

# Digital Populism and the Social Media Impact on the 2017 Mongolian Presidential Election

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## INTRODUCTION

Elections in recent times have witnessed a growing trend to use mass media, especially social networks, to appeal to fundamental cultural characteristics such as traditions, shared values, identities, religious beliefs of a group, ethnicities and nationalism in order to stimulate public opinion, direct their emotions and build attitudes to achieve election results that best fit the interests of politicians.

Taking advantage of the current situation, with the lack of censorship and control of social networks, populist politicians and political parties have been pervasively spreading fake news, mudslinging, and using smear tactics among the populace. These have been observed in recent elections in the established liberal democracies of the US, France and Germany. As Francis Fukuyama recently wrote, “the emergence of a ‘post-fact’ world, in which virtually all authoritative information sources are challenged by contrary facts of dubious quality and provenance”<sup>1</sup> has become a reality.

This paper tries to examine a similar trend or pattern in the case of the presidential election in Mongolia in 2017 and makes comparisons between the Mongolian presidential election and the US presidential election in 2016. For this purpose, analyses were conducted on public opinion survey findings, media monitoring surveys, observations and analyses of independent researchers, and field study results.

## GENERAL PICTURE OF THE 2017 MONGOLIAN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

In the 2017 Mongolian presidential election, the main competition took place among the candidates Miyegombyn Enkhbold, from the Mongolian People’s Party (MPP); Khaltmaagiin Battulga, from the Democratic Party (DP); and Sainkhugiin

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<sup>1</sup> F. Fukuyama, “The Emergence of a Post-Fact World,” 2017, accessed 4 April 2018, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/onpoint/the-emergence-of-a-post-fact-world-by-francis-fukuyama-2017-0>.

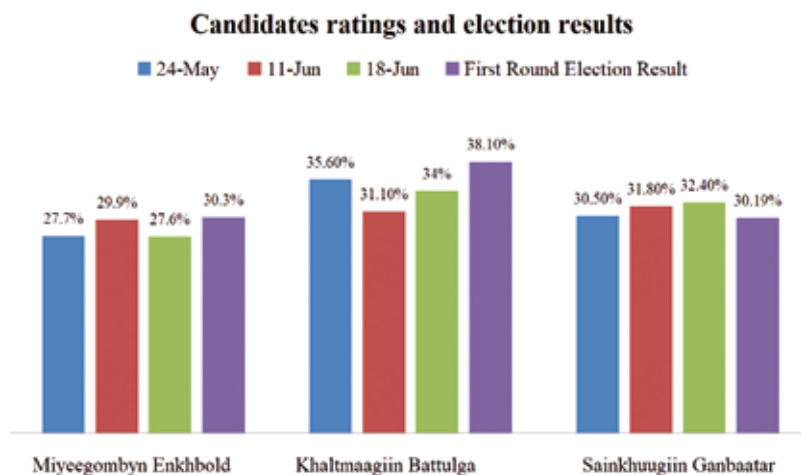
Ganbaatar, from the Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party (MPRP), all three of which also have seats in the State Great Khural (Parliament) of Mongolia. In the first round of the election, none of the candidates received a clear majority and thus, Battulga and Enkhbold remained in the ballot for run-off voting. In the second round of the election, Battulga won with 50.6% of the votes.

This recent election was peculiar in comparison with previous presidential elections in that the overwhelming majority of voters made their choices from the moment the candidates were determined and the number of floating voters who were undecided was minimal. Research findings show that throughout most of the period of the election campaign, the level of floating voters was at 6-7%, which is a significantly lower indicator compared to previous presidential and parliamentary elections.

During previous elections one third of the voters were undecided until the final week prior to election day. For example, public opinion survey findings conducted in the week prior to the polling day of parliamentary elections 2016 found that 29-31% of the total voters at the national level had not decided whom to vote for.<sup>2</sup>

In contrast, from the beginning of the campaign for the 2017 presidential election, voters were divided among the three candidates and floating voters were miniscule. The ratings of the three candidates during the election campaign and the first-round election results are shown in Graph 1.

