



**SOCIAL MEDIA USE BY ISTANBUL MAYORAL
CANDIDATES IN TWO SUBSEQUENT 2019 ELECTIONS**

**2019 İSTANBUL BÜYÜKŞEHİR SEÇİMLERİNDE
ADAYLARIN SOSYAL MEDYA KULLANIMI**

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ABSTRACT

We analyzed Facebook and Twitter engagements by Binali Yıldırım and Ekrem İmamoğlu, the two main candidates in the 2019 Istanbul mayoral election, spanning from December 2018 to the end of June 2019 due to the fact that the original elections were disputed and repeated. Social media analytics were used to obtain the data used in the study. We put forward four research questions that draw on the nature of social media as well as the unique Turkish political context. We rely on the discussion these questions for the bulk of our analysis. While the candidates received comparable number of votes, İmamoğlu was the clear champion of engagements on both platforms. We also observe that İmamoğlu embraced a positive campaign and the secular base already had a wider presence in social media. İmamoğlu was able

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to galvanize the opposition who was accustomed to being defeated by the governing AKP.

Keywords: İstanbul, Elections, Binali Yıldırım, Ekrem İmamoğlu, Social Media Analysis.

ÖZ

Bu çalışma, çokça tartışılan ve tekrarı yapılan 2019 İstanbul belediye seçimlerinin iki adayı Binali Yıldırım ve Ekrem İmamoğlu'nun Aralık 2018'den Haziran 2019'a kadar Facebook ve Twitter üzerinden yürüttükleri seçim kampanyalarını ve sosyal medya kullanımlarını analiz etmektedir. Verilerin elde edilmesi için sosyal medya analitik teknikleri kullanılmıştır. Araştırma, sosyal medyanın doğasını ve Türk siyaset konteksini de dikkate alarak dört araştırma sorusu üzerine kurgulanmıştır ve sosyal medya kullanım düzeyi ile seçimde başarılı olma arasındaki bağın anlaşılması hedeflenmiştir. Adaylar birbirlerine yakın miktarda oy almalarına rağmen, İmamoğlu'nun her iki platformda da seçmenlerle iletişimi bakımından bu seçimlerin açık ara kazananı olduğu gözlenmiştir. Seküler tabanın daha geniş sosyal medya kullanımını göz önüne alarak İmamoğlu'nun genel olarak pozitif kampanya yürüttüğü tespit edilmiştir. Ayrıca, İmamoğlu'nun uzun bir süre AKP'ye karşı başarısız olan muhalif siyaseti de etrafında topladığı gözlemlenmiştir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: İstanbul, Seçimler, Binali Yıldırım, Ekrem İmamoğlu, Sosyal Medya Analizi.

INTRODUCTION

On 31 March 2019, citizens of Turkey participated in key local elections to choose who will govern cities, districts, towns and local neighborhoods for the next five years. Throughout the country, elections were disputed in a considerable number of towns and cities. The Supreme Election Council (YSK) decided to annul some of the elections (Evrensel Gazetesi, 2019; H. Şahin, 2019) because of either objections or the results were rejected and new dates were set for repeat elections. Perhaps the most widely debated YSK decision in recent Turkish political electoral history was

the decision to annul the results of the Istanbul metropolitan mayoral election, where the main opposition party's candidate won the elections by a narrow margin (0.25% or 21,462 votes out of 8,547,074). On Monday May 6, 2019, the YSK convened and decided to annul the Istanbul mayoral election at the metropolitan level while confirming the results at the district level¹ in Istanbul. The elected-mayor Ekrem imamoğlu's official certification for the mayorship was revoked. The decision came after the governing Justice and Development Party's (AKP²) objection to the results on the basis that the board of ballot boxes was established unlawfully. According to this claim, this malfeasance significantly impacted the election results because the difference between the two leading candidates after all valid and invalid votes had been recounted, was very slight³. In the subsequent election that was held on June 23, 2019, imamoğlu widened the margin to 9.22%, corresponding to 806,767 votes out of 8,746,638 valid votes.

Two main blocks of coalitions competed for the Istanbul metropolitan mayoral election. On one side, Binali Yıldırım was chosen as the candidate for the two-decade ruling AKP (also the incumbent party in Istanbul) and the far right Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) under the name of The People's Alliance coalition. On the other side, Ekrem imamoğlu was the candidate for the coalition Nation Alliance formed by Republican People's Party (CHP) and the Good Party (iyi Party) with the contentious⁴ support from the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP). Binali Yıldırım's campaign was built around his public service experience from earlier government positions that include being the 28th Speaker of the Grand National Assembly, the 27th and last Prime Minister of Turkey, and his almost eleven years uninterrupted service as the Minister of Transportation, Maritime, and Communication. The Nation Alliance's candidate, Ekrem imamoğlu, on the other hand, built his campaign on being a new face with positive and industrious energy, promising drastic changes for the ancient city of Istanbul. He previously served as the Mayor of Beylikdüzü, one of the districts in Istanbul, from March 30, 2014 until March 31, 2019.

¹ The governing AKP won 24 out of 39 district (Turkish ilçe) municipalities of Istanbul.

² AK Parti is the official abbreviation for Justice and Development Party. However, we preferred AKP because it is a common use in many international platforms.

³ According to the data from YSK, initial difference between imamoğlu and Binali was 27,417. After the recount, it fell down to 13,729.

⁴ As demonstrated in the news coverage of the campaign in the Supplementary Document, the People's Alliance coalition accused imamoğlu for covertly allying with the HDP, a party that is alleged to be associated with the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), a widely accepted terrorist organization in the international arena.

In this paper, we analyze the Istanbul elections on March 31, 2019 and June 23, 2019 based on the two main candidates Facebook and Twitter engagements. Social media use in campaigning is a relevant component that can be investigated to understand election performance. Such investigation provides a background for these two elections. Later, we continue our analysis with the role of social media in Turkish politics and in the world in general, followed by an examination of the descriptive statistics on social media use in Turkey. This provides a background for the research hypothesis we present and discuss. For the sake of completeness, we briefly include the results from the three other candidates, as well. The Istanbul election which was re-conducted on June 23, 2019 was one of the most engaging and fiercely debated elections in the city's history since 1963. As in many other elections around the world, the candidates represent more than who they are and their promises for municipal governance. Voters view the elections as something bigger than just an election, more of a showdown between the two major political camps in Turkey. Thus, we expect that a study on the candidates' social media engagement with their followers will reveal more than only the numeric election results, as we outline in our hypotheses at the end of the introduction. For this purpose, we conduct a critical analysis of two social media platforms with the purpose of gaining insights into the process of the Istanbul elections, and its relevance to Turkish national politics, because it is assumed in modern Turkish political discourse (Deutsche Welle, 2019; Al Jazeera, 2014) that the Istanbul elections are the ultimate rehearsal for what comes next in the mainstream Turkish politics⁵.

1. LITERATURE

Social media is used extensively for political campaigning around the world and has gained growing interest from research communities (Jungherr, 2016, Dutta and Bhat, 2018, Dimitrova and Matthes, 2018). Its use and efficacy has steadily increased since its first emergence. One of the first and most well-known examples is the US congressional and presidential elections, the latter of which was dubbed as the Facebook election (Dutta and Fraser, 2008), even though the validity of this claim has been questioned (Carlisle and Patton, 2013). Because of this, social media since has gained prominence in the electoral processes, in addition to being a crucial instrument to many social movements.

During the first years of its inception, academic research suggested a limited utilization of social media for political campaigning. Carlisle and Patton (2013) found

⁵ The long incumbent president of Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan previously entered to the Turkish mainstream politics as the mayor of Istanbul before cofounding AKP that has been ruling Turkey since 2002.

that the political activity on social media during 2008 US Presidential elections was not as extensive as it was claimed by the popular media. Baxter and Marcella (2012) studied Scottish political parties' social media use in the 2010 UK general election, and observed that the politicians mostly used social media for a one-way flow of information, and their posts were mostly liked by their own friends, family, party members, associates and activists, at the same time they avoided two-way interactions and difficult policy questions posed by the public. Stranberg (2013) found social media to have a moderate impact on the 2011 Finnish parliamentary election campaign indicated by limited citizen engagement, even though the candidates used the platforms extensively. Karlsen et al (2011) argued that the efficacy of the social media depended on the contextual characteristics such as the particular electoral processes, and observed that parties with a focus on an individual candidate tended to emphasize their online presence more, based on their study of the 2009 Norwegian Parliamentary election campaign. These earlier observations are consistent and make sense as the underlying technology was still developing in terms of its functionality, it did not completely reach the general population, and politicians did not know how to use it to its full potential.

In the recent years, social media engagements have been steadily growing, and it is increasingly becoming an indispensable tool for political campaigning around the world. Sinpeng et al (2020) analyzed twenty million social media engagements in the 2016 election in the Philippines, and suggested that Duterte's online popularity, which became the center of attention, was a reflection of grassroots political support, even though they claim that his online presence was underwhelming and unprofessional. Bright et al (2020) analyzed media campaigning effects using candidates' Twitter use in the 2015 and 2017 elections in the UK, and found that Twitter based campaigning that was conducted in a broadcasting fashion rather than an interactive fashion, helped to win votes despite the research encouraging politicians to be more interactive with the general populous. Studying the 2018 Italian general election, Giglietto et al (2019) investigated the characteristics of the levels of insularity in terms of how news stories propagate across partisan communities, leading to so called echo chambers. They found that the supporters of populist parties (The Five Star Movement and The League) tend to be more insular. Narayanan et al (2019) studied Facebook and WhatsApp based campaigning in the 2019 Indian general election, and observed that sensational junk news that was extreme and conspiratorial was used extensively by some of the parties, and such polarizing dissemination was the worst in the world except for the 2016 US elections. Likewise Irawanto (2019), studied the 2019 Indonesian general election, where conventional media is still more popular than social media, and observed that the two major parties

overwhelmingly utilized social media in a one-way communication form to facilitate personal attacks. The authors argue this usage reflects the nature of Indonesian politics.

While most researchers analyze the role of social media for political campaigning, Nave et al (2018) and Gerbaudo et al (2019) focus their attention on what makes certain political posts more successful than others on social media. Examining the posts of diverse political actors in Israel, Nave et al (2018) identify six features linked to a successful post: implied emotions, humor, first person, self-exposure, personal stance, and anger-evoking cues, the effectiveness of which depends on the left vs right position of the candidate. For example, they found that humor functioned well in left wing circles, while out-group references yielded more success by right wing politicians. Similarly, Gerbaudo et al (2019) study the relationship between topics, emotions, and user engagement by studying the communication battle between the Labour and the Conservative parties in the 2017 general elections in the UK. Accordingly, they observed that the Labour party outperformed the Conservatives by 10 times in terms of the user engagement, which they attribute to the “positive posting” by the former, as the latter focused on issues such as Brexit, terrorism and national security. Additionally, the role of social media continues to be a major factor not only to impact political outcomes, but also for predictive modeling. For example, Silva et al (2020) claim the predictive model they developed (based on Naive Bayes machine learning technique) has the capability to estimate the election outcomes with higher accuracy than public opinion polls using social media data from Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. Hanouna et al (2019) developed a novel method to identify political trolls and bots in the 2019 elections in Canada using the findings from European Parliament election and the two rounds of elections in Israel in 2019, and they opine that some of the unusual activities point to foreign meddling.

More recently, Trump’s campaign in the 2016 US election drew a lot of attention due to unusual rhetoric, media tactics, and social media use, in addition to speculated meddling activities. Trump’s mastery of social media is noteworthy alone (Alsup, 2019; Barbaro, 2015; Parkingson, 2015). Williams and Gulati maintain that in addition to communication and campaigning tools, social media platforms can be used to portray candidates as more accessible and authentic (Williams and Gulati, 2013). This may be what Trump was trying to accomplish. While it is very difficult to quantify the exact role of social media in his success, it is one of a few factors that got him nominated and helped him win the presidency. Confessore and Yourish (2016) found that Trump got \$2 Billion in free press (mostly negative news) in the first

nine months of his campaign as part of his unconventional social media strategy. Wells et al. (2016) additionally observe that Trump won the nomination with a hybrid media campaign. He courted media attention via planned and unplanned interactions, and utilized Twitter tweet storms when his coverage was low. Enli (2017) observes two divergent social media strategies in the 2016 U.S. elections: While Clinton's strategy conformed to the professional style of election campaigns, Trump employed an amateurish and non-traditional yet authentic style. She further notes that social media was used primarily as a marketing tool, and observes that even Trump, the breaker of rules, eschewed from engaging his social media followers, limiting his engagement to select tweets. Every tweet he posted became viral and was re-shared five times more often those of his opponent, Hilary Clinton (Persily, 2017). Strandberg (2013) refers to studies that indicate the new generations of citizens who grow up with the internet in their everyday life, and logically claims that future campaigning and political activism will be primarily online. There is much more to be expected from social media and politicians in the future.

There is no consensus on the exact role of social media in political campaigns and elections; as it appears that this process is still relatively new, evolving, and poses open ended questions. There are indisputable advantages to using social networking sites for political parties and candidates. As seen from Trump's example, it can be weaponized with the right mastery, approach, and context. Strandberg (2013) gives several advantages of using social media in campaigns. First, social media seems to be a much more affordable campaigning tool than any other conventional media outlets. Second, social networking sites like Facebook can be used for additional functions such as fundraising, recruitment, internal organization, and mobilization of supporters. CHP's candidate Ekrem İmamoğlu, for instance, accumulated five million Turkish Lira in one day when the party opened fundraising according to Zeyrek (2019). Third, because social networking sites like Facebook can gather immense amounts of information about users, it possible to send tailored campaign messages to specific voter groups. Fourth, social media enables campaign professionals to reach passive voters who are not interested in obtaining the relevant messages. Campaigners also take advantage of 'active viewers' to spread the campaign messages onwards as seen in the Obama campaign in the 2008 U.S. elections (ibid).

The power of social media more became evident when people in North Africa and the Middle East organized themselves to overthrow decades-long regimes starting with the Twitter Revolution in Iran in 2009. Additionally, since the Arab Spring in 2011, which ended up facilitating a change in regime in Tunisia and Egypt (Wolfsfeld, Segev, and Sheaffer, 2013), social media has proven its power as a medium to change

established authorities and systems. Similarly, the 2011 Occupy Movement in the US and the 2013 Gezi Protests in Turkey were proof of social media's ability to mobilize protestors, at a time when established media was reluctant to report about the people in the streets. Subsequently, political analysts and academic commentators rushed to celebrate the effectiveness of social media, claiming it was cyber space that facilitated the masses to organize protests worldwide and to ultimately bring down some of the most autocratic regimes in the Middle East. These conclusions originated from the hypothesis that the main/mass media is silenced by the governing elite, allowing social media to become the main source of information, resistance, and trust among protestors (Haciyakupoglu and Zhang, 2015).

Social Media Use in Turkey in Numbers

In Turkey, 63% of the population actively participates in social media; the global median is 53% (Poushter, Bishop, and Chwe, 2019). High levels of social media use in Turkey parallel with increased internet access in Turkey. Social media membership increases at rate of 9.3 percent of the annual growth rate. We obtain a wide range of illuminating and relevant statistics from WeAreSocial (2019). As of 2019, the number of internet users reached 60 million (52 million of which are active social media users), corresponding to 72 percent of the whole population. More than 44 million of them access the internet primarily through their mobile devices and 84 percent of internet users access the internet every day. In the same report, Google.com.tr and Google.com score as the top-visited websites with a web traffic volume of more than 2.3 billion hits each month. YouTube and Facebook follow Google respectively. Twitter comes after, with the volume of 181.1 million hits a month. Of the percentage of internet users who report using at least one social media platform, YouTube (92%) rates at the top of the list, followed by Instagram (84%), WhatsApp (83%), Facebook (82%), and Twitter (58%). 96 percent of internet users who stream each kind of content each month (ibid) watch videos online. The average amount of time per day spent on the internet in Turkey on any device is about 7 hours and 15 minutes, and about 2 hours and 46 minutes is spent on social media. Turkey is one of the most connected nations in the world. However, the gender distribution of social media in Turkey use is surprisingly skewed. The number of female social media users is distinguishably lower than male users with the exception of Snapchat (68%). For example, out of 43 million monthly active Facebook users, female users only account for 36 percent. The gap ratio of monthly twitter users is even wider with only 19 percent female users out of 9 million active users.

Because of the considerable amount of social media usage in Turkey, scholarly research is paying greater attention to its impacts, as well as different sectors of

society, including civil organizations, conventional media, and politicians. Despite frequent criticism of social media, the incumbent President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan uses social media actively. His Twitter account is the second most followed (13.5 million) account after the Turkish standup comedian Cem Yılmaz (13.8 million) in 2019. Along with the official Twitter account of Turkish Presidency, Erdoğan frequently uses his personal Twitter account to post on various subjects from wishing joy for people's holidays to responding to current developments in the country.

Social media is a serious matter in terms of restriction to access, political monitoring, and prosecution (Akser, 2018). Social media postings are often monitored closely and punished with severe consequences (Ataman and Çoban, 2018). According to the 13th biannual Transparency Report covering the first half 2018, Turkey submitted the most content removal requests, accounting for 8480 court orders and 13,843 requests. The total consists of 11,616 court orders and 27,811 requests submitted by 38 countries (Twitter, 2018). Despite increasing regulations⁶ and restrictions, users of social media and social media usage by different sectors continue to increase, shaping every aspect of daily life. Considering the volume of active social media use in Turkey, politicians will not remain indifferent to the possibilities that social media can offer for career building and campaigning.

Facebook provides a wide range of data at finer scales, such as Istanbul (Facebook Inc., 2019). Among Facebook users, Istanbul is the largest user-location in Turkey with 15 million users. 63 percent of users are male and 51 percent are between 18 and 34 years old. Among female users, 45 percent are between 18 and 34 years old. Among Istanbul users, 66 percent are college graduates. Many users indicate that they work in the service sector particularly in management, art, sports, entertainment and media, and administrative services. Among Istanbul users, 97.5 percent access their profile from their mobile device (81.1%) and desktop (16.4%); only 2.5 percent access their profile from their desktop alone. 65 percent of male and 35 percent of all female Facebook users in Turkey reside in Istanbul which makes this social media platform a propaganda tool for politicians and public opinion.

When we looked at the first twenty most liked Istanbul based Facebook pages, we see that they are relevant to political opposition sites including Ekrem İmamoğlu at the top of the list, CHP representative Tuncay Özkan (6th), EkşiSözlük (7th) which is known to be one of the platforms that supported Gezi Park protests (Takvim 2019),

⁶ On July 29, 2020, Turkey has approved further regulation on the use of information online enacting the Legislation number 7253 in which social networking sites that has more than one million daily users in Turkey is subject to open an office in Turkey. Noncompliance is subject to gradually rising punishment.

CHP's leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu (12th), television station ODA TV (13th), and a newspaper, Cumhuriyet (14th) that are pro-CHP, and CHP Facebook page itself (Facebook Inc., 2019). We found no trace of AKP relevant pages or AKP's candidate Binali Yıldırım that are in the Top 50 most liked pages list.

2. METHODS

Research Hypotheses

We explore the role of social media in political campaigning and the changing landscape of media interactions. Particularly due to Trump's mastery of social media, it is evident that platforms such as Facebook and Twitter can be weaponized with great potency for political gain despite seemingly limited resources⁷. We approach the Istanbul elections with a wide range of possibilities in mind. We conceptualize these possibilities regarding social media use (Facebook and Twitter) for the Istanbul Mayoral Election campaign by posing several hypotheses, which we revisit in the discussions section after an analysis of the data.

1. A high level of social media engagement signals better election results for a candidate when all other variables remain the same:

Extending this hypothesis, one could argue that a high level of social media engagements does not automatically count for positive results for a candidate when there are other variables in the equation. Those conventional variables might include socio-economic concerns, xenophobia, viability of a candidate, track record of candidates, and the existing popularity of the associated political party. Using 133 cross-sectional studies around the world, Boulianne (2019) asks a similar question regarding the effects of social media use on political participation and expression, and finds that the results depend on the political context and the existence of a free-press.

2. When a "positive campaign" is used, the chance of receiving positive engagements on social media is greater, especially when divisiveness and polarization are the dominant existing political language.

Here we refer to the language used in the campaign, especially in the light of the incendiary and divisive language used in Turkish politics in recent years. This hypothesis is a counter to Trump's campaign, the main recent data point, which showcased that incendiary language was key to gaining more support through social

⁷ Although studying fake-news and trolling activity on social media is beyond the scope of this paper, the possibility of the deliberate use of misinformation to influence attitudes on an issue or toward a voter must always be considered.

media. That is why we add the divisiveness clause to the hypothesis, which is expected to be valid when the public is already tired of the ongoing divisiveness.

3. The level of social media engagement can be partly explained by the demography of social media usage and socioeconomic status of the districts in Istanbul.

As we already examined the Facebook users' profile in Istanbul, it is apparent that the data obtained would present numerous biases. They include overrepresentation of males and college graduates, and people who are already leaning secular as evident from the liked politicians.

4. As the central government controls the major news outlets, it's expected that the base of the opposition would shift towards social media where they can receive and react to a more uncensored diverse set of content.

This hypothesis is based on the observation that the government took possession of television and newspaper media over the years in a progressive manner, minifying a majority of the opposition. While the AKP avoided criticism internally through conventional media, they could not bridle opposition in social media, which they already regularly censor (Hurriyet, 2014; Twitter, 2018). Imamoğlu's victory speech on June 23, 2019 was overlooked by all major outlets including CNN Turk with one exception, Fox TV. The opposition's foothold in conventional media is severely limited and othered. We observe that despite efforts by the government to manage social media (Twitter, 2018), it appears that the existence of these platforms continues to be the voice of the opposition. However, here we also note that measureless disinformation that circles in social media further complicates arguments for the freedom of expression that comes with social media in Turkey. When the author-responsibility equation suffers, precaution must be shown toward the credibility of social media sources. During the Gezi Movement in Turkey, this author-responsibility disappeared from time to time causing immense consequences for both the state and society. Our argument in this paper is not about relying on social media as the only source of news and information during times of floundering conventional media coverage.

Data Extraction and Processing

We identified five mayoral candidates in the 2019 mayoral election campaigns; as shown in Table 1 along their political affiliations and the corresponding data sources. We note that Yıldırım has two relevant Twitter accounts, one personal and one for the campaign. We use both of his accounts and aggregate the numbers when presenting his Twitter engagement. Our temporal scope starts at the beginning of

December of 2018, the month the candidacies were announced. Our analysis ends at the end of June, a week after the second election on June 23, 2019.

The necessary Facebook data, technically identified as “social graph,” of all five candidates was extracted using Facebook Graph API, an HTTP based framework to query and extract data in addition to other utilities (Facebook Inc., 2015). The primary data format provided by the Graph API is JSON (JavaScript Object Notation), a lightweight standard used across many domains and applications for data transfer. The data in JSON format includes key and value pairs, separated by commas. According to this standard, objects are held by curly braces, while arrays (collections of data items) are held by square brackets.

The graph API is a representation of the information collected and stored on Facebook. It is composed of nodes (individual objects like users, pictures, pages and comments), edges (connections between groups of objects and a single object), and fields (data/attributes of objects, such as name and email). The data transfers conform to the HTTP/1.1 protocol, and the requests are made to graph.facebook.com. Users and researchers create developer accounts and access tokens to access the Graph API.

Each Facebook social graph is represented by a unique identifier that is used to query information on individual pages or users. We use the Objects ID’s such as “binaliYıldırımiletisimofisi” to access and extract the necessary information.

Our second data source to analyze is Twitter. Unlike Facebook, almost every user’s data is public and downloadable. The data extracted from Twitter is referenced in the mentions cited in the profiles of the candidates captured by the API available in the tool for developers (Twitter Inc., 2019). The Twitter data we obtained includes the contents and date of all individual tweets posted by a particular user, along with the number of likes and retweets of those posts.

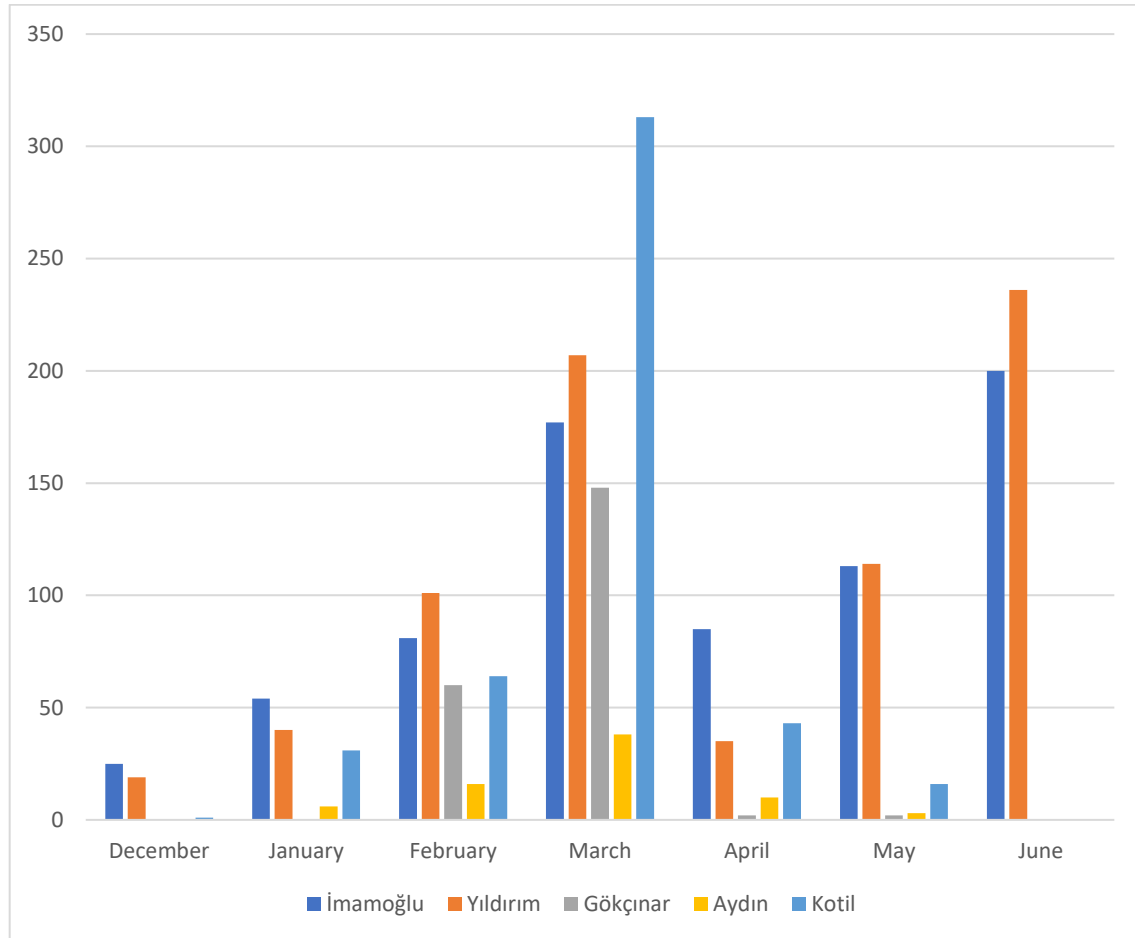
3. RESULTS

Facebook Results

The Graph API is data rich and includes information ranging from the number of posts published by each page and number of engagements, sorted by date, types of reactions, and type of medium (e.g. picture vs. video). We first examine the number of posts published by each candidate. In the first phase of the elections (December 12 of 2018 to March 31 of 2019), Yıldırım of the AKP posted the largest number of posts (705), followed by İmamoğlu (529), Kotil (439), Gokcinar (205) and Aydın (69). We then look at the monthly distribution (Figure 1) and observe that Yıldırım consistently

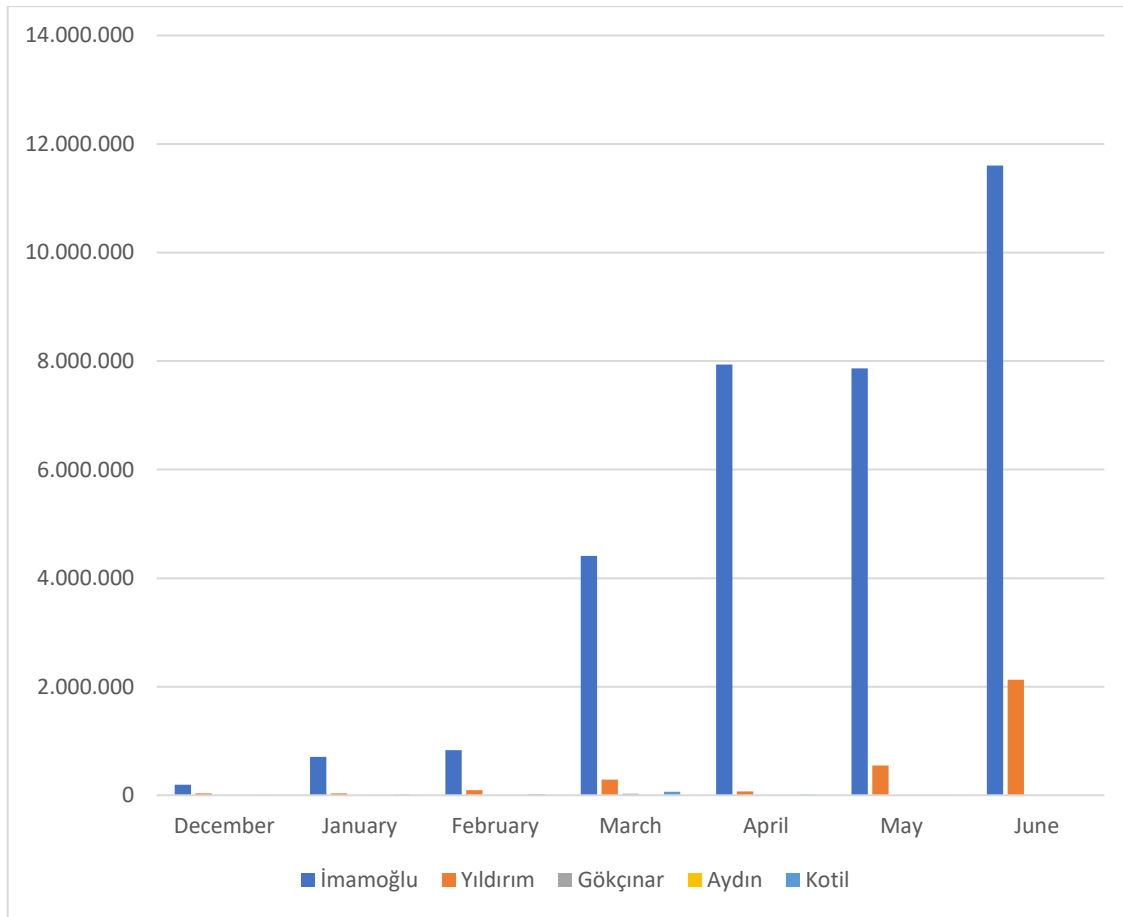
shared the highest number of posts every month except for December of 2018, which is expected, due to his candidacy being declared towards the end of that month.

Figure.1: Number of Posts by Candidates by Month



We observe a comparable number of posts by the two leading candidates during both election periods in Figure 1. We then present the number of engagements received each month by each candidate within the period of the two elections. Engagements consist of comments, reactions, and shares by users. Daily patterns are demonstrated in Figures S1 and S2 in the Supplementary Material for the two main candidates on a daily basis. Reactions are separated into likes, and other types of reactions including Haha, Love, Sad, Thankful and Wow, as shown by Figures S3 and S4.

Figure.2: Engagements by Month and Candidate



We then present Figure 2 indicating the total engagements by Facebook users, which shows the influence of İmamoğlu’s engagement with people to get them to comment on his posts, react to them, and share them to reach to a wider audience. This is also evidenced in Figure S5 demonstrating the engagement to posts ratio that indicates the effectiveness of each posts. We also observe his engagement and effectiveness increase over the months of both of the election processes. We see İmamoğlu ‘s clear command throughout the duration of the campaign, which became even clearer after the March 31, 2019 election.

We then look at the number of engagements by each candidate throughout the duration of the campaign. Engagements consist of reactions (e.g. likes), comments, and shares. Here we obtain surprising results: İmamoğlu with over 24.3 million engagements, followed by Yıldırım’s 0.8 million engagements, and relatively insignificant numbers by the rest of the candidates.

Since 2016, Facebook allows users to react to posts by a range of emotions (emojis), including Love, Haha, Wow, Sad, and Angry. Figure 3 and 4 (as well as the rest of the Figures) demonstrate the user reactions by these emojis for the top two candidates that are relevant in the electoral race. While the Love emoji is the most dominant for İmamoğlu, it is the lowest for the other main contender, Yıldırım. The results interestingly show that the Haha reaction is the highest for Yıldırım.

Figure.3: Distribution of Reactions by Reaction Type and by Month to İmamoğlu’s Facebook Posts

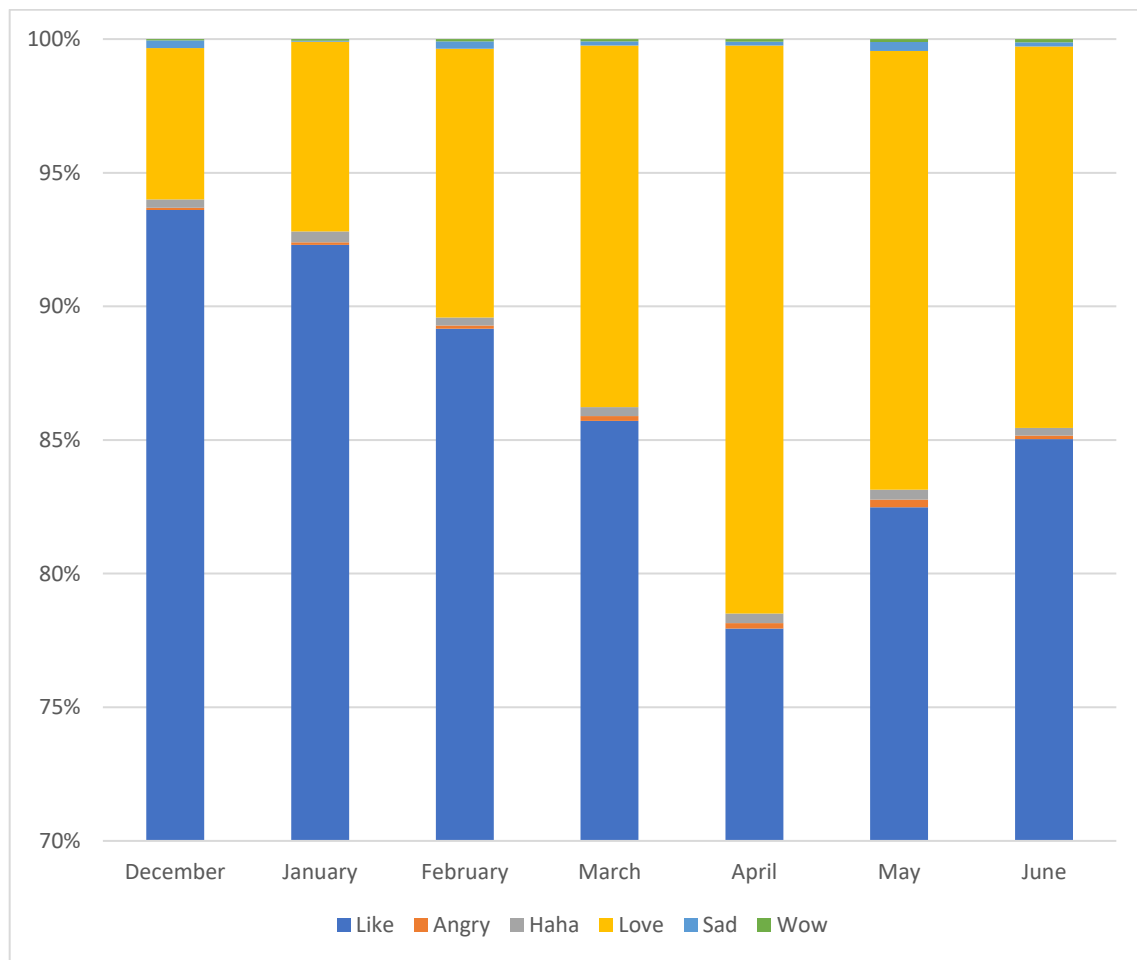
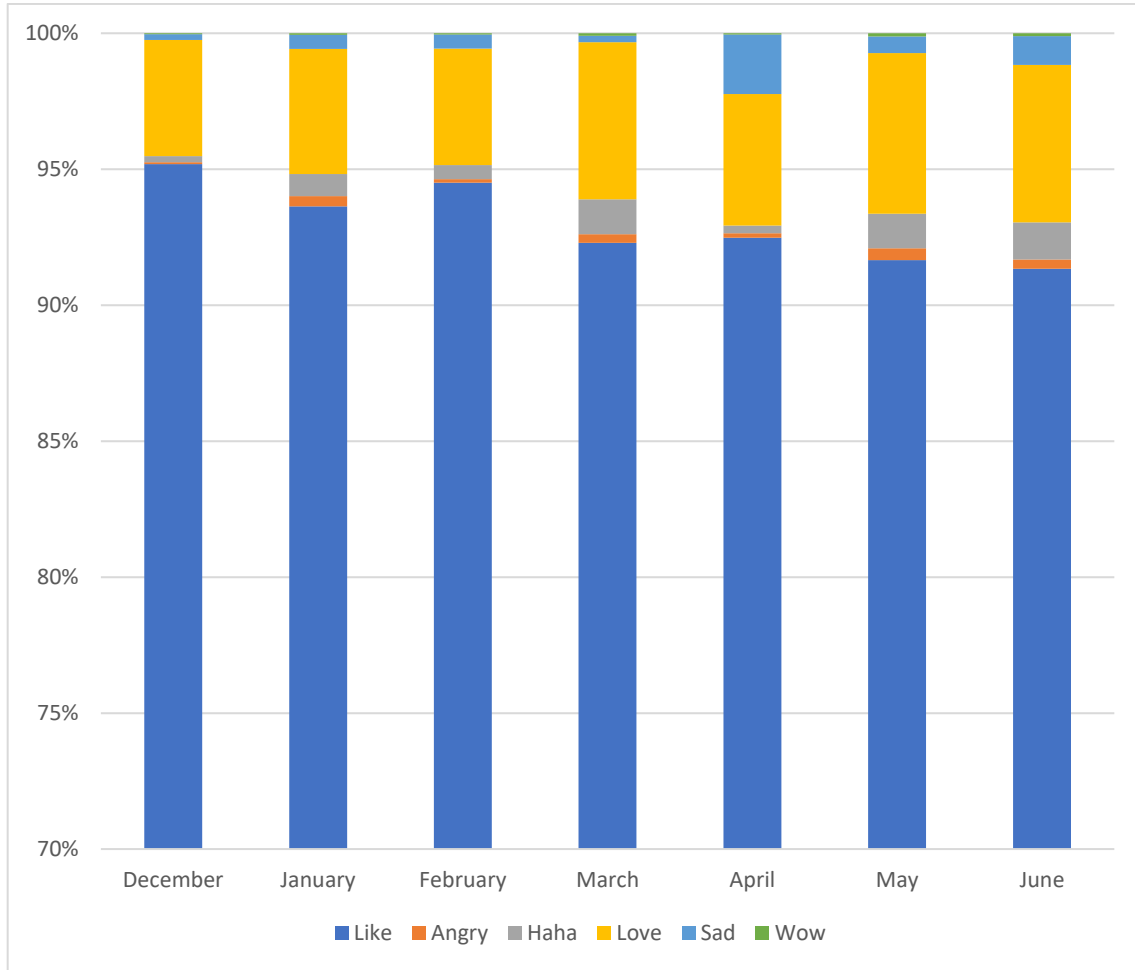
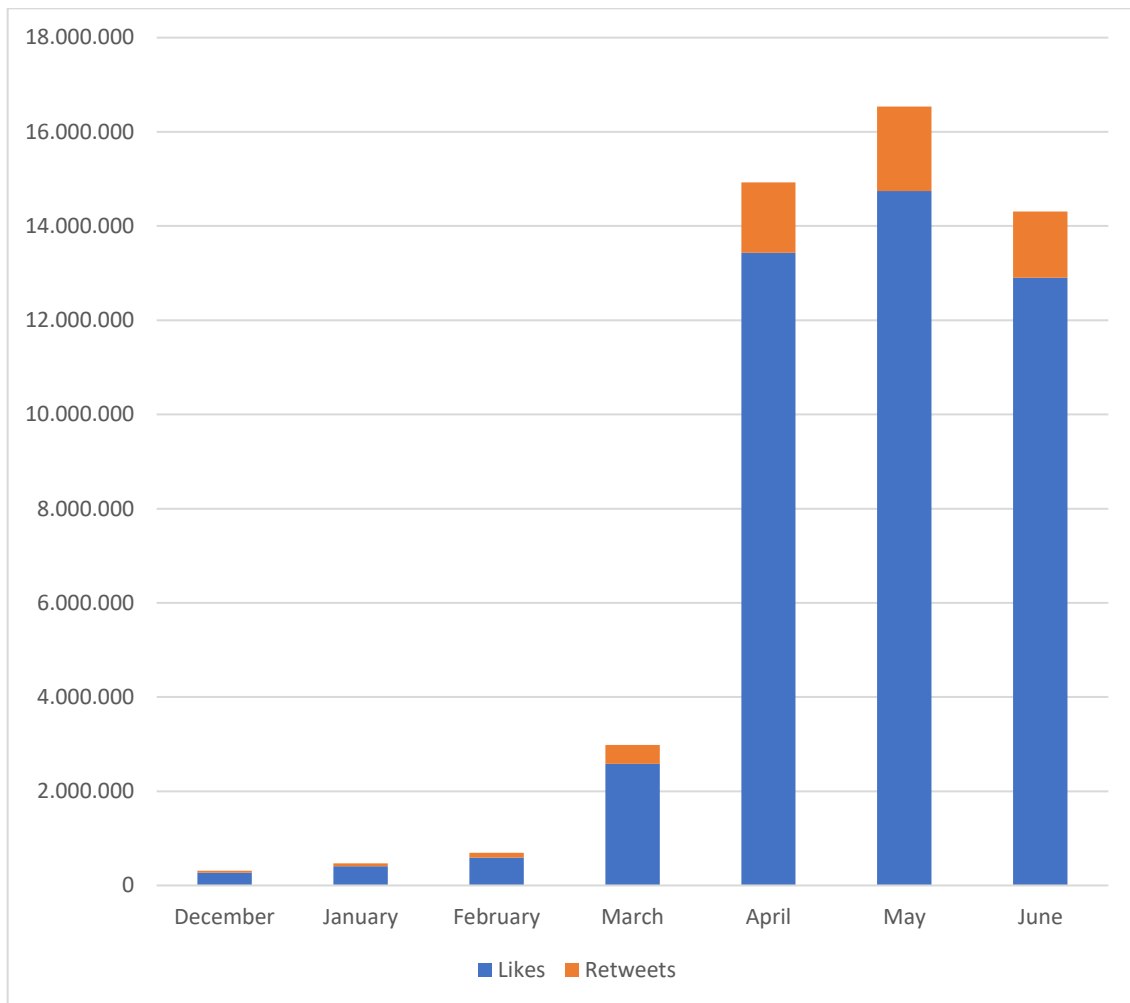


Figure.4: Distribution of Reactions by Reaction Type and by Month to Yıldırım’s Facebook Posts



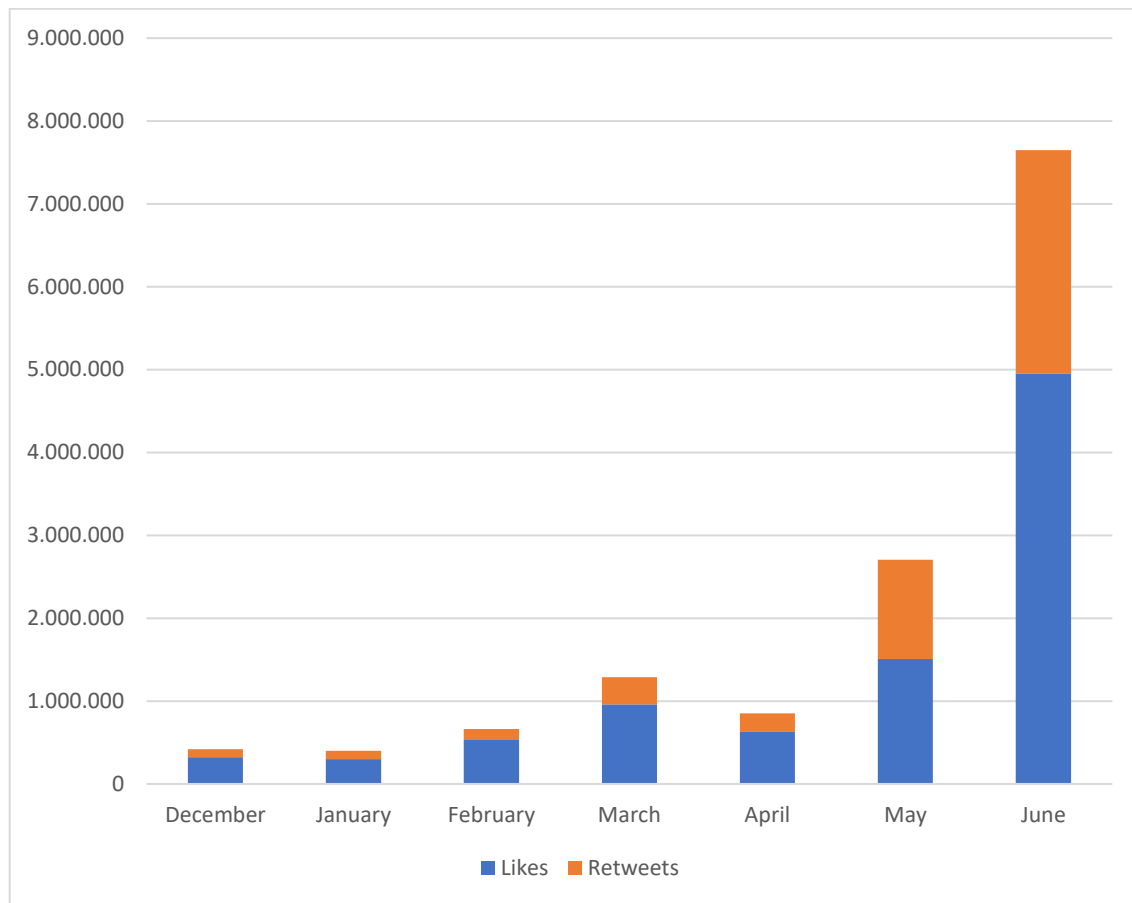
Twitter Results

İmamoğlu’s tweet reactions indicate a growing pattern throughout the first election campaign process, reaching nearly three million likes and retweets combined in the month of March (Figure 5). The engagement numbers in the subsequent three months all increase about fivefold, demonstrating a high contrast between the first and the second election campaigns.

Figure.5: Likes and Retweets of İmamoğlu's Tweets by Month

Yıldırım's aggregate engagement numbers from his two Twitter accounts manifest a similar pattern to those of İmamoğlu, albeit with lower numbers of engagements (Figure 6). The highest total engagement number is less than 1.5 million in March. We observe higher engagement numbers; with close to three million in May, and close to eight million in June. We also observe a high portion of retweets, an observation that is not valid in the case of İmamoğlu. Both candidates Twitter engagements are displayed on a daily basis in Figures S5 and S6, which indicate high engagement levels on election days.

Figure.6: Likes and Retweets of Yıldırım’s Tweets by Month



4. DISCUSSIONS

İmamoğlu garnered a total of more than 32.1 million engagements on Facebook during the two election campaigns (between the start of December 2018 and the end of June 2019), compared to nearly 3.2 million for Yıldırım. The corresponding numbers for Twitter are 54.3 million for İmamoğlu and 20.7 million for Yıldırım, who has two separate Twitter accounts. 31.1% (6.4 million) of Yıldırım’s all engagements are retweets, a higher number compared to İmamoğlu’s 10.7% (5.8 million). Following this summary, we begin our discussion addressing our previous hypothesis and then continue with a more general discussion.

1. A high level of social media engagement signals positive results for a candidate when all other variables remain the same:

We have two candidates that posted nearly identical number of posts and received nearly identical votes in the March 31st elections. This narrow margin opened up almost 10% in the subsequent election on June 23rd, with İmamoğlu's social media campaigns achieving even higher engagements in the second round. İmamoğlu's statistics indicate that his Facebook and Twitter use was more effective, transcending, and illuminating compared to Yıldırım. This impressive difference in engagement cannot sufficiently dictate the electoral outcomes, however. We must keep in mind that Turkey in general and Istanbul in particular have been predominantly conservative and moderate. It has been challenging for the CHP to shift any votes from the AKP's electoral base. To give some perspective, the CHP received 26.28% in 1984, 35.95% in 1989, 20.30% in 1994, 13.91% in 1999, 28.90% in 2004, 36.98% in 2009, 40.0% in 2009 Istanbul mayoral elections. Looking at past performances, while keeping in mind that the CHP is a left leaning and secular party⁸, the ordinary vote potential of the CHP in Istanbul has been in the range of between 20% and 40%, with a median value that is slightly below 30%. We must therefore recognize that any results higher than 30% for the CHP's are associated with societal reactions to a more powerful candidate. These numbers stand in contrast with the 48.8% that the CHP obtained in the March 31st elections. We observe that the CHP has been garnering more power in the last decade, mainly due to societal polarization, political and electoral coalitions, and the AKP's precedence (Keyman, 2014). Additionally, the CHP was initially more of a symbolic resistance to conservative politics and Erdoğan's leadership rather than their own innovative politics. Then, we inspect social media engagements from the perspective of the polarization of the anti-Erdoğanist block (Yilmaz, 2017). Turkish media sources observe that the CHP put forth a mayoral candidate that is not a secular elitist, but rather an approachable politician that can communicate well with not only the secular and Kemalist leaning bloc, but also with conservative, blue collar, and under-privileged masses (Çakır, 2019; Demirtaş, 2019). Çakır (2019) goes on further claiming that the profile of İmamoğlu readily fits into terminated Welfare (*Refah*) and Virtue (*Fazilet*) Parties, of which President Erdoğan himself was a part of. We interpret that the CHP's high engagement numbers signaled unexpectedly high election results for the CHP, whose rate has historically been under 40%.

Looking at hard data from Facebook and Twitter engagements, comments, and shares, we observe the following: Just like Trump, whose "remarks were given voice or channeled through his account, to a cadre of followers who vocally amplified and

⁸ We took ideological portrayal of political parties as how they are defined commonly and mentioned in their party speeches.

defended him online” (Wells et al., 2016), İmamoğlu’s social media communication was amplified and championed by an eager secular block, hungry for a meaningful win. The main difference is that while Trump ran a successful social media campaign fueled by incendiary remarks, İmamoğlu ran a politically balanced campaign. On the contrary, there are multiple reports that Yıldırım and his campaign officials and voter base were not as driven and motivated as they were previously (Altaylı, 2019). This lack of drive in the ranks of the AKP was previously documented as mental fatigue (*mental yorgunluğu*) among AKP intellectuals and elites (Çetin, 2017). It is our judgment that the wavy campaign conducted by both mid and high-level AKP officials, coupled with a lack of motivation from the campaign managers, and waning enthusiasm from the voter base resulted in lower social media engagement in Yıldırım’s campaign. We accept the first hypothesis that the high engagement numbers indeed signaled positive results for İmamoğlu, who attained surprisingly high results.

2. When a “positive campaign” is used, chance of receiving positive engagements on social media is higher, especially when divisiveness and polarization are the dominant in the existing political language.

We observe that Yıldırım is not a classically popular leader. He can be described as a loyal foot soldier and a technocrat of the AKP. It even appears that his social media engagement was coordinated by the party’s top management. His Facebook page is titled Binali Yıldırım Office of Communication, which creates a distance from voter and portrays formality and impersonality.

In contrast, we observe that the opposition was practical and approachable with social media use. The scope of these reasons is beyond the limits of this study. İmamoğlu of the CHP conducted a positive campaign, defined by avoiding acerbic political rhetoric, instead concentrated on solving Istanbul’s problems, and was also covered by the media (Çakır, 2019). His high engagement numbers suggest that the voter base is interested in policy production and diligence, as well as inclusive and participatory politics. In addition, we observe that the majority of Facebook users in Istanbul already sympathize with the CHP. We saw this in Facebook’s Istanbul statistics, indicating that the CHP is the most liked political party, and Kılıçdaroğlu and Atatürk are the most liked political figures in Istanbul.

This contrasts with President Erdoğan’s, AKP’s and MHP’s campaign and messaging which focused on more binary rhetoric. While Yıldırım had more positive messaging focused on detailed projects for Istanbul, he was overshadowed by more charismatic leaders like Erdoğan and Bahçeli. In the context of ‘us vs them’ rhetoric,

these leaders referred to Kurdish separatists (aka PKK) and the Gülen movement (aka FETO), both of which are identified as terrorist organizations. Conventional media lumped CHP officials with PKK and FETO. This was probably perceived as excessive and potentially unnecessary attacks of guilt by association; and backfired.

3. The level of social media engagement can be partly explained by the demography of social media usage and socioeconomic status of social media users in Istanbul.

We previously studied the “Facebook profile” of Istanbul, which reveals relevant information about the demographics of the social media users in the city. We observe that (assuming Facebook as a proxy) social media users are already secular leaning and ready to challenge established discourses. Registered Twitter users in Turkey exponentially increased when Gezi Park protests erupted in 2013 and protestors began organizing themselves via social media. Therefore, it makes sense that a CHP’s candidate would have more social media presence and propaganda time.

We are then prompted to clarify one caveat in this approach, however. The observation regarding demographic profiles does not explain the massive difference that we observed throughout these elections. Secularists and left leaning masses were not initially mobilized to the extent we witnessed in this electoral process. We believe a few new factors helped to galvanize the secularist base. We would like to note them:

- i. İmamoğlu’s and the secularist base’s balanced language. İmamoğlu never changed his tone of speech even under the most difficult times in the campaign. For the first time in recent history, the CHP got so close to winning an election that would reverse the Erdoğan effect and Turkey’s eighteen-year long reign of conservative politics.
- ii. Personal attacks on İmamoğlu by high ranking AKP officials. İmamoğlu was called a “Pontus,” a regional name for the Greeks⁹, which helped unifying the voter base against the use of discriminative speech.
- iii. Deepening polarization in Turkish society. The AKP and MHP claimed that the Istanbul elections were a fight for national unity (*bekameseselesi*). This was perceived as trivial and backfired. However, it is important to note that Turkey has gone through several critical stages recently. One in which was the July 15th coup attempt by the Gulen movement. This shook the pillars of the state colossally.

⁹ Debate on calling İmamoğlu as Pontus came with when a Greek newspaper captioned saying İmamoğlu is a Pontus (referring to İmamoğlu’s place of birth, Trabzon) who took back Constantinapolis from Erdoğan (referring his Ottomanism and Islamism).

Before that, there were so called ‘Trench Events’ in the eastern parts of Turkey where the PKK occupied cities and towns declaring self-rule and a path to independence. As mentioned earlier, the Gezi Movement was another social stress on Turkish society and the state from several different angles. Syria and ISIS in the south of Turkey was another stress line for the Turkish state and people in general. Additionally, with the Dollar-Turkish Lira devaluation in recent years, Turkey rapidly moved into a defensive mode and began to see everything as a matter of *bekameselesi*.

4. As the central government controls the major news outlets, it is expected that the base of the opposition would shift towards social media where they can receive and react to a more diverse set of content.

One of our findings is consistent with Habermas’ (1989) observation that feudalized and controlled public space is opened up in the new age of communications. We observe this in Turkish media. Despite the state elites’ attempts to control the media and the rest of the economy (Esen and Gumuscu, 2018), social media cannot be controlled (or at least as easily as conventional media) with “kayyum”s.¹⁰ It has become an arena for alternative voices to operate and propagate. Despite social media crackdowns, bans, and persecutions (Akgül and Kırıldıođ, 2015; Parkinson, Schechner, and Peker, 2014; Parks, Goodwin, and Han, 2017), our findings suggest that secularists and the rest of the opposition flourish in cyber space. This observation is also consistent with Howard and Hussain (2013) who observed that due to the lack of independent press in Arab societies, the only venue for political engagement was social media. The youth and discontent public in the Middle East, North Africa, and many parts of the world systematically challenge government establishments and authoritarian regimes through social media. We postulate that the government’s control of mainstream media forced opposition leadership and the voter base to seek alternative ways of articulating themselves. Facebook and Twitter served the purpose of getting the message out for the opposition. The opposition was eager to embrace inclusive messaging from a potential leader (imamođlu) who seemed to stand a chance against Erdoğan. We also postulate that Turkish people developed empathy with those who are systematically and purposely excluded from public view via conventional media. Thus, imamođlu’s claim of unjust treatment during his candidacy was meaningful in the eyes of people. In other words, ‘victimization’ rhetoric served a purpose for imamođlu and helped him to win the election in Istanbul.

¹⁰ The word “kayyum” has been recently popularized in Turkey. It refers to a person (either a public servant or private citizen) appointed by the government to manage a private company or municipality.

Isolating the impacts of social media is very difficult. There are many interrelated positive and negative factors for both the AKP and the CHP. Some of these are:

- i. The Turkish economy has been in decline in the last few years (Citak and Sandford, 2018; Karatepe, 2019). This is allegedly due to several crises with the U.S. such as the imprisonment of the evangelist Pastor Brunson (Wald, 2018) and the S-400 Russian missile crisis (Kibaroglu, 2019), President Erdoğan's argument that interest rates are "evil" (Erkoc, 2019), rising interest rates which subsequently mean the end of cheap money for developing countries (Rao and Ranasinghe, 2018), and recent global trade tensions and tariffs (Bekkers, 2019).
- ii. Syrian refugees, whose extended stay has been causing a rift in Turkish society, and reactions against the AKP's Syria and refugee policies (Akgündüz, van den Berg, and Hassink, 2018; Gökarksel and Secor, 2018; Polat, 2018).
- iii. Mismanagement and overconfidence of the AKP ranks that has been voiced frequently both by the supporters of AKP and the opposition (Altaylı, 2019; Dilipak, 2019).
- iv. CHP moving towards the center (to the right, in relative terms) by allying with the secular nationalist İyi Parti, conservative Felicity Party, and nominating İmamoğlu who never strongly positioned himself in any kind of political current other than Kemalism (Dilipak, 2019; U. Şahin, 2016; Yeni Asır, 2014). This allowed moderates and even the right leaning voters, especially those who have not been happy with the economy and the Syrian refugees, to switch sides.
- v. Strengthening of anti-Erdoğanism as a reaction to growing polarization (Yilmaz, 2017) and two-decades of single party ruling (Yeşil, 2018) that deepens the polarization in society.
- vi. Significant changes in Turkish demography. Younger conservative generations that did not experience the lurching pre-Erdoğan Turkey. On the contrary, they openly enjoyed relatively improving economy, consumerism and freedom of expression in social and public life. For example, millions of new voters entered in Turkey's political life without being aware of the February 28th post-modern coup process in which headscarves were not allowed in public institutions, schools, or universities. Today, it is almost normal to see a public servant (Judge, Mayor, etc.) in the public sector wearing a headscarf. This was not possible before the AKP government.

Apart from these main factors influencing the election outcomes, Blumler and Kavanagh's (1999) third age of political communication is a fitting descriptor of recent Turkish politics, which provides a landscape for hardcore political battles through the proliferation of media. In addition to abundant television stations serving unapologetically biased opinions, professional political advocacy, involvement of artists and sports figures in daily politics, anti-elitist populism, centrifugal diversification (marked by cyber politics), and echo chambers (Barberá et al., 2015), Turkey has additional political communication characteristics such as a large government monopoly over the media (Yeşil, 2018).

Some argue that Yıldırım and the AKP were slacking off in this election, or perhaps fundamentally question their effectiveness, which may stem from the AKP's political orientation, a lack of excitement, and/or the choice of political alliances. Altaylı (2019) illustrates the problems with the AKP campaign as the following: a) The Istanbul political organization abated and left Yıldırım alone; b) the alliance with the MHP did not provide any benefits, but actually hurt the campaign; c) the calm demeanor of Yıldırım was conceived as lackluster by the public; d) while İmamoğlu was rallying and meeting people in the streets, Yıldırım's campaign focused more on the meetings in auditoriums. These alleged organizational problems in the AKP's campaign in the 2019 Istanbul elections are consistent with our findings for the cyber campaigning portion.

We cannot analyze these results meaningfully without including the role of President Erdoğan, and the difficult situation that CHP leader, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, has been in for years. Erdoğan, as the leader of the conservative party, has dominated Turkish politics for more than two decades. In the first years of his leadership and though inclusive politics, Turkey welcomed democratic progress (like the Kurdish opening), social programs (healthcare for everyone), and liberal politics (integration with EU) (Kirişci and Sloat, 2019), and economic progress with the increase of the GDP per capita. During these years, Erdoğan dominated his opponents in each election. CHP leader, Kılıçdaroğlu, lost more than ten elections and referendums and became an all-time stymied politician. However, in the face of İmamoğlu, the CHP for the first time in its history hoped that victory would come and the anti-Erdoğan block would carry the party to the mayorship of Istanbul. Considering that the CHP's conventional vote potential has been less than 35 percent in the recent decades, the anti-Erdoğan block was the key to the CHP's success. İmamoğlu wisely took advantage of the current anti-Erdoğan atmosphere to outrun his opponent Yıldırım and won the Istanbul mayorship victory for the CHP after the quarter century of

defeat. Additionally, the social dominance of İmamoğlu based on his individual characteristics are consistent with Karlsen (2011)'s observations.

Blumler and Kavanaugh (1999) observe that “In most modern societies, then, centripetal communication is to some extent retreating and centrifugal communication is advancing.” We agree with their conclusion looking at the diverse political media campaigning in Turkey in recent years. We also conclude that this makes the job of the politician, individual, and the researcher more difficult. We for example can only focus on so many news resources and platforms, and therefore it is difficult to arrive at complete conclusions without serious shortcomings and skepticism. We for example did not include other channels like main news outlets, Instagram and WhatsApp, or private forums which could divulge much more insight to arrive at better conclusions. Better data science methodologies, frameworks, and even AI could alleviate those problems. We can additionally argue that these advanced tools can be sources of unfair competition, and can be abused as in the 2016 elections and Cambridge Analytica (González, 2017). The politician on the other hand is challenged because he/she has to micro target sub populations (Haenschen and Jennings, 2019), just like corporations who have to micro-target customers based on their socio-economic status and location (Liu and Mattila, 2017). Similarly, we can argue that the voters are also challenged, as it is difficult to get a complete picture of political discourse from a few communication outlets. For the voter we can also add the challenges associated with accessing factual information, as it is relatively easy to create fake news and propagate it rapidly. We argue that the public good suffers to a certain extent in this picture: People are constantly manipulated from all angles, and forced into echo chambers, where they are comforted by resonant voices.

Finally, we agree with Enli (2017) who observes that the role and the structure of social media in campaigning is continuously evolving. We maintain that similar to understanding Trump's unique electoral performance (Barbaro, 2015; Confessore and Yourish, 2016), we need to consider the context of recent Turkish politics as well as the demographics of the social media user base in Turkey in order to understand why İmamoğlu has been successful in his social media campaign. Once more, we agree with Enli (2017) who claims that social media can facilitate agenda setting and be a space to construct the image of a candidate. This can help explain İmamoğlu's rise from being an unknown politician from an obscure district to being a super-star of Turkish politics (Euronews, 2019; Gumrukcu, Coskun, and Spicer, 2019).

5. CONCLUSION

İmamoğlu had an overwhelmingly more social media presence that was beneficial to his campaign compared to Yıldırım. We find this result as a reflection of the much wider preexisting voting base that is mostly secular. We also link these results to the positive campaigning conducted by İmamoğlu and his team, as well as the lack of traditional and mainstream media space available to his campaign, for which the social media was left as a more prominent space to express itself and to engage with the public, compared to the campaign of Yıldırım. Finally, İmamoğlu's campaign had a stronger lead in Facebook compared to Twitter, something that is worth investigating further.

Without a doubt, the wealth of qualitative and quantitative data suggests a large number of research trajectories and questions. Among the plethora of research questions, there are a few prospects and priorities that we are interested in pursuing ourselves for the future studies:

1. There is a seeming consensus in Turkish society, particularly among secularists, that society is becoming increasingly more religious due to the predominance of the AKP, which is challenged by social surveys. Accordingly, how do the social trends in Turkish society, especially along the lines of religion and secularism, impact the social media campaigning?
2. To what extent can we say that the election campaigns in Turkey get feedback from social media in particular? Can we observe any instances where social media reactions impacted the public policy or the electoral campaign?
3. What is the role of group identity and the growing polarization in the Turkish public, and politics, as well as in social media interactions? Our preliminary observation based on the latest elections and social media reactions indicates that secular Turkish people were increasingly galvanized in the last elections, especially after being on a losing streak for so many years. This can be contrasted with the conservative camp, which was marginalized throughout much of the history of the young Turkish Republic. The secular wing of Turkish politics is increasingly diplomatic (e.g. İmamoğlu's candidacy¹¹), data driven and tech savvy.

¹¹ There was an initial reaction to İmamoğlu's candidacy among the secular block. First of all, he did not have a brand name recognition. Secondly, whatever name he had (son of Imam), certainly sounded more Islamic and antithesis of the conventional CHP wisdom.

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SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

Table.S1: Mayoral Candidates, Political Affiliations and Their Facebook and Twitter Endpoints

Candidate	Party	Facebook API Endpoint / Object ID	Twitter API Endpoint
BinaliYıldırım	AK Party	facebook.com/binaliYıldırımiletisimofisi	twitter.com/BY twitter.com/BA_Yıldırım
Ekremİmamoğlu	CHP	facebook.com/imamoğluekrem	twitter.com/ekrem_imamoğlu
NecdatGokcinar	SP	facebook.com/gokcinarnecdet	
Muammer Aydın	DSP	facebook.com/DspMuammerAydin	
SelimKotil	BTP	facebook.com/selimkotil	

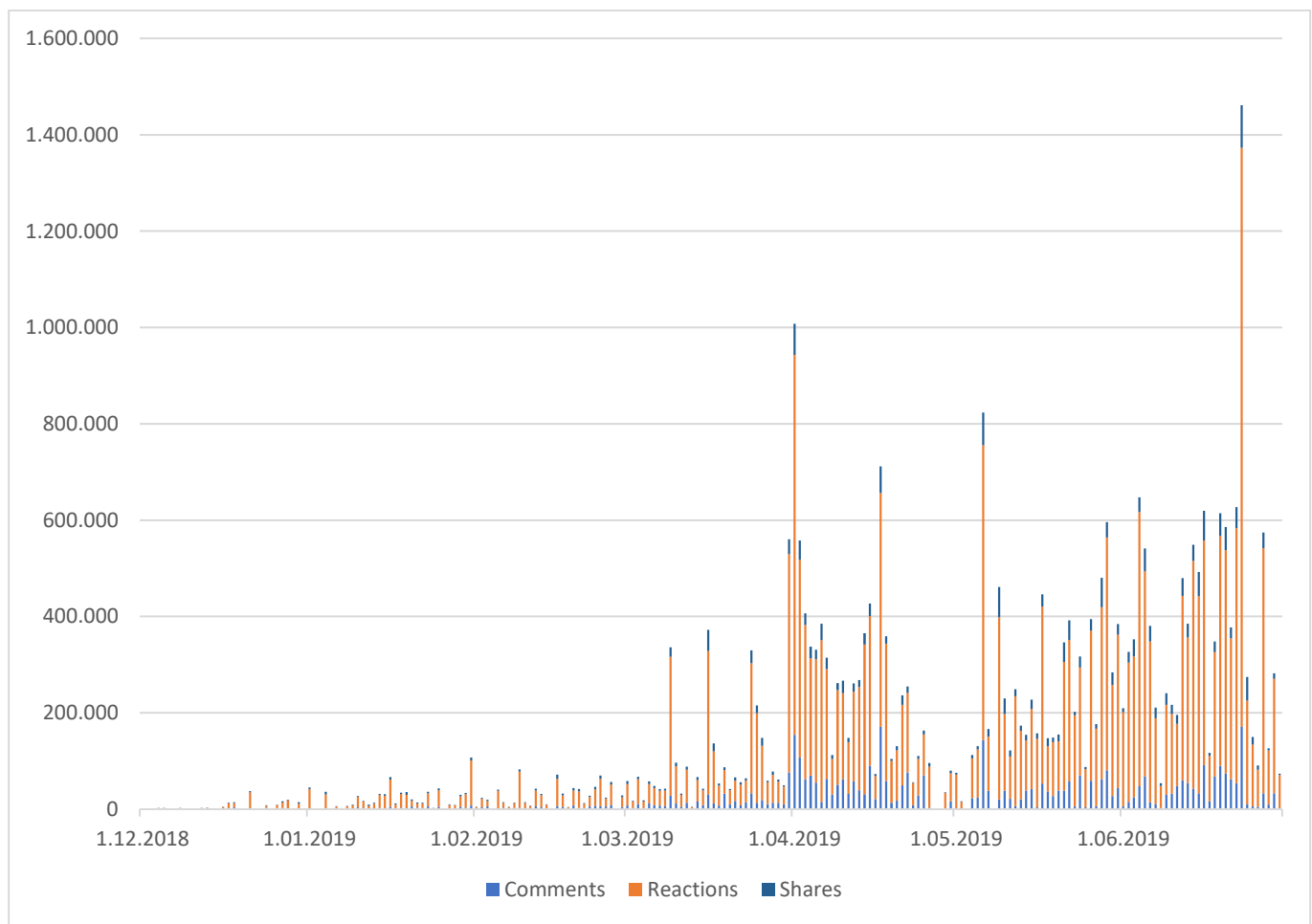
Figure.S1: Breakdown of Main Engagements to İmamoğlu's Facebook Posts by Type and Day

Figure.S2: Breakdown of Main Engagements to Yıldırım’s Facebook Posts by Type and Day

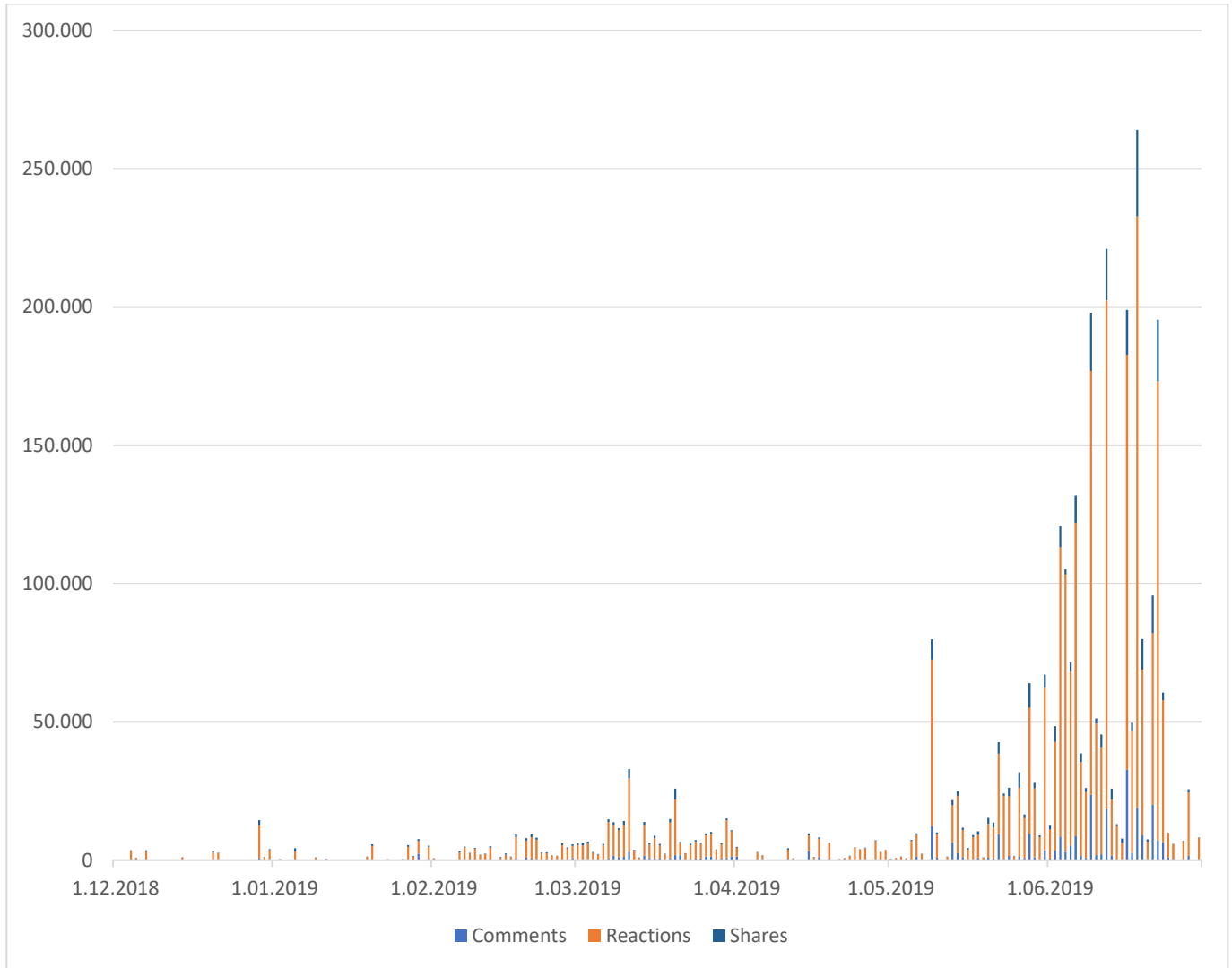


Figure.S3: Breakdown of Reactions to İmamoğlu’s Facebook Posts by Type and Day

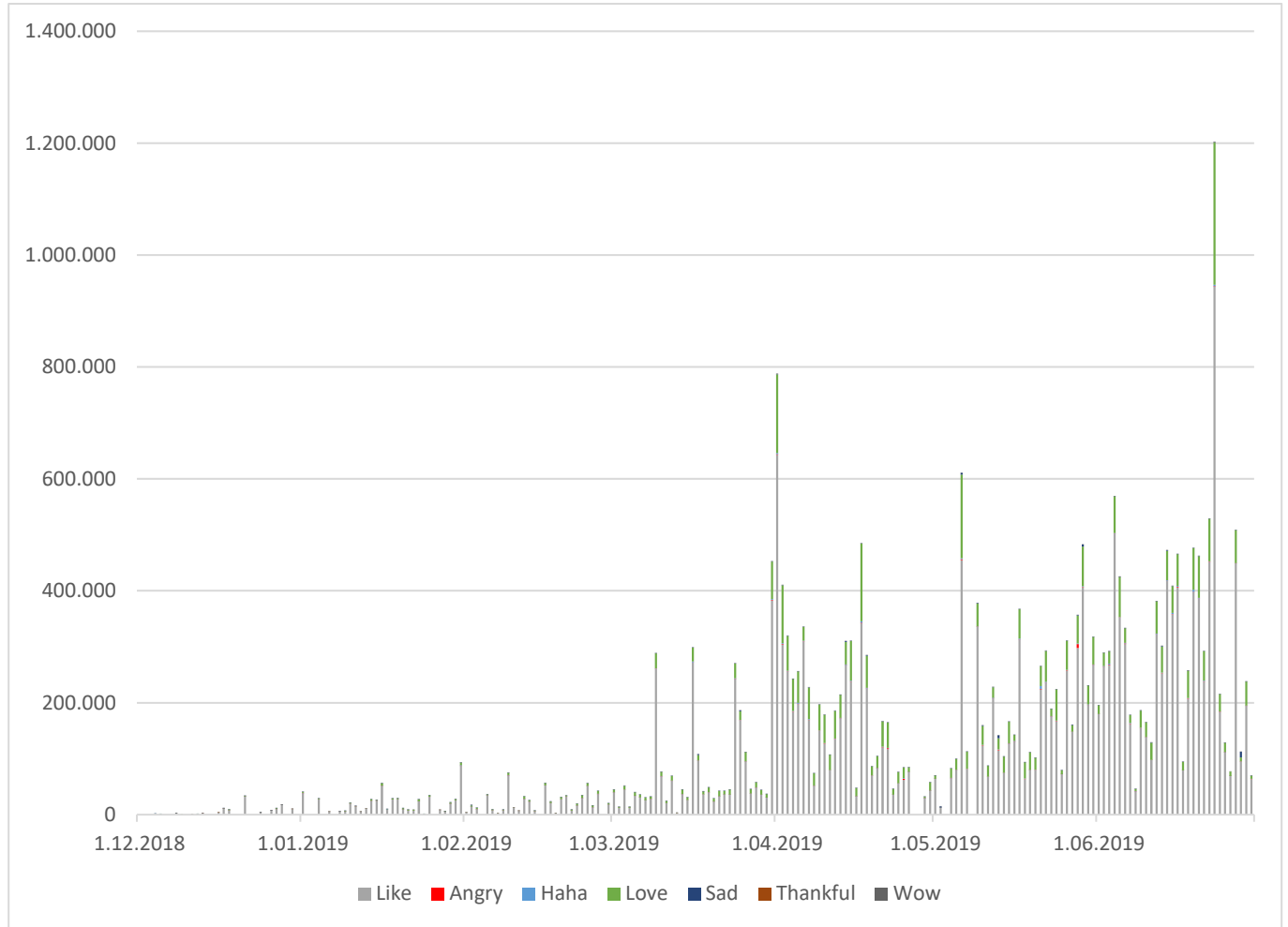


Figure.S4: Breakdown of Reactions to Yıldırım’s Facebook Posts by Type and Day

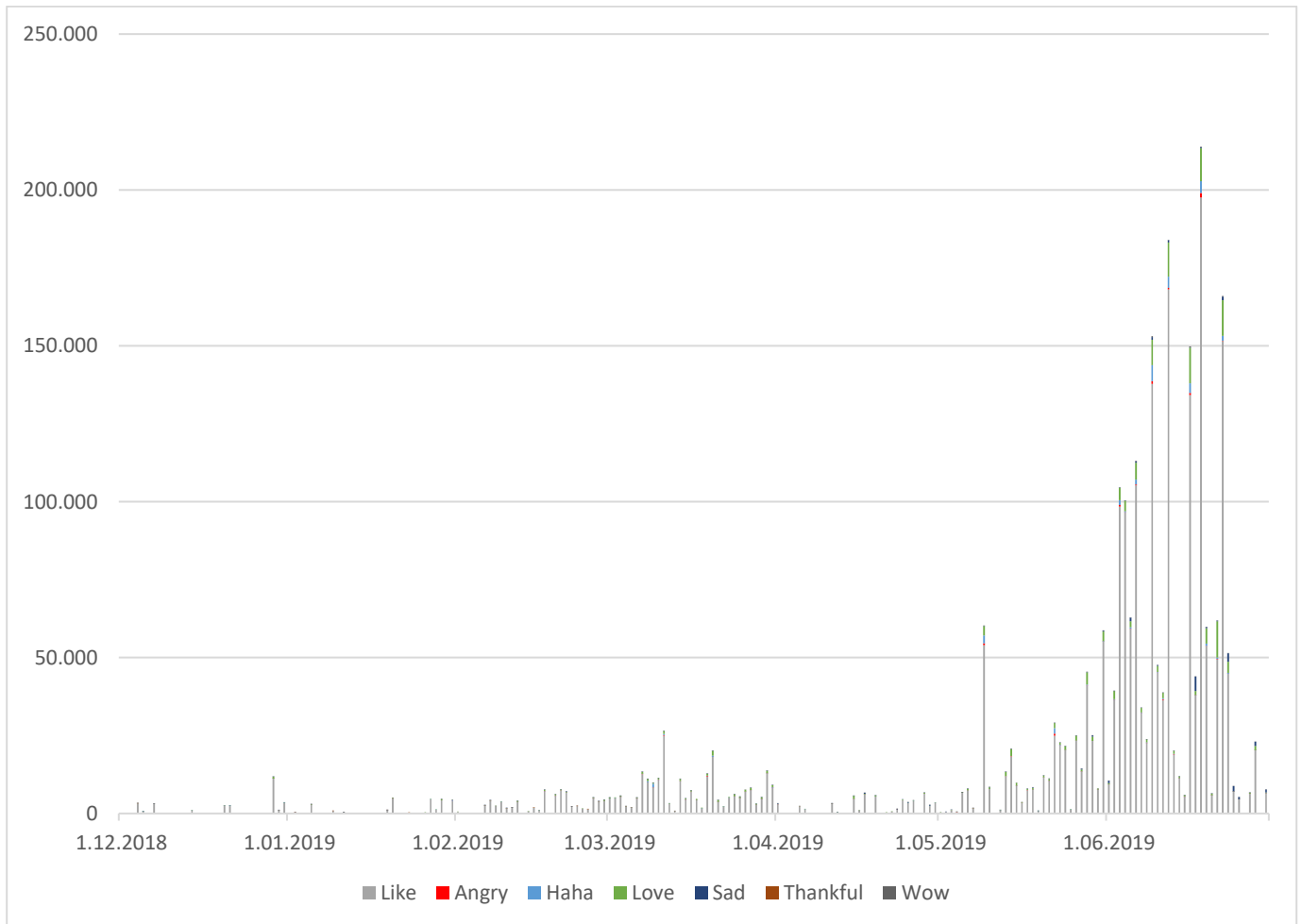


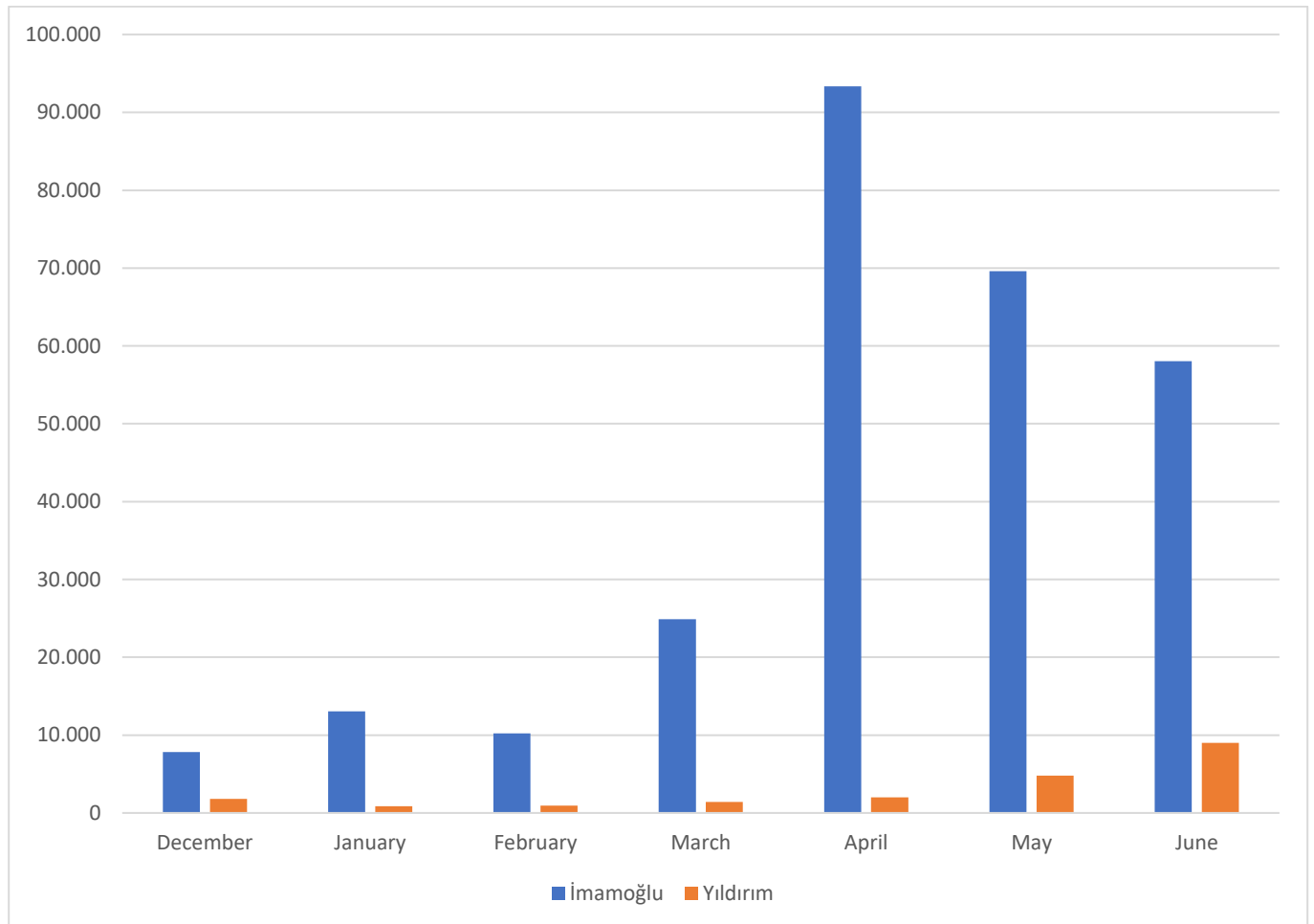
Figure.S5: Facebook Engagements to Posts Ratio by Month and Candidate

Figure.S5: Likes and Retweets of İmamoğlu's Tweets by Day

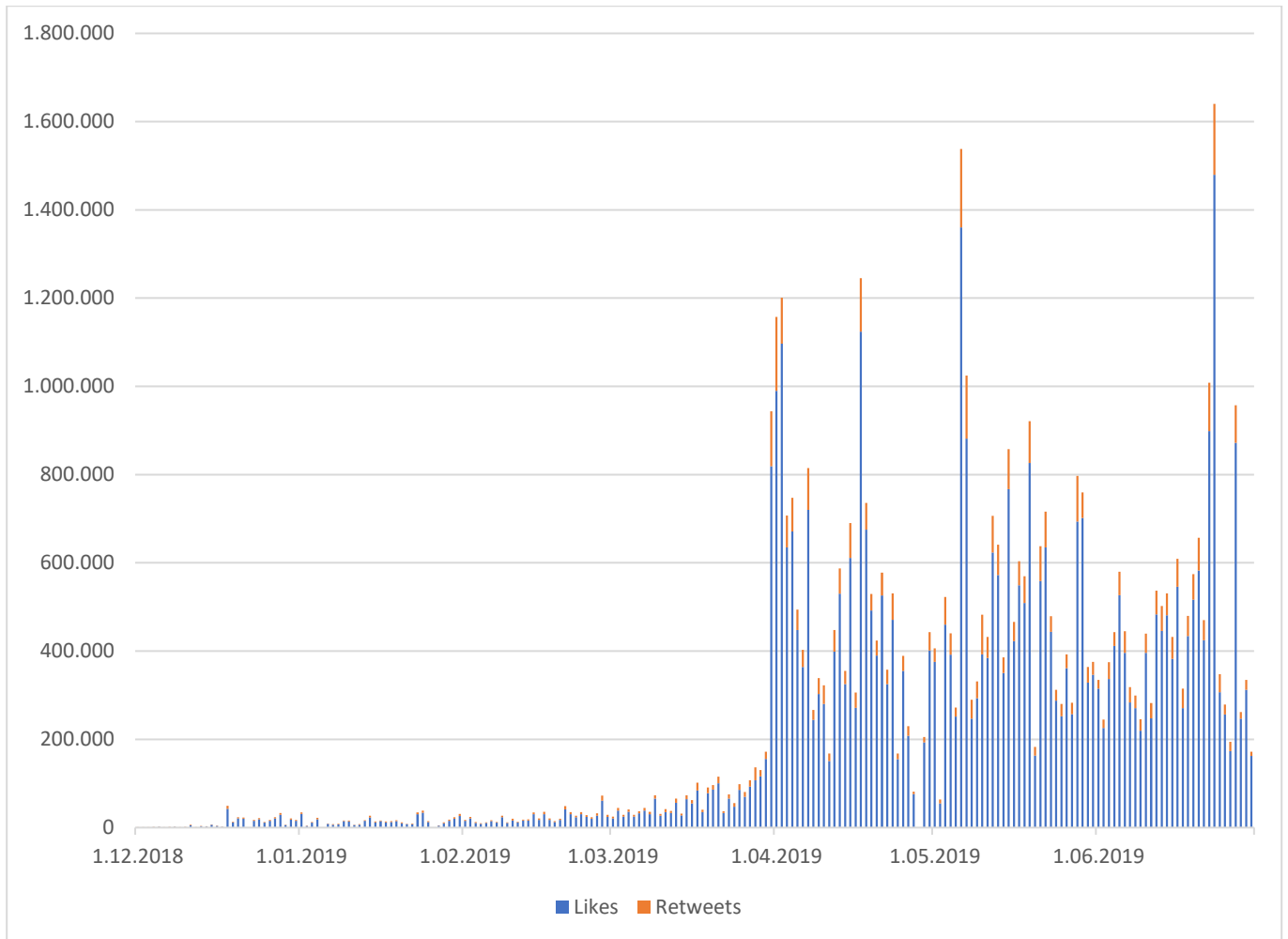


Figure.S6: Likes and Retweets of Yıldırım's Tweets by Day

