social media and its specificities. In order to correctly identify and understand this process, an in-depth analysis is necessary, the political discourse present on social media having the potential to reflect important realities of religion instrumentalization.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

After reviewing the literature connected to the chosen topic of the paper, the following research questions resulted:

RQ1: Which discursive strategies do Romanian presidential candidates involve in the process of religion instrumentalization on social media?

RQ2: What similarities and differences are there between the processes of religion instrumentalization sustained by Romanian presidential candidates?

RQ3: How do political discourse, religion and social media influence and interact with each other during the presidential election campaign in Romania?

In order to find the most relevant information, fit to help answer the research questions and, ideally, generate additional ones for further research, the present study focuses on certain points. Firstly, given the complexity of the relationship between religion, political discourse and social media, the method chosen for the study was critical discourse

analysis. By using this method, how the external world influences the political discourse and how the political discourse influences the external world can be understood. (Van Dijk 1993; Schiffrin et al. 2008) This method is essential to the efficient exploration of how religion is used in social media political discourse, because these elements, both individually and together, are influenced by and depend on former, current and possible external realities. For example, faith can be conveyed in political messages in connection to the invasion of Russia in Ukraine or to the statements posted by USA President Donald Trump on Twitter. Societal changes and dynamics profoundly influence the micro-universe of social media political discourse, therefore the analysis process also needs to take these into consideration. The chosen sample was found on Facebook, given the hybridity that characterizes the platform, both regarding to format (videos, images, texts) and to style (formal and informal). The analysis was done on the Facebook pages of the presidential elections' candidates with more than 1 million votes received in the first round of elections. (Autoritatea Electorală Permanentă 2025) So, the official posts from 4 Facebook pages were analyzed, the time frame being represented by the campaign period (April 3rd-May 2nd, 2025). Some main aspects were followed throughout the analysis, such as religious elements (Christianity, God's help) or discursive strategies (framing the opponents as evil, persuasion). But each discourse and its messenger were subjected to an in-depth analysis, even though some were not following the standard patterns, because all elements and their relationships were relevant to the study.

3.2. Results

Based on the critical discourse analysis done on Facebook on the posts belonging to the top 4 candidates running for president in Romania, during the May 2025 campaign, some aspects could be identified in each of the candidate's discourse (Ponta n.d.; Antonescu n.d.; Simion n.d.; Dan n.d.) Identified data, analyzed on an individual level or introduced in the study in a comparative manner, provided information about aspects such as the presence of clear religious posts in the candidates' campaign activity, as it can be seen in the graph below. With their help, the process of answering the research questions and also additional ones was an easier task and valuable insight was provided about Romanian politics and society:

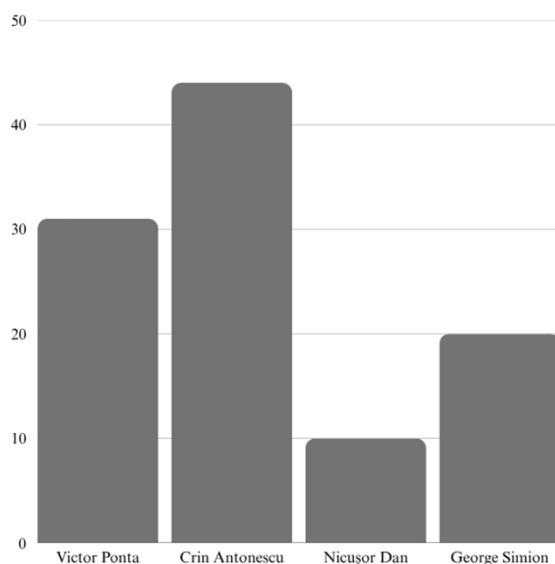


Figure 1. Clear Religious Posts on the Facebook Pages of the 2025 Romanian Presidential Elections Candidates during the Campaign Period