**Graph 1: Ratings of the three candidates during the election campaign and first-round election results.**



Source: MMCG Research Centre, *Public opinion survey research of Presidential election, 2017*.

<sup>2</sup> Institute of Political Communication, "Voting behaviour survey during the parliamentary election campaign," 21 June 2016, 13.

As research findings and the election results show, 93-94% of the voters had decided their voting preference quite early and the election campaigns of the three candidates were targeted at luring the votes of the remaining 6-7% of the electorate.

## KEY INFLUENCING FACTORS FOR THE ELECTION RESULTS

This part of the article sheds light on the key causes and conditions that influenced the victory of opposition candidate Battulga over candidate Enkhbold of the incumbent party MPP, which controls the majority of the seats in parliament.

With regard to the conditions concerning Enkhbold's election campaign, there are three major factors that were at play. These are:

1. Candidates' image and their reputation among the masses.
2. Government's popularity, its decisions disliked by the masses and its management of crises.
3. Digital populism.

I will briefly describe these three factors below.

### 1. Candidates' image and individual characteristics

The individual characteristics and public images of the three candidates greatly differed from each other and the nomination processes carried out by their parties also varied extensively. In the case of Battulga from the Democratic Party, he prevailed over six other individuals in the internal party pre-selection contest. Ganbaatar, the candidate from MPRP, was an outsider to the party but gained the nomination from the party. As for the MPP, in its VIII party conference, Enkhbold and Tsendiin Nyamdorj were nominated and 85.7% of the attendees voted for Enkhbold to be the candidate. Even though Nyamdorj had maintained good leading positions within the ruling ranks in the party structure, and another potential figure, Badmaanyambuugiin Bat-Erdene, who, notwithstanding the fact that he had been a losing candidate in the previous presidential election, enjoyed a good reputation in the public, the party through its policy decided to nominate Enkhbold to run for the office.

Along with the party factor, individual characteristics play an especially important role during presidential elections. In this recent election, among the candidates, both Battulga and Ganbaatar distinguished themselves as strongly populist figures and are quite well-known as personalities, whereas Enkhbold was known more as a party leader and was not particularly popular among the masses. Battulga is well-known and respected as an athlete of sambo (a wrestling style similar to judo, mostly popular in former socialist countries) and judo wrestling, which is the

favourite and traditional sport among Mongolians. Moreover, perhaps under the influence of strongman authoritarian leadership in both neighbours Russia and China, there is growing support among Mongolians for a strong leader and presidential government, according to public opinion polls in recent years. Focus group discussions during the election indicate that the image and public perception of candidate Battulga is that of a strong leader.

During our focus group discussion, organised together with the Maxima research centre, conducted on 2-3 June 2017 in Ulaanbaatar city, 78 citizens shared their views on candidate Battulga: “as he keeps his promises”, “is a strong character, as an athlete, he prefers a fair game”, “only person to clean the politics”, “potentially strong president”, and “has Russian wife; Mongolia should be aligned with Russia instead of China, so Russian wife is acceptable” and other positive assessments. In addition, they also had some negative views regarding him as “he embezzled the budget spending on railway construction”, “tends to decide politics from a business viewpoint”, and “if he is elected as president then he will definitely enter into conflict with Parliament and Government”, among others.<sup>3</sup>

With regard to Enkhbold, citizens had positive views, such as “can be potentially better head of state than the other two candidates in dealing with issues through peaceful means, extensive knowledge and experience”, and negative ones, such as “his body language seems undecided and hesitant”, and “held all the high posts previously, including UB city mayor, prime minister, and parliamentary speaker, and had good chance to make changes, what difference does it make if he becomes president”.

On candidate Ganbaatar, people viewed him as a person who “fought for citizens’ interest as the president of the trade union, potential fighter against MANAN (conspiring grand coalition including two major parties; MAN is abbreviation of MPP and AN is abbreviation of DP; “Manan” is the Mongolian word for “fog”), lone fighter who is standing up for our nation”. There were also negative perceptions, such as “changing his parties, inconsistent, not ready to be president”.

In general, among the citizens of both Ulaanbaatar city and rural areas, Enkhbold’s rating was significantly weaker, with predominantly negative evaluations, while both Battulga and Ganbaatar had roughly the same number of positive and negative views.

## 2. Government popularity, its decisions disliked by the masses and its management of crises

One general pattern observed in most of the presidential and parliamentary elections around the globe is that when elections are held during a crisis, it usually

<sup>3</sup> Maxima Consulting, “Focus Group Interview Report,” 2-3 June 2017.

negatively impacts the incumbent party. The public tends to blame the incumbent party for the crisis of the time. For example, this was the main cause for the defeat of the Democratic Party in the 2016 Mongolian parliamentary elections. In 2011 Mongolia's economy grew by 17% and attracted billions of dollars in foreign investment. Nevertheless, the prices of commodities, the main sector of Mongolia's economy, sharply plunged in the late 2011 and early 2012, causing a financial and economic crisis. Thus, once the world's fastest-growing economy, mining-dependent Mongolia faces mounting unemployment, declining foreign direct investment and a looming debt crisis. Some researches indicate that election results greatly depend on how the ruling party manages economic and other crises, and how it implements its political communication to convey crisis management, policy, and results.<sup>4</sup> In particular, during an economic crisis, it is often necessary to cut budget spending and to increase tax to generate more revenue, which directly affects voters' living conditions, causing them to view the incumbents negatively. In this context, the policy mistakes of the incumbent MPP government in crisis management were one key cause for its defeat in the presidential election.

One of the primary factors that adversely influenced the decline of Enkhbold's popularity was the fact that he did not become the prime minister even though he was the leader of the majority party after the 2016 parliamentary elections. Among others, the main campaign promises of the MPP included the formation of a professional government and refusal to appoint any member of parliament as cabinet members; both promises were highly supported and expected by the public. Hence the selection and appointment of J.Erdenebat as prime minister was the first major blow to the long-awaited public expectation. This appointment was a major setback for the rating of the party and Enkhbold's personal popularity, as the people had expected Enkhbold to be appointed a prime minister since he was the leader of the triumphant party.

This dissatisfaction over his refusal to assume the premiership was widely observed from a series of public opinion surveys carried out during the election. The public criticised: "Usually party leaders become prime ministers, but Enkhbold decided not to in order to become president; many good things were promised during the recent election campaign but have not been realised and even repudiated", among other issues.

The declining popularity of the MPP government and its erroneous policies form the precondition for its defeat in the presidential election of 2017. For instance,

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<sup>4</sup> Jeffrey Frieden and Stefanie Walter, "Understanding the Political Economy of the Eurozone Crisis," *Annual Review of Political Science* 20:1 (2017): 371-390; Michal Kotnarowski and Radoslaw Markowski, "Political Preferences in Times of Crisis: Economic Voting in the 2011 Polish Elections," *Acta Politica* 49.4 (2014): 431-461.

the government decisions to increase seven types of taxes, cut social care, and extend the retirement age all faced public outcry.

A range of public opinion surveys conducted before or during the election established that these government decisions led the citizen to evaluate as such: “MPP could not deliver its election promises from the parliamentary elections and failed the trust of the masses”. Participants in the surveys stated: “MPP after securing the majority in parliament forgot its promises and there were ways to cut spending without increasing tax rates”.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, the inappropriate policy mistakes of the MPP government and irresponsible actions of some individual politicians made the starting condition of the election campaign unfavourable for the MPP.

### 3. Digital populism

The 2017 presidential election campaign lasted only 18 days from 6 June 2017 according to the law, and in contrast to previous election campaigns, candidates were restricted in their use of advertising channels. In the case of TV ads, each candidate was permitted 15 minutes air-time on 16 nation-wide broadcasting TV channels. According to Electoral Law, each candidate is entitled to distribute election campaign printed material to voters not exceeding the following sizes and form: three printer’s sheets of journal, two printer’s sheets of leaflet and poster, two printer’s sheets of the candidate’s resume and three printer’s sheets of reports on performed work.<sup>6</sup> The number and locations of street posters were also significantly limited.

Thus, the traditional features of election campaigning were widely restricted in comparison with previous elections. Hence, the candidate of the MPP and that of the DP both extensively exploited social media, whereas the candidate Ganbaatar focused more on his face-to-face contacts and meetings as the main channel of his campaigning strategy.

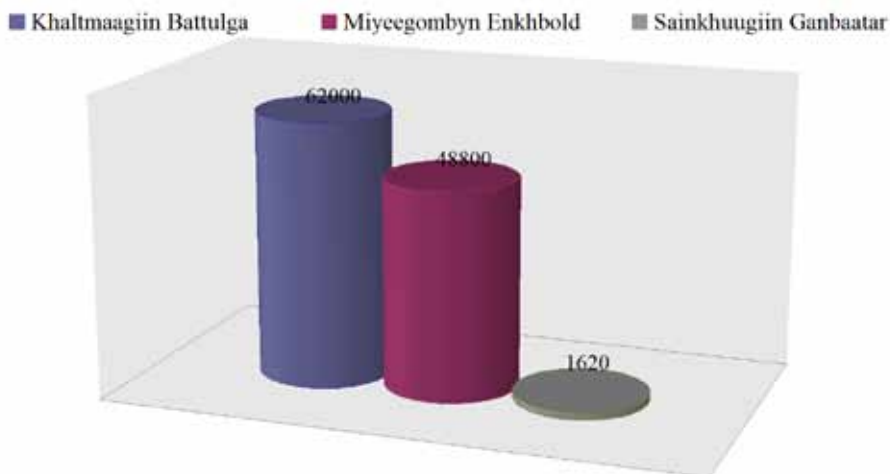
Throughout the election campaign, the Democratic Party’s candidate, Battulga, successfully made a corruption accusation on Facebook against his main rival Enkhbold, who in turn launched a negative political campaign against his main opponent Battulga on Twitter. Clear evidence of Battulga’s campaign prevalence on Facebook was that his campaign ads, live videos and coverages attracted the largest amount of viewership throughout the whole election campaign period. To clarify this point, let me compare the viewership of the election campaign opening ceremonies of all three candidates.

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<sup>5</sup> Institute of Political Communication, *Research Report*, 10 June 2017, 9.

<sup>6</sup> *Electoral law of Mongolia* (2016), Article 77.

**Graph 2: Number of people who watched the election campaign commercials of the three candidates on Facebook.**



Source: Institute of Political Communication, “Research Report,” 28 July 2017, 16.

This pattern of viewership was maintained during the election campaign period. Battulga’s advertisements, and their negative campaigning, led in terms of viewership shares, while Ganbaatar’s supporters on Facebook were minimal from the beginning until the end of the election. Therefore, it is possible to conclude that Ganbaatar’s supporters were not on Facebook, but were offline supporters.

The overall image of the election campaign was not filled with the platforms or the policies of the three candidates, but by negative campaigns by the candidates against each other and fake news. None of the three candidates was able to conduct the election campaigning in accordance with strategic planning. For instance, Enkhbold’s election campaign team had mainly focused on giving proper responses and rebuttals. In the meantime, Battulga’s campaign focused on anti-Chinese advertisements and a recording of “60 billion” (a piece of audio recording where the leading figures of the MPP were heard discussing a suggestion to organise a scheme of election, contributions and post-election appropriation of government posts, each of which is claimed to be priced, in total reaching 60 billion tugriks). In doing so, similar methods of creating fake stories and fake news used in the 2016 US presidential election by the Donald Trump team were largely utilised. Below are some examples.

The fact that candidates engaged in mudslinging and smear tactics to damage each other’s reputation and propagation of negative publicity on social media in order to attract public attention was observed during the monitoring study on the influence of social media and the press conducted during the 2017 presidential election by the Political Communication Institute.

The DP's campaign team started posting three related but separate videos, titled "The death of a brave Mongolian", "Enkhbold's ethnic lineage" and "Insulting Great Genghis Khan", on 1 and 2 June 2017, even before the election campaign had officially started. These posts were published and shared on the largest groups and pages on Facebook

The recording of "Enkhbold's ethnic lineage" was first posted on TV Choice page on 1 June 2017, claiming that Enkhbold had a Chinese origin and mixed ethnicity. This recording was distributed and spread in large Facebook groups with more than 40,000 members, such as Offshore, Zugaatai zaluus (Fun Guys), Automashin zarlal (Vehicle Classified), Information, and Online Sale, among others. The Zugaatai zaluus group is the largest, having 332,000 members. The recording was watched by 99,000 accounts and shared 2,403 times within 48 hours of its initial posting.<sup>7</sup>

Moreover, on 2 June 2017, within 24 hours of its initial posting, the video recording was published on around 10 news sites, with the title "Enkhbold proven to be of mixed blood with hard evidence".

It has been observed that most of the comments under these three separate videos were driven by hatred and xenophobia against Enkhbold's Chinese lineage, such as "Enkhbold is a Chinese, and that is why we should elect a genuine Mongolian". The fact that people believed without questioning those videos, which were exploiting the traditional xenophobic fear against China, was of great influence to the voters.

"The death of a brave mongolian", the second video, was published with a short explanation: "Chinese people are running over inner-mongolians to kill them". Again it was posted on the largest groups and pages on Facebook, such as Mongolian Entertainment, Papparazzi, Zugaatai zaluus, and Khamag Mongol (Pan-Mongolia), each with thousands of members, while people were sharing it on their personal accounts.

"Insulting Great Genghis Khan", the third video, depicted the scene of a Chinese acting in a disrespectful way towards the portrait of Genghis Khan and was shared on the largest groups on Facebook, including Sensational Videos, Trendy Videos, and Mongolian Entertainment, among other large groups with over 30,000 members, and had several thousand views.

Thus, these three videos were posted in a coordinated sequence on 1-2 June 2017, and many celebrities and social-network celebrities with many followers also shared them, allowing them to reach a large number of accounts. For example, famous sumo wrestling champion Asoshoryu Dagvadorj artificially edited a photo with the explanation "How he took revenge on the Chinese insulted Genghis Khan

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<sup>7</sup> Institute of Political Communication, *Research Report*, 28 July 2017, 21.



portrait” on his own Facebook timeline on 2 June, which reached 671 shares in just one hour before the champion himself deleted the post.<sup>8</sup>

When analysed, it was found that the comments under these mutually coordinated videos posted on Facebook focused on the hatred against the Chinese, complained that too many Chinese workers were coming to Mongolia, accused M.Enkhbold of being Chinese and called for electing a genuine Mongolian as the president.

In relation to the inflammatory sentiments based on the traditional xenophobic fear against the Chinese, many people tended to accept these views and comments on social networks without question, according to our surveys. Checking of validity, reliability and accuracy of news and its sources were ignored and conscious filtering did not take place on social networks.

Hence, the election team of DP candidate Battulga successfully posted a series of negative campaign videos, which in a span of minutes reached multiple people. In particular, the level of influence of these negative advertising was higher among youth, the main users of social networks, compared to other age groups, as observed in our focus group discussion during the election campaign.<sup>9</sup>

## SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES OF SOCIAL NETWORKS IN THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION CAMPAIGNS OF MONGOLIA AND THE US

A comparison of social networks’ impact upon the presidential election campaigns in the US and Mongolia can highlight similar patterns. For instance, in both cases, social network usage has become widespread and its influencing power upon the opinion of the voters has increased significantly in comparison to previous elections. In previous elections, social network platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Youtube, etc., were used as a promotional platform for positive campaigning, as an election platform, and to showcase the policy positions of candidates. Negative advertising was miniscule, as seen in the cases of the 2008 and 2012 campaigns of Barack Obama, from the Democratic Party, and the 2012 campaign of Mitt Romney, from the Republican Party.

In the case of Mongolia, the 2013 presidential election campaign saw the start of the use of social networks for election campaigning. In 2013, although there were three candidates from the MPP, the DP and the MPRP, the main contest within the social media realm took place between the candidates from the MPP and the DP. Nevertheless, the magnitude and content of negative campaign advertisements were

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<sup>8</sup> Institute of Political Communication, *Research Report*, 10 June 2017, 13.

<sup>9</sup> Maxima Consulting, “Focus Group Discussion Report,” 16 June 2017.

markedly limited. There were some negative messages and information which could be categorised as being more funny than mudslinging against candidates B.Bat-Erdene and Ts.Elbegdorj. For example, B.Bat-Erdene was described as a bulky Mongolian man while it was joked that Ts.Elbegdorj was so short that when he was on horseback his feet could not reach the stirrups. There were pictures and photos showing B.Bat-Erdene wrestling in the national festival Naadam (he is a multiple-times champion of national wrestling). Other photos showed Ts.Elbegdorj as a leader of the democratic movement in the 1990s, with an explanation: “Ts.Elbegdorj was involved in leading the democratic revolution, where has been Bat-Erdene in the meantime?”

As for the 2016 US presidential election and the 2017 Mongolian presidential election, both saw the use of social networks as the main battleground of election competition. A series of mudslinging ads and fake news were prepared and used to damage the competitors’ popularity. According to Allcott and Gentzkow in 2016, Donald Trump’s team made and spread multiple fake news, insults, and mudslinging ads to inflame inter-ethnic feuds and provoke racial discrimination, causing more divisions.<sup>10</sup> In 2017, Battulga’s team made use of Mongolians’ unfavourable views regarding the Chinese to spread fake news, using videos of random crime scenes with the political message of “Chinese against Mongolians”, titling them as the real danger of the Chinese.

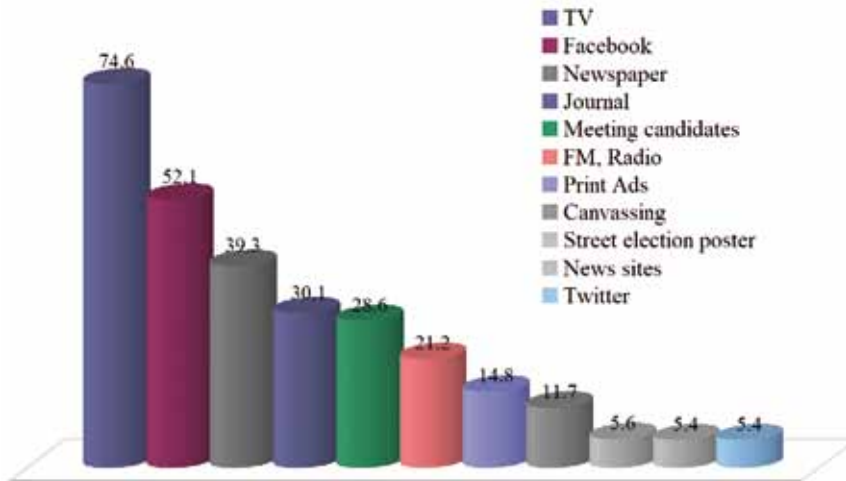
Although there are thus some similarities regarding the usage of social networks between the presidential election campaigns in the US and Mongolia, there are also significant differences, too. Foremost among the differences is the fact that while the two main social networks, Facebook and Twitter, are both powerful in influencing voters’ opinion in the US, in the case of Mongolia, Facebook alone has far-reaching influence on major groups of voters. As for Twitter, Mongolian users are relatively few and thus its impact on the electorate is limited, which was seen in the 2016 parliamentary elections and the 2017 presidential election campaign.

According to our studies conducted during the 2017 presidential election, Facebook is the third most important source of information about the candidates. 39.3% of respondents of the survey responded that they received information about the candidates from Facebook whereas only 5.4% of respondents responded that they received information about the candidates from Twitter.

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<sup>10</sup> Hunt Allcott and Matthew Gentzkow, “Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election,” *Journal of Economic Perspectives* Vol. 31(2) (2017): 211-236.

**Graph 3: From what source do you get your information about the candidates?**



Source: Maxima Consulting, “Public opinion poll,” 15-16 June 2017.

The group of respondents who use Facebook as the main source of information comprises of youth between the ages of 18-25 residing mostly in Ulaanbaatar city or aimag, which are the largest administrative and territorial division centres, and from different educational backgrