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# Standing still or ascending in the social media political participation ladder? Evidence from Iran

*¿Quedarse estancado o ascender en la escalera de participación política en las redes sociales? Evidencias desde Irán*

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## **Abstract**

The appeal of social media has transformed the ways political participation is experienced. As an online communication tool, social media platforms have changed how political content is processed and transmitted. These developments have stimulated political participatory practices even in authoritarian regimes that are less tolerant on how social media affect people's political consciousness. This study seeks to examine whether social media platforms increase political participation in authoritarian regimes by having Iran as its case study. Iran is an authoritarian regime which imposes heavy censorship in all sorts of media and severe limitations in the freedom of speech. By introducing the Social Media Political Participation Ladder, this article accounts for both a theoretical and an empirical contribution by testing its application. Using primary data from a street survey, with a representative sample (n = 110) conducted in three different cities across Iran, we find a relatively positive impact of social media use in online political information and participation. However, the level of offline political participation remains low, showcasing no significant influence. Thus, the article verifies the different stages developed under the Social Media Political Participation ladder and Iran's current standing on it.

*Keywords:* social media, Iran, online political information, online and offline participation, authoritarian regime.

## Resumen

El recurso a las redes sociales ha transformado la forma en que experimentamos la participación política. Como una herramienta de comunicación en línea, las plataformas en las redes sociales han cambiado cómo se procesa y transmite el contenido político. Estos desarrollos han estimulado las prácticas de participación política, incluso en regímenes autoritarios, a pesar de ser menos tolerantes sobre cómo pueden afectar las redes sociales a la conciencia política de la población. Este estudio trata de examinar si las plataformas de redes sociales incrementan la participación política en regímenes autoritarios, utilizando Irán como estudio de caso. Irán es un régimen autoritario que impone una censura muy dura a todo tipo de medio de comunicación y aplica severas limitaciones a la libertad de expresión. Con la introducción de la escalera de participación política en las redes sociales, este artículo representa una contribución tanto teórica como empírica al testar su aplicación. Utilizando datos primarios extraídos de encuestas a pie de calle, con una muestra representativa (n = 110) recogida en tres grandes ciudades por todo el territorio de Irán, encontramos un impacto relativamente positivo del uso de las redes sociales sobre la información y participación política. Sin embargo, el nivel de participación política *offline* continúa siendo bajo, lo que demuestra una influencia poco significativa. De esta forma, se han podido verificar las diferentes etapas desarrolladas bajo la escalera de participación política en las redes sociales y la posición actual de Irán en la misma.

*Palabras clave:* redes sociales, Irán, información política *online*, participación *online* y *offline*, régimen autoritario.

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## INTRODUCTION

In recent years, social media have become the fastest spreading service in the world, altering many aspects of daily life from communication, education, business, and even politics. Social media are digital platforms that allow their users to create profiles, share content and build a network of contacts (Boyd, 2008). As an online communication tool, social media have changed the way political content is processed and transmitted while its interactive nature enables a variety of activities that were not so easy to achieve with the traditional media (Eveland, 2004). Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, and Instagram are considered the most popular social media in the Western world, that have been characterised not only as essential sources of information but also as platforms of political engagement (Cho *et al.*, 2009).

A first indicator of the growing popularity of social media both, in informing citizens but also for online and offline political participation was illustrated in the 2008 US Presidential elections. Obama's campaign used social media not only to raise funds but to "develop a groundswell of empowered volunteers who felt that they could make a difference" (Aaker and Chang, 2009: 1). Other examples of the use of social media in mobilizing citizens to participate in politics were the marches for immigration reforms initiated in MySpace (Costanza-Chock, 2008), the Occupy

Wall Street movement (Gleason, 2013), London riots, San Francisco subway mobs and the students' initiative on Climate Change.

Political information refers to the use of social media to access news sources, while offline political participation addresses a more active stance by participating in rallies, protests or civil associations. However, the use of social media and its effects differ between democracies and authoritarian regimes. In authoritarian regimes, social media are not considered merely as a means of communication, but they hold the potential of increasing political engagement both online and offline. There have been incidents that highlight these prospects, such as the 2009 "Twitter uprising" in Iran (Bentivegna, 2002) and the Arab Spring or "Facebook revolution" in Egypt in 2011 (El-Nawawy and Khamis, 2012). Social media have also been studied for their impact on democratization processes in societies where state authorities restrict communication flows.

The present study seeks to provide a more accurate understanding of social media by examining its potential for generating political participation in authoritarian regimes. Iran is selected as a representative authoritarian regime but also for its high level of internet access and its young population that is increasingly familiar with new communication technologies. According to the Global Digital Report (2020), 33 million Iranians are active users of social media platforms. From April 2019 to January 2020, there was a 39% growth in users. However, these technologies pose new challenges for the Iranian regime that has invested heavily in controlling the internet since it is considered as a foreign "intrusion".

This article investigates the extent to which social media played a role in the dynamics of political information and online participation that could assist in advancing the offline participation in authoritarian regimes. The main research question addressed is whether social media opens up new spaces for online political participation and advocates for offline participation in Iran. Under this question, three hypotheses are formulated as follows:

- *H1*. Social media are primarily used in authoritarian regimes to acquire political information.
- *H2*. Social media are widely used in authoritarian regimes for online political participation.
- *H3*. Increased social media engagement leads to more proactive offline political participation.

The study aims to make a theoretical contribution based on Arnstein's (1969) ladder of citizen participation and Macintosh's (2004) e-participation levels, introducing the Social Media Political Participation Ladder (SMPPL) as a representation of the influence of social media in political participation. By testing this theoretical approach in Iran as a case study and based on quantitative data collected from a street survey, this paper offers insights into the stage of the SMPPL where Iranian citizens stand on. The questionnaire that was conducted in the Persian language in April 2019

evaluates a series of multidimensional observations, assessing the influence of social media in engaging the Iranian society politically and the applicability of the developed theoretical model to other cases.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Social media as a communication tool allows the population to participate more actively in collective action, obtain information, engage in political discussion, and influence a network of friends and family online. Therefore, social media can mobilize various forms of political engagement in society (Xenos *et al.*, 2014). As cited, “online media no longer constitutes alternative but central environments for citizens’ engagement in politics” (Ekström and Shehata, 2018: 171). However, to understand how the role of social media works in political activity, it is also necessary to take into account the impact of the various types of digital platforms, the portion of the population influenced by these channels and the different political systems (Boulianne, 2015).

In terms of political participation and engagement, the literature provides a broad framework of academic studies. For Brady (1999), citizens’ actions and activities must go beyond the political and social interest of discussion, but they should also be able to influence political outcomes and the decisions on social issues made by individuals and groups in society. The modes of political engagement may involve collective actions, information and political participation, production of texts and videos (Ekström and Shehata, 2018). Therefore, social media brings different forms (traditional or not) of political participation and active citizenship through activism and online discussion, digital platforms, live recording, volunteer registration, petition and online donation (Xenos *et al.*, 2014).

Social media favours political engagement by mobilizing information among the population (Carlisle and Patton, 2013). According to Ekström and Shehata (2018), regardless of political motivation, being active in social platforms allows people natural exposure to political content more often, and a certain level of political knowledge is aroused among the public even though it might still be unintentionally. Social media has changed the way political information is processed and transmitted since not only political elites and media professionals are responsible for sharing information, but also ordinary users through their blogs and postings on the network. This free accessibility has allowed the population to obtain a greater abundance of contents on political issues, public control, and accountability (Casero-Ripollés, 2018).

Besides, the variety of media channels on the market has a differentiated impact on access to information or how political content is mobilized. Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram are more open channels that have a broad user base and allow people easy access to politicians’, party organizations’ and other political associations’ public accounts and research networks. They are also accessible platforms through any hardware device, i.e. computers, tablets, smartphones. Snapchat brings a more private setting and a more informal means of communication, but it has fewer profiling

capabilities and can only be accessed by a mobile device. The difference in the character limitation of these channels also interferes with the communication transmitted between citizens. Facebook is a platform that allows 63,206 characters; Instagram 2,200 characters; and Twitter, only 280 characters (Bossetta, 2018).

Moreover, the technological evolution of online tools is a factor that has allowed an increase in the political participation of the last years. Discussion spaces integrated by chats and online research were already present much earlier in the digital world, but their impacts were much limited in terms of political engagement (Carlisle and Patton, 2013). The flexibility of the current social media is part of this evolution that brings better political interaction among citizens by creating “opportunities for political participation: enabling, engaging and empowering followers for various benefits” (Effing *et al.*, 2011: 30). In addition to online political participation, authors such as Mossberger *et al.* (2008) believe that social media reinforces offline participation patterns. Offline mode of engagement refers to candidate donations, public deliberations, and demonstrations. Through dissemination on digital platforms, it is possible to mobilize large groups of people to engage in public hearings, political rallies, and street protests. Although Margetts *et al.* (2015) understand that online participation is still a secondary political route compared to offline mode, still it does not exclude the importance of its influence.

On the other hand, other authors (Zhang *et al.*, 2010) refute the significant dimension of online activities in political participation. These activities through social media are restricted and directed to the digital universe; they do not directly affect institutions or politicians per se, nor do they produce effective results in the political participation of citizens. Social media can influence political behaviour through online discussions. However, little is reflected in the individual’s political attitude (*ibid.*). Baumgartner and Morris (2009) state that online activities such as blogging and personal opinion posts politicians do not necessarily lead users to participate offline in politics.

In this way, social platforms facilitate political involvement by being able to attract a wide range of users. This is due to their favourable accessibility, their presence in daily habits, the advantageous cost and less demanding political efforts and commitments. Social media ensures a low cost of access to political information and mobilization compared to other instruments (newspapers, magazines, books, posters, flyers) (Carlisle and Patton, 2013). Because of the speed and reach of information transmission, social media can reduce the gap between the more and less politically engaged (Ekström and Shehata, 2018) and promote the balance of digital participation independent of income, gender, and ethnicity (Carlisle and Patton, 2013). At the same time, social media can push citizens to political engagement from small efforts such as simple sharing of information, posting short comments and signing petitions online to tailor the availability and intent of each individual.

Thus, social media ends up being used for political engagement by a profile of the public more inclined by these ways. Based on the Rainie’s Internet and American Life Project (2012) younger users are more likely to post links of political content and

personal opinions to engage in social networking political groups than the proportion of the population over fifty years old. Also, in socioeconomic terms, the public that makes use of social platforms is more diverse and less limited when compared to the traditional modes of political and civic participation. This way, in the digital world, inequalities are less noticeable in terms of political engagement.

While McClurg (2003) and Xenos *et al.* (2014) affirm that there is a positive relationship between social media, others such as Ekström and Shehata (2018) conclude that these digital platforms do not necessarily succeed in promoting politically active citizens. These social media tools often do not help to understand concisely the political process or even partisan ideals under the abundance of information and the difficulty in filtering genuine and meaningful content. Hence decentralization in the production and distribution of political information may lead to ambiguities and inaccurate data. The anonymity and the amount of false news in social media platforms influence the quality of communication (Casero-Ripollés, 2018). As mentioned, “thus it is important to consider both the process by which information is gained (learning from political information) and the outcome of such information (gains in political knowledge)” (Bode, 2015: 2). The posted comments have also followed a line of hostilities, which has led to more divisive debates and no substantial content. Likewise, by allowing people to select their network of friends, pages, and content, it is possible that through social media citizens are receiving only part of the knowledge and the necessary political information (Fountain, 2017).

The role of social media may also vary according to the culture and political system of a country. While this should not be asserted, for Boulianne (2015), there is a higher likelihood that a strong relationship exists between social media and political engagement in well-established democracies. According to Reuter and Szakonyi (2013), the use of social media can raise political awareness in authoritarian regimes, if the network itself has been politicized by anti-regime activists to contain political information. Howard *et al.* (2011) also report that social media played a central role in shaping political debates, disseminating democratic ideas vital to the promotion of revolutionary online conversations that preceded street protests and events during the Arab Spring.

## SOCIAL MEDIA POLITICAL PARTICIPATION LADDER

Active citizen participation in politics is observed in acts such as voting, campaigning, protesting organizations, and contacting representatives and officials. It is generally perceived as a voluntary act to influence elections or public actions (Verba *et al.*, 1995). However, political participation has been mainly associated with higher levels of income and education, as well as specific groups, syndicates, and organized activist groups (Smith *et al.*, 2009). In order to engage in active political participation, citizens need firstly a certain level of political information and also being accustomed to expressing themselves and engaging in debates. In this sense, political participation resembles different stages or levels that require both individual and collective

understanding. When analyzing the process or stages of political participation, there are important things to consider such as the availability and distribution of political information, citizens' views on government policy decisions, and the active participation of society in the political agenda. Arnstein (1969) and Macintosh (2004) have organized scales that seem to address most of these aspects.

Arnstein's work (1969) develops eight rungs on a ladder of citizen participation. The lower level involves two rungs, manipulation and therapy, which refer to non-citizen participation and therefore political submission to the powerholders. The next three degrees, namely informing, consultation, and placation, refer to tokenism: a political opportunity for citizens to obtain information but also to give their opinion on political issues. Finally, the last three degrees, namely partnership, delegated power and citizen control, describe citizen power that allows society to have an active voice in political decision making.

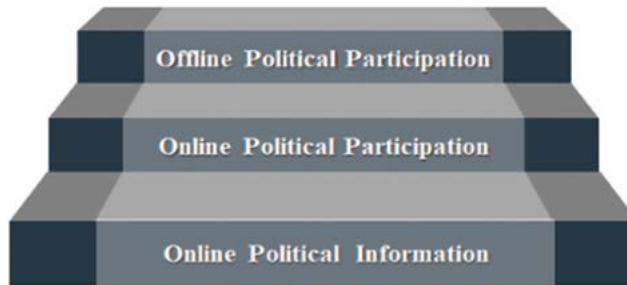
The traditional approaches on political participation do not fully engage with the complexities of the participatory process (Carpentier, 2016) and especially the new technology dynamics. The commencement of the internet and its constant developments altered the way information is transmitted providing access to various sources while being accessible from any place at any time. This accessibility increases the level and intensity of political information that could produce a more politically active public (Kurtz, 1995). Macintosh's work (2004) addresses these new developments brought by the internet by developing an e-participation level model. The first stage in the ladder is the e-Enabling, which provides access to information and a better understanding of the transmitted political content. The second stage is e-Engaging, which provides a space where people can interact and take part in different activities such as greater citizen involvement in deliberative debates on government policies. The last stage is e-Empowering, that urges users to collaborate, engage in tasks and initiatives thus promoting active citizen participation that could shape the government's political agenda.

However, the introduction and widespread use of social media are considered to have even more profoundly shaped political participation both in the online and offline form (Jost *et al.*, 2018). Social media platforms provide a wide range of information on different topics and engage users in a series of online initiatives facilitating opportunities for communication and deliberation such as petitions, social movements, organizing volunteering activities and assisting in political campaigns. These initiatives represent an observable change towards the democratization of political expression (Castells, 2012). An essential aspect of social media empowerment is that it starts from the individual level and is not imposed or introduced by politicians. It is the citizens who decide to follow or support a political person and at the same time, establish initiatives and even provide information. There is a growing number of people who use exclusively social media sources to read the news and be informed on particular issues, mainly Twitter and LinkedIn. The platforms also allow comment sections for users to discuss.

Based on these considerations, we develop the Social Media Political Participation Ladder, which identifies three stages or steps of political participation (Figure 1). The first step represents the various sources for acquiring information in social media platforms including news, commentaries and on-spot coverage of events taking place through live videos.

FIGURE 1.

SOCIAL MEDIA POLITICAL PARTICIPATION LADDER (SMPPL)



Source: Own elaboration.

After having climbed this step of the ladder, citizens can proactively engage in online discussions, create pages, support petitions and political campaigns making their voices heard. The last step indicates that after the users have been informed and engaged in online deliberations, they seek a more active offline political participation as it also observed in other studies (Skoric and Poor, 2013; Vitak *et al.*, 2011). Thus, the ladder represents a process that makes use of all tools and initiatives provided by social media to advance active citizenry.

## IRAN'S POLITICAL SYSTEM AND CENSORSHIP OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Since the 1979 revolution, Iran's regime was established as the first Islamic republic system in the world, governed by religious authorities and the law of Sharia as an integral part of the country's legal code. According to Ayatollah Khomeini—the founder of the Islamic Republic—, Islam defines the provisions for the political life since “Islam itself is democratic” (Vatanka, 2015). Numerous terms have been used to describe the regime, such as democratic theocracy, religious democracy (Schmid, 2002) and even “mullocracy”<sup>1</sup> (Kurun, 2017). However, the political system in Iran seems to reveal a rather complex network of elected and non-elected institutions affecting the decision-making process. Its hybrid nature is manifested with a “constitutional compromise between the secular and clerical components” and its distinct

1. Government of the mullahs (clerics).



format of the electoral procedure (Pejman and Giampiero, 2015). Despite this fact, the Islamic Republic of Iran holds elections regularly; the procedures fall short of democratic standards and equal representation while the Supreme leader profoundly influences the process. Regarding the electoral procedure, the ballot is candidate-based (Zaccara, 2012) and public support on the nominated candidates is rather circumstantial and not ideological (Ehteshami and Zaccara, 2013). These peculiarities in the Iranian system accounting for “limited level of pluralism”, “low electoral integrity” and “inexistence of governmental alternation” better positioning the political regime under the notion of “hegemonic pluralist authoritarianism” (Szmolka, 2017).

Nevertheless, Iran’s political system has been criticized by political elites and international organizations in the West mainly on election-related violations, freedom of speech, inequality of gender and human rights (Tazmini, 2009). The Polity Progress report (2014) gives Iran a scoring of -7, that entails minimal political participation in the country and places it among the “autocracies”. The Freedom House’s latest report on political rights and civil liberties (2019) designated Iran as “not free” with an aggregate score of 18 out of 100 whereas the Rule of Law Index (World Justice Project, 2020) ranks Iran 102 out of 126. In addition, the Committee to Protect Journalists report (2019) evaluating the most censored countries, places Iran in position number 7 and the Word Press Freedom Index places Iran in position 173 out of 180 countries indicating the tightening grip of the Iranian regime on all media forms (Reporters without Borders, 2020).

The authoritarianism of the Iranian regime is particularly evident in the realm of information technology and social media, with the hiring of thousands of “cyber-jihadists” to monitor and control social media (Milani, 2015) but also to “stifle political opposition that operates in cyberspace” (Vatanka, 2015). During Mohammad Khatami’s government (1997-2005), censorship and repression of the media were relatively low, allowing for substantial growth in the use of social media and blogs (Iran Media Program, 2014). Orkut stood out as one of the most accessed platforms in Iran in 2004, reconfiguring the flow of communication (Eloranta *et al.*, 2015). YouTube and Facebook were also popular in obtaining information and sharing videos of protests; however, Twitter was not, even before its blockade in 2009 (Esfandiari, 2017).

Iranian online social media has played a significant role in shaping social capital (Eloranta *et al.*, 2015), in empowering marginalized groups (Gheytanchi, 2015), as an alternative way to censorship of printed media (Michaelsen, 2015) and as a form of political mobilization (Ekström and Shehata, 2018). Thus, creating conditions for a cognitive process of building positive social relationships, facilitating the conduct of civic actions at the local and transnational level (Eloranta *et al.*, 2015). Since Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s presidency in 2005, the regime tolerates little freedom of expression in traditional media. After the amendment in the Press Law in 2001 by the Council of Guardians, magazines and newspapers are subjected to severe censorship, and a significant number of journalists have been faced with warnings or even imprisonment for the topics they cover (CPJ, 2019). In this way, reformist journalists identified online social media as another viable tool for expressing alternative

views, forming public opinion, deliberating, and sharing information with the exiled community (Michaelsen, 2015).

However, online activity in Iran is also being monitored while foreign-based websites are banned or filtered, including news sites, search engines, entertainment channels, email domains (Pakravan, 2012). Twitter, Facebook, and Telegram were banned. Despite these limitations Iranians remain active and circumvent the state's filtering technique with other tools such as new proxy servers and virtual private networks (VPNs) (Iran Media Program, 2014). In Alami's (2017) and Zogby's (2011) survey, Twitter and Facebook were used by Iranians during 2009 to 2013, a period when these networks were already banned. Therefore, there is no official knowledge about the actual number of users and the exact use of social media in Iran. Instagram is currently the only one allowed<sup>2</sup> despite a temporary ban in December 2017. More than 47% of the population uses the application ranking the country as the 7th biggest market for Instagram in the world<sup>3</sup>.

## THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE 2009-2018 UPRISINGS IN IRAN

This section analyzes the role of social media in the political uprisings in 2009 and 2018. The victory of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in the 2009 elections created unprecedented unrest with public demonstrations in many cities across the country. The candidate of the opposition Mir-Hossein Musavi and his supporters accused the regime of vote-rigging and election fraud. Thousands of citizens took on the streets with the slogan "Where's my vote?". These protests over the next months marked the beginning of the "Green Movement" (Dabashi, 2013; Esfahlani, 2015). Twitter and other social media were used to encourage more Iranians to come out in protest and broadcast the developments in turmoil. Users outside of Iran moved their Twitter locations to Tehran and changed their time settings as a way to bypass government monitoring (Elson *et al.*, 2012). The campaign "Help Iran to Elections" encouraged Iranians to add green to their profile pictures as a way to support the movement (Bailly, 2012). However, Ems (2014) confirms that only a small number of tweets originated from within the country. Thus, Western journalists and academics, due to the vast number of messages and popular hashtags like #Iranelections, #FreeIran wrongly characterized the movement as the "Twitter Revolution" (Payvand, 2009). Studies that analysed the number and content of tweets during the protests discover that they were used to communicate the events in other countries and had "no significant direct impact on the events inside Iran" (Ketabchi *et al.*, 2013: 54). As per

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2. *Al Jazeera*. 2017. "Iran blocks Instagram, Telegram after protests". Available at: <https://bit.ly/2VXq82t> [Last accessed: May 8<sup>th</sup> 2019].
  3. StatCounter. 2019. *Social Media Stats in Islamic Republic of Iran*. Available at: <https://gs.statcounter.com/social-media-stats/all/iran> [Last accessed: May 10<sup>th</sup> 2019].

Kadivar, Twitter was mainly used as a “system for publicizing events in Iran to the rest of the world instead of as an organizing tool for Iranians during protests” (2015: 175).

The government consequently forbade the demonstrations’ coverage and imposed greater control over online activities. The regime also used social media to coerce and threaten activists inside and outside the country (Elson *et al.*, 2012; Michaelsen, 2016). It even used Twitter to “extract information to identify key leaders and disrupt attempts to organize protests” (German, 2014: 4). Due to the measures employed by the regime, the Green Movement started losing its apparatus after February 2011. The movement started being fragmented into different groups, causing a discursive discrepancy further fueled by criticisms in social media that lead to an internal split, due to lack of consensus, collective identity and coordination in this period (Elson *et al.*, 2012; Esfahlani, 2015).

Regarding the political use of social media in the Green Movement, similarities can be seen in the context of the Arab Spring, which represented a series of social demonstrations against the abuse of power by political authorities in the Middle East and North Africa since late 2010. Similar to Iran, social media played a key role in channelling information, showing the government repressions, organizing protests and giving meaning to events of Arab Spring (Brown *et al.*, 2012; Tusa, 2013). Likewise, Bahrain, Tunisia and other Arab countries used online platforms to track dissidents and promote pro-regime agendas (Dewey *et al.*, 2012). Faris (2015) and Brown *et al.* (2012) share the argument that social media in the 2009 and 2011 uprisings served more to disseminate information and less as a mechanism of political mobilization.

Nevertheless, President Ahmadinejad has been more successful in managing traditional and online media than Arab neighbors (Elson *et al.*, 2012; Faris 2015). In the same manner, Tunisia adopted a similar filtering system; however, the government was not effective in blocking social media (Dewey *et al.*, 2012). In Egypt, Mubarak’s government underestimated online political activities from the start. The absence of strict Internet regulation and the neglect of opposition activities on social media led to the regime’s failure (Faris, 2015). According to Tusa (2013), social media in Iran were used mostly to organize protests during the Green Movement. On the contrary, in Egypt, online platforms were used even before 2011, which made it possible to build a consolidated base of different groups and a stronger revolutionary narrative.

Social media also played an important role in the anti-government demonstrations rocking the country in 2017-2018 when new protests burst out in Mashhad against President Hassan Rouhani (Eltagouri, 2018). The protests arose in response to increased youth unemployment, plans to raise fuel prices and discontent with the Iranian foreign policy asking for the removal of the regime (Asadzade, 2018). The use of smartphones allowed more people to stay online during the 2018 demonstrations with the hashtags #pashimanam<sup>4</sup> (The Economist, 2018) that accompanied most

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4. It means “we regret” (our vote).

posts reporting on the protests. Telegram, as a messaging tool, assisted in spreading the news about the events and its ban hindered the protests' organization.

Nevertheless, these protests were different in nature. In 2009, protesters demanded changes that stayed however under the framework of existing politics, the overthrow of Ahmadinejad's and the establishment of Mousavi as president, more social freedoms and less oppression by the security forces. Contrarily the 2018 demands were much more radical, with the opposition insisting on the removal of Khamenei from power and the end of the regime (Quinn, 2018; Rajavi, 2018). Additionally, the 2017-2018 protests were not centrally organised and not under leadership to cohere into a unified protest movement (Saidi, 2018). As far as it concerns the impact of social media in these protests, it is observed a noticeable degree of online political activism. Studies using twitter analytics have identified that hashtags such as #Iran-Protests were primarily used to share news stories, with no personal comments included (Yucesou and Karabulut, 2019).

## METHOD AND SAMPLE

The study aims to test the theory of the participation ladder in social media. To do so, we employed the case survey research method aiming to combine the benefits of both a survey and a case study, using cross-sectional data and in-depth analysis (Larson, 1993). The method is also used to describe population trends or to test questions or hypotheses (Mills *et al.*, 2010) and has been particularly devised to study topics such as citizen participation (Levi and Stoker, 2000; Ekman, 2009). Iran was selected as a single and representative case for upholding fundamental characteristics of authoritarian regimes, particularly in regard to the repression of freedom of speech in the media (Freedom House, 2019; The Economist, 2019).

Conducting interviews in the Middle East has proven quite demanding regarding ethical and political considerations (Clark, 2006; Romano, 2006). Structured interviews<sup>5</sup> in the form of a questionnaire with close-ended responses were used as an instrument to obtain data, while secondary data were also employed to reinforce the findings. The questionnaire formulated was informed by the theory developed and consisted of 24 questions divided into five sections with the first being the basic demographics, followed by the section on use frequency and preferences in the internet and social media. The latter three sections addressed the political information, online political participation, and offline political participation process. This research corresponds to the concurrent use of social media in Iran, Instagram was mainly referred to as the one officially allowed and the second most visited website in the country (Similarweb, 2019).

The questionnaire was conducted in the Persian language in three Iranian cities Tehran, Shiraz and Zahedan in April 2019, with the assistance of three residents,

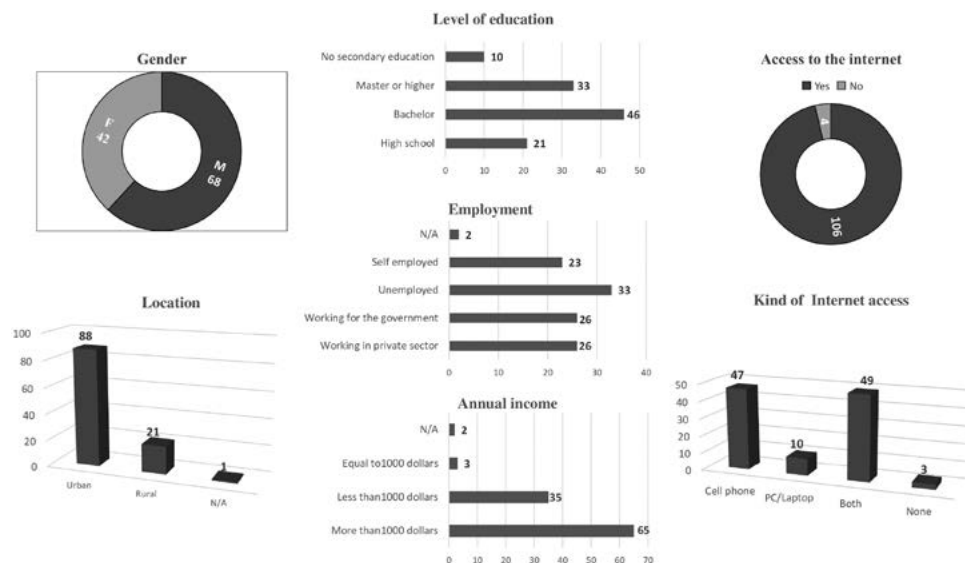
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5. Also known as standardized survey interviewing.

who were PhD students in social sciences trained for completing the interviews. The three cities differ significantly from one another in population, economic prosperity and educational level, while the number of internet, mobile and social media users varies between them, thus constituting a representative sample of the Iranian society. Tehran is the capital city with 9,135,000 population, 40.2% of economic participation rate and 24.9% of the country's total Internet users; Shiraz is a medium size city of 1,565,572 people and Zahedan is a rather small city with 609,263 population<sup>6</sup>.

The interviews were conducted by approaching people in streets and parks<sup>7</sup> and lasted an average of 10-15 minutes. Interviewees were informed that their participation is entirely voluntary, anonymous, to be used for academic purposes and that they can abandon it at any time even after it has been started. Respondents were selected randomly however not all wished to complete the questionnaire, and some left in the middle of the process. The number of fully completed questionnaires was 110 (n = 110). Figure 2 presents the demographic variables.

FIGURE 2.  
DEMOGRAPHICS QUESTIONS AND RESULTS



Source: Own elaboration.

6. Statistical Center of Iran. 2020. *Census 2016*. Available at: <https://www.amar.org.ir/english> [Last accessed: May 5<sup>th</sup> 2020].
7. Shiraz: Zand street and Eram garden street (شیراز: خیابان زند و خیابان ارم), Tehran: Enghelab street and Tajrish street (تهران: خیابان انقلاب و خیابان تجریش) and Zahedan: Janbazan street and Keshavarz street (زاهدان: خیابان جانبازان و خیابان کشاورز).

## RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

### *Demographic Questions*

From the total number of interviewees, 68 were male, and 42 were female. The second demographic question in the sample was age: 19 ranged between 18-24 years old, 43 between 25-34 years old, 28 between 35-44 years old, 12 between 45-59 years old, and eight were older than 59 years.

The next question concerned the respondents' education level, who were distributed as follows: no secondary education 10, completed high school 21, bachelor's degree holders of 46, and master's or higher degree holders 10. Regarding the type of employment, in the public sector or governmental position 26, work in private sector 26, freelancer or self-employed 23, unemployed 33 while two chose not to respond to this question. The next question concerned the annual income, and the responses resulted in: 65 more than 1000 dollars, 35 less than 1000 dollars, three equal to 1000 and two did not want to disclose this information. Lastly, concerning the residency, 88 of the interviewees live in an urban area and 21 in a rural one, while one gave no response. Lastly, regarding access to the internet, 106 of the sample answered that they have private access to the internet and four do not have. On the specific type of internet access, 47 stated to have only mobile internet access, 10 only on PC or laptop, 44 on both and four none.

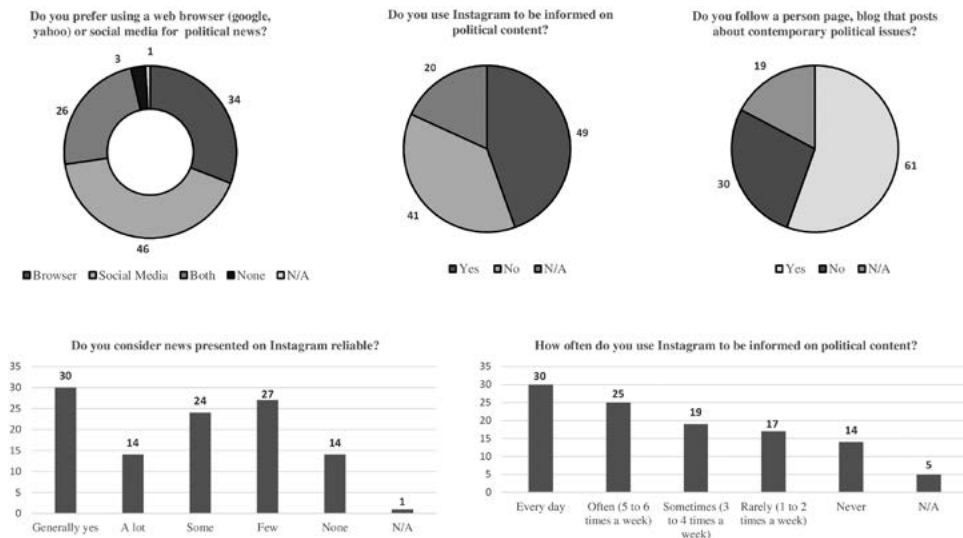
According to these results, our sample is characterized by a male, urban, young adult, and a highly educated majority, with access to the internet, satisfactory income, employed both in the private and public sector.

### *Online political information questions*

Social media has brought a new dynamic to the way political information is transmitted and consumed by citizens. Access and exposure to news through social media has been expanding rapidly. Often, quality content is produced by digital platform experts that enable citizens to gain political knowledge (Bode, 2015). However, the distribution of political content often involves a network of friends and family members that can lead to biased information. In this section, as we can see in Figure (3), we will look at how the Iranians have obtained political information through social media.

The responses allow us to affirm that there is a considerable number of Iranians who use social media in receiving political information as a primary source; thus, our first hypothesis is verified. From the participants, 46 responded they would use social media, 34 browsers, 26 both resources, three responded none and one did not wish to respond. Considering the frequency of using social media to stay informed of political issues, 30 mentioned every day, 25 often (five to six times a week), 19 sometimes (three to four times a week), 17 rarely (one to two times a week), 14 never and five did not wish to respond. Now, regarding the particular use of Instagram, there is a balance

FIGURE 3.  
ONLINE POLITICAL INFORMATION



Source: Own elaboration.

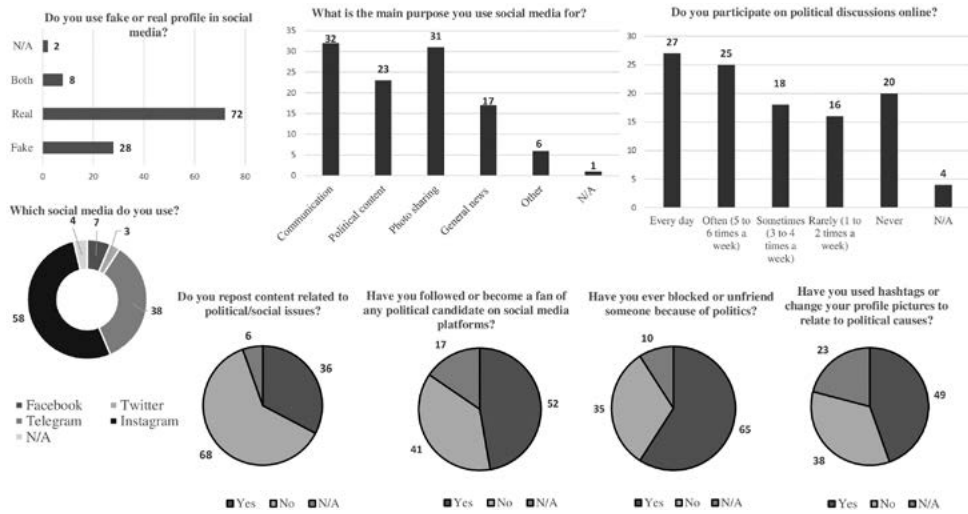
among Iranians who choose this resource to be informed about the political content. From the respondents, 49 use Instagram for this purpose, 41 do not use it, and 20 did not wish to respond. The survey also allows us to assess whether Iranians have confidence in the information provided by social media. From the respondents, 30 generally consider it reliable, 14 a lot reliable, 24 some, 27 few, 14 none and one did not wish to respond. We can also see that it is common among Iranians to follow pages of people or blogs that publish on contemporary political issues. From the respondents, 61 reported following person pages or blogs with political content, 30 did not, and 19 did not wish to respond.

In short, the role of social media in serving the purpose of obtaining political information is more significant. This rise of social media in obtaining news has led to a decrease in the dependence of Iranians from traditional media (Gallagher *et al.*, 2019). The results showed that the Iranian society reaches the first stage of SMPPL of political information reinforcing the arguments that social media act as information centers (Gil de Zúñiga *et al.*, 2012) while also seeming to increase political awareness in authoritarian regimes (Siraki, 2018). As in the survey conducted by Zogby (2011), the results present similarities. Most Iranian respondents (55%) felt better informed since the advent of social media, and a significant amount (43%) use it as a source of news and information within other reasons. Likewise in Alami's (2017) survey, the results show that generally the respondents use the social media for finding political information, increasing political knowledge of the population, although the respondents had a moderate level of political behavior.

*Online political participation questions*

Online political participation means that a person participates in the political process by spreading their opinions and beliefs through the digital path. In this section, as we can see in Figure 4, we will look at how Iranians have participated in political activities through social media and whether there is any significant repercussion of political participation. Most Iranians have a real profile on social media. From the respondents, 72 use real profiles, 28 fake, eight both and two did not wish to respond. Besides, most Iranians use social media to communicate. Among the respondents, 32 mentioned communication, 23 political content, 31 photo sharing, 17 general news, 6 responded other people, and one did not wish to respond.

FIGURE 4.  
ONLINE POLITICAL PARTICIPATION



Source: Own elaboration.

According to the responses, we can confirm that Instagram is the most widely used digital platform among Iranians. In fact, 58 of them use Instagram, seven Facebook, three Twitter, 38 Telegram and four did not wish to respond. These results indicate that Iranians also use other social media that have been banned in the country with the most popular social media being Instagram and Telegram also verified in other surveys (Gallagher *et al.*, 2019). In terms of regular participation in online policy discussions, there is moderate engagement: 27 respondents participate every day, 25 often (five to six times a week), 18 sometimes (three to four times a week), 16 rarely (one to two times a week), 20 never and four did not wish to respond. On the other hand, few Iranians post comments or web links on social media to express a political



opinion. Among the respondents, 68 do not repost this type of content, 36 repost and six did not wish to respond.

The results show that Iranians somehow moderately react online to political opinions within a network of friends and family. 65 respondents mentioned that they have already blocked or unfriend, 35 have not, and only 10 did not wish to respond. There is also a moderate number of Iranians who follow or become a fan of any political candidate on social media. Among the respondents, 52 have followed, 41 have not followed, and 17 did not wish to respond. Regarding the use of hashtags in profile pictures as an indication of supporting political causes, Iranians have not promoted this practice extensively. 49 respondents have used it, 38 have not used it, and 23 did not wish to respond.

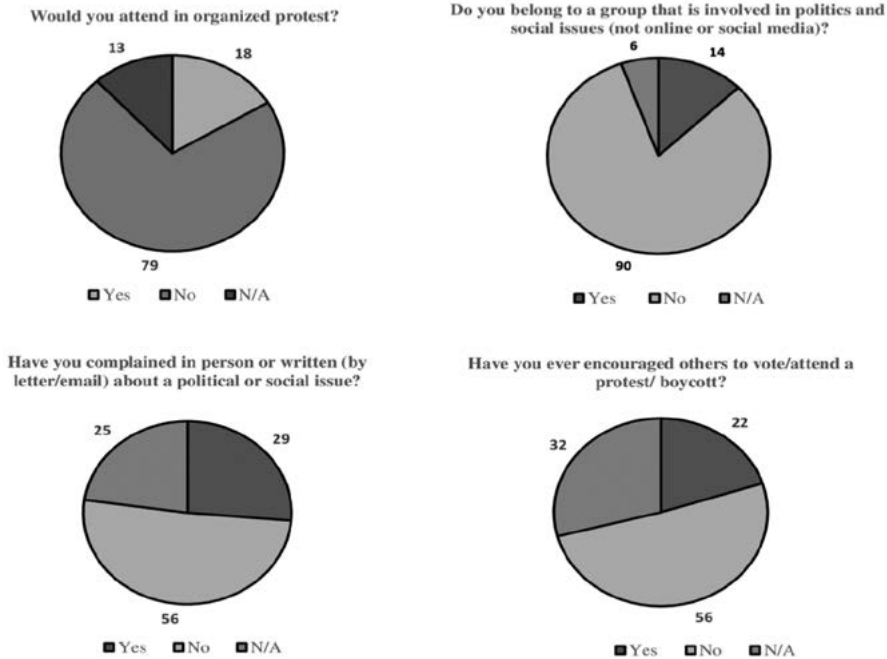
Thus, the role of social media in leveraging online political participation in Iranian society appears not to be significant; although there is a moderate influence in terms of maintaining communication, following pages of political candidates and reacting to the circle of friendship regarding the diversity of political opinions. Regarding the second stage of the SMPPL, which refers to the engagement of the users online, the Iranian society reaches a moderate way, thus, not verifying the second hypothesis. Similar conclusions were drawn from studies focusing on Facebook users in Iran, revealing that Iranians are rather “passive” users, mostly following or liking content than commenting on political posts. Additionally, the majority of the people interviewed responded that they share mostly personal rather political content or news (Iran Media Program, 2014). Zogby’s survey (2011) found that few Iranians (18%) agree that social media facilitates political involvement and a moderate amount (55%) agree about the impact of social media on the ability of people to express their views and share information. These findings further support the argument that coercive measures of authoritarian regimes impact on the range of available options and make online mobilization more costly (Reuter and Szakonyi, 2013).

### *Offline political participation questions*

Offline political participation is one of the traditional forms of involvement that allows individuals to express their position and political opinion through participation in protests, political rallies, public audience, work, or volunteering in any political party. In this section, as we can (Figure 5), we will look at Iranian political participation through offline resources. Thus, we can compare whether there is a greater willingness of Iranians to participate in politics online or offline and whether social media has provided a significant role in this motivation. The questionnaire confirms that most Iranians have little propensity to attend political protests. From the respondents, 79 would not attend in an organized protest, 18 would attend, and 13 did not wish to respond.

FIGURE 5.

## OFFLINE POLITICAL PARTICIPATION



Source: Own elaboration.

Few Iranians have been engaged in traditional groups of political or social content. From the respondents, only 14 have belonged to a group, 90 have not belonged, and six did not wish to respond. Similarly, there is little encouragement among Iranians. Of the respondents, 22 have ever encouraged other people to vote or to participate in a political protest/boycott, 56 have not encouraged, and 32 did not wish to respond. It is not very common among Iranians to contact a national or local government official about an issue. From the respondents, 26 have contacted, 56 have not, and 25 did not wish to respond. As expected, Iranians have not complained in writing or person about political or social issues. From respondents, nine have complained quite often, five often, 14 rarely, 12 not quite often, 19 seldom, 39 never, 12 did not wish to respond.

Overall, the role of social media in fostering offline political participation has no significant weight. Iranian society hardly uses social media to promote protests, political rallies, or participation in public deliberations; offline political participation seems to have almost no significant weight in Iranian society. Regarding the third level of the SMPPL which refers to an active form of offline political participation that represents the empowerment of citizens in societal and political issues we notice that Iranians do not actively participate in shaping the government agenda or promoting and engaging

in initiatives of offline political participation even to safeguard their rights. The third hypothesis of this study is not verified. This outcome has been presented in other studies that question the ability of social media in “fuelling activist protest and sustain revolution” (Wojcieszak and Smith, 2013). Alami’s survey (2017) also indicated that 31.2% of respondents do not attend campaign rallies, 42.5% do not campaign for their supported candidates and 37.3% do not express a political opinion on politicians, revealing low political behavior. In sum, the results confirm previous studies that have found that, in order to reach a high level of citizens’ political participation, a more active online political participation needs to be cultivated first (Sung and Jang, 2020). As for authoritarian regimes in particular, the impact of social media is evident in the improvement of civic skills, but it hardly increases offline political participation without advancing political knowledge and online engagement (Wakabi and Grönlund, 2019).

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This article constitutes a contribution to the area of Political Science by analyzing the impact of social media on promoting political participation in Iran as a representative case study of authoritarian regimes. As discussed, the use of social media is vigorously restricted in Iranian society because of its authoritarian political system. As a result of the political censorship in Iran, many of the digital platforms have already been banned from use. By employing a survey conducted in Iran, this study has sought to provide an understanding of the links between social media and political participation.

Accordingly, with the introduction of the Social Media Political Participation Ladder (SMPPL), we list three possible analytical dimensions where social media can gain an influential role: online political information, online and offline political participation. Based on this theoretical underpinning, political participation is perceived as a process whereby the respective society takes a gradual “step-up or stage-up” approach. According to the SMPPL, only after having achieved a higher level of political information, a developed interest in being more involved in online political discussions and initiatives emerges thus, advancing to a more proactive online political behaviour. Consequently, after the second stage of online political participation, further stimulation will encourage an increased propensity to discuss and engage offline, reaching the top of the ladder.

The findings of this study demonstrate that the impact of social media in Iran does work largely in this stepwise format. Furthermore, the responses provided are to a degree consistent with those of Wojcieszak and Smith (2013), indicating that the majority of citizens do not use these platforms for political engagement, but to communicate and to discuss personal and work-related issues. However, our results show that Iranian society has started using social media to a greater extent to be informed on the news with Instagram holding a prominent role as a tool of political

information. These results allow us to conclude, without generalizing to the whole Iranian society, that social media advance political information, thus, validating our first hypothesis.

Our second hypothesis that considers that social media are used widely for online political participation was not verified with the sample of the survey revealing a rather moderate online political participation in Iran. Thus, considerations that praise the role of social media as a critical element in active political engagement in authoritarian regimes need to be re-evaluated. Finally, there is no validation of the third hypothesis that accounts for significant effects of using social media in offline political participation. A great majority of respondents had not engaged in any format of offline political participation. This may suggest that the fear of the regime is still quite prominent in the country.

In conclusion, the findings of this study match the conclusions of the existing literature on the use and impact of social media in authoritarian regimes. More notably, this article confirms that social media has not impacted drastically active political participation in Iran. In brief, Iranian society is on an ascending process but currently standing on the first stage of political information.

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