Finishing the presidential race on the 4th position, with over 1.2 million votes, Victor Ponta was one of the most experienced politicians running for president. He ran for this position in 2014 and came in second. (Autoritatea Electorală Permanentă 2014) His 2025 campaign on Facebook consisted of 198 posts, 31 of them being clear religious posts. However, looking only at the 31 posts would have been inefficient, because markers of religious discourse could be identified in almost all posts uploaded during the campaign. The type of posts ranged from image and text to video and text and plain text. The common element was written text, accompanying other types of content. Formality was mostly associated with videos depicting the candidate directly addressing the audience, while informality was prevalent in videos depicting Ponta having conversations with people, keeping a balance between the two. It was mainly in these community conversations that religious markers were chosen as discursive strategy. His overall discourse on Facebook was perhaps the most linguistically connected to religion, because religious words and citations from religious texts were very present, always suggesting that God supports him as candidate, as political figure and as human. In fact, Victor Ponta practiced a speech in which religious elements were very strong in the previous presidential election race. In his 2014 campaign, the prime minister candidate for the presidency of Romania entered the second round with a speech built around the idea of being a good Romanian, respecting religious values, helping those in vulnerable situations, etc. In this context, he also enjoyed the support of some

members of the Orthodox clergy, although the Romanian Orthodox Church decided to be neutral in electoral campaigns.

When it comes to the third position from the first round of elections, collecting over 1.8 million votes, Crin Antonescu also approached religion with consistence and persistence. From 159 posts in total during the campaign period, 44 posts were evidently dedicated to religion. With a very formal campaign style, being the second very experienced candidate, besides Ponta, he presented himself as the serious candidate, as an experienced politician protecting and promoting traditional values. Keeping a balance between poster-type content, fragments from filmed interviews, community visits and direct messages to the audience and his opponents, Antonescu's Facebook posts had religion present in some way in almost all of them. In comparison to Victor Ponta, he did not use direct quotes from religious texts or religious linguistic structures. He chose to focus on rather indirect terms and ideas, such as morality, traditional family, Christian principles, conservative perspectives. On the other hand, he was one of the two candidates, the other one being further approached, posting content depicting conversations or meetings with Orthodox religious figures. So, religion was present in a less ostentatious manner in Crin Antonescu's discourse, but even just the quantity of religious content proved that his campaign activity was nonetheless an attempt to attract religious people. Moreover, we can recall that, as one of the 12 candidates in the 2009 Romanian presidential elections, despite being the candidate of the National Liberal Party, which promoted a secular perspective on the state and the functioning of its institutions, Crin Antonescu did not hesitate to appeal to elements of religious symbolism and messianic imagery. With such a speech, Crin Antonescu came in third place, after Mircea Geoană and Traian Băsescu, the latter winning the elections and becoming president for a second term.

The second place in the first round of elections was occupied by Nicușor Dan, one of the two figures associated with the fight against the system, gaining almost 2 million votes. A former activist and the mayor of Bucharest, he has been a rather atypical politician. His Facebook campaign consisted of 41 posts before the first round and 130 in total, with less than 10 being directly linked to religious subjects. Most of his content was represented by videos and informality was his main choice in terms of discursive tone. Just as the other candidates, he depicted community visits and conversations. One thing he dedicated a lot of virtual space to was the combat of misinformation and disinformation surrounding his persona. Before the first round of elections, not many posts were dedicated to religious discussions, but he referred to his faith from the beginning. He marked events such as Easter or the death of Pope Francisc. Because many of the negative elections content online revolved around him and especially around his relationship with faith, he had to insist upon this topic, mainly in the period between the first and the second rounds of elections.

He directly addressed the rumors and refuted any misinformation about his and his family's faith. Therefore, even if religion was not as present as strategy in his overall discourse, it had to be included in special posts, because it was an essential part of the perception on his candidate status. If for other candidates the presence of religion was a strategic tool in political communication, in the case of Nicușor Dan things are different. He is more connected to action groups that put secular values at the center of public action. However, the fact that politicians have made a political fashion today of including references to religion in political communication forces the candidate to include elements related to religion in his electoral image construction. In the confrontation with the populist George Simion, in the second round of the presidential elections in 2025, Nicușor Dan won, becoming president of Romania.

Getting over 3.8 million votes in the first round of elections, George Simion had a rather moderate campaign before it when it comes to religion. Between the first round and the second round of elections, the relationship with religion became more and more present in his discourse. There were 44 posts on his Facebook page between the first round and 100 in total. Similar to the case of Victor Ponta and Crin Antonescu, even if there were not many posts directly associated with religion, religious sub-texts, undertones and markers were present throughout the campaign. Before the first round of elections, around 8 posts could be directly linked to religion, while before the second round around 20 posts were straightforward in their connection to religion. When it comes to the stylistic choices made by Simion in his campaign, there was a clear difference between the two rounds. During the first phase, the use of texts, videos and images could be identified, with the tone of voice being rather directed towards a moderate, neutral view. During the second phase, he started to address the audience using short and strong messages, live videos and calls to action. The first phase captured the presence of religion in posts celebrating holy figures, Orthodox holidays and proofs of faith within his family. The second phase depicted a candidate who tried to remind people that he is the candidate who is closest to God, uploading many videos in which he participated to Christian processions, in which he was embraced by important Orthodox figures and communities, in which he was trying to show that he is religious above all. Even if the candidates had different strategies, religion was one of the key elements present in their campaign strategies.

Susana Dragomir and Ioan Hosu analyzed the website, Facebook posts, articles and speeches of the AUR leaders, as well as elements of their political program and found that they have a predilection for invoking religious elements in their political discourse, resorting to mythical and religious forms of demonizing political opponents or those they perceive as belonging to a community otherness. They revealed that the AUR party led by George Simion "has proven that it has adopted an ideology and

discourse designed to mobilize Christians and their grievances... As described in the official program of AUR, the party is based on four pillars «family, faith, nation and freedom» where «faith is, theologically speaking, one of the three cardinal Christian virtues, when we say faith, we mean church, tradition, and nation... atheism is a wandering arising from the arrogance of those who imagine that an anthropocentric view of the universe is superior to a theocentric one», as follows from AUR Political Program (Dragomir, Hosu 2023, 40-41). In the spirit of a discourse specific to religious fundamentalism, religion is part of the political discourse and a central element of the imaginary that shapes social and political relations. The cultivation of tension between the religious majority and various minority groups is ongoing “in a context where Romania is a multi-ethnic country, with a mix of religious communities, pinpointing those who do not belong to the majority group could bring catastrophic consequences for the stability and peaceful cohabitation of our country” (Dragomir, Hosu 2023, 49).

In contradiction to the secular forms of the institutions of the digital age world, the anti-system, sovereignist, patriotic and Christian leader thus comes to be associated with far-right ideology. Although this association can be made from an ideological point of view, it is argued here that the closer relationship is the one with the discursive style and methods of political action of religious fundamentalists. Moreover, in the midst of the rise of scientific values and technological development, it is also argued that, at least on certain levels, a new wave of religiosity is also manifesting itself in the context of the birth of the digital era. Herdiansyah et al. shows that with the increasingly rapid development of digitalization, the spread of negative content on social networks and online platforms is facilitated, especially when it comes to content of a religious nature. Thus, “the emergence of social networks and content-sharing platforms has become a forum for spreading extremist views and content contrary to religious values” (Herdiansyah et al 2023, 30).

Different forms of authoritarianism manifested against the backdrop of invoking religious values can be found not only in Romania, but also in developed democracies in Europe. As Lucian-Vasile Szabo showed, “today we can observe authoritarian excesses even in the member states of the European Union. At the beginning of 2024, Hungary, Italy and Slovakia had governments anchored in the ideology of the radical right, with numerous sovereignist overtones, anti-migration policies and restrictive policies towards gender ideology. An extremist party became the main political force in the Dutch parliament, and in Poland, in December 2023, a liberal government replaced an eight-year conservative government, known for frequent attacks on the foundations of the rule of law, imposing the primacy of Polish law over European treaty law, with cruel anti-abortion legislation, bans for LGBTQ people. Strong far-right parties existed in

France, Germany and Spain as well, and the danger of their accession to power through a populist popular vote was very real” (Szabo 2024, 9).

3.3. Discussion

The critical discourse analysis done on the Facebook posts belonging to the top 4 Romanian candidates running for president in 2025 offered insights that were very useful in answering the research questions, while also adding value to the study by capturing subsidiary realities of the relationships between religion, politics, discourse and social media. When it comes to RQ1 (“Which discursive strategies do Romanian presidential candidates involve in the process of religion instrumentalization on social media”), results shown that, even though they use different types of discourse throughout the campaign period, the common and perhaps the main one was that the relationship with religion had to be suggested in ‘natural’ contexts. The preferred one was represented by fragments of conversations with people while visiting communities, included in video compilations. In these contexts, the candidates were suggesting through linguistic choices and statements their relationship with religion. From a “God bless us” to a declaration of faith, candidates included religion in their interactions with Romanian people, so that their faith could seem as sincere and similar to people’s own ideas of belief. RQ2 (“What similarities and differences are there between the processes of religion instrumentalization sustained by Romanian presidential candidates?”) was answered in more moments of the analysis. On one hand, the common ground of the candidates was the acknowledgement of the importance of religion when running for a position dependent on a positive image and on popularity. On the other hand, the differences between candidates offered maybe the most valuable insights. In Ponta’s case, religion was pushed as instrument in the most clear and insistent manner. Antonescu also falls in the category of candidates trying to prove they are religious using insistence, even though he relies more on ideas such as morality and values. Dan’s religious content is rather focused on combating the rumors that he is not as close to religion as the others, the remaining posts not being dedicated to religion. Simion is an interesting case, because of his moderation before the first round of elections. It is safe to argue that he his relationship with religion had been established long before the campaign period, so he did not seem that preoccupied with proving the strength of this relationship. The road to answering RQ3 (“How do political discourse, religion and social media influence and interact with each other during the presidential elections campaign in Romania?”) lead to relevant information. Firstly, the candidates considered experienced politicians, Ponta and Antonescu, needed to insist more on their religious side, as it could be observed in Figure 1 and as it was stated earlier in the Discussions segment of the paper. Both of them participated in elections when religion was not

as crucial for political discourse as it is nowadays. In opposition, the 'newer' candidates, Simion and Dan, have started their image construction in a time of certainty regarding the importance of religion in a political figure's popularity. Social media played an extraordinary part in establishing the newer candidates' relationship with religion, its usage as popularity measurement instrument helping the latter candidates build a favorable image in a timely manner. Social media played a crucial role especially during the campaign period regarding religion instrumentalization, because it allowed candidates to adapt and improve their discourse, according to the success of the others' strategies. The ways in which each of them approached religion depended on what the other candidates declared, on how people reacted to their content, on the information circulating online about themselves. Social media was one of the most important interaction partners and campaign advisers of candidates. A constant and major reality of the research process was the difficulty of choosing posts to analyze. The reason was the omnipresence of religion in the candidates' campaigns. Even if its presence was marked only by small reminders such as the inclusion of "With God's help" at the end of community visits or interview excerpts, discourse during the 2025 presidential elections process was directly and continuously connected to religion.

4. Conclusion

Through an in-depth analysis of campaign discourse during the 2025 Romanian presidential elections, realities from the political and societal dimensions were discovered and uncovered. Romania is a complex case, given its geographical and strategic position within international organizations and systems, and its scientific exploration has a great potential of offering valuable information. In a time when populist and right-wing views and voices are on the rise, it is essential to look at relevant spaces, Romania being one of them. The 2025 presidential elections rerun included conservative, liberal, nationalist and populist voices, so it represented a very useful resource for providing insights about the present of the country. The most successful candidates in the first round of elections represented different scenarios and different strategies, but their campaign were equally valuable when it came to one thing. They captured moments in the development of the relationship between religion, political discourse and social media. These three elements deeply impacted each other. Religion set decisive directions in political discourse. Political discourse ensured the efficiency of religious message transmission and the efficiency of image formation. Social media was dictating the form, the orientation of political discourse, while also forcing religion to adapt to its internal logic. Of course, there are limitations to the study, from the choice of platform in an era mainly marked by TikTok to the sample size

or to the chosen time and special frame. Further research could benefit from focusing on a comparative study, analyzing campaigns on different platforms, from different years and even from different countries, ensuring a broader view. Also, studies could choose to focus on other elements, religion being one of the many aspects instrumentalized in political discourse. The present paper manages to add layers to the study of political discourse on social media, one of the most influential elements in today's society.

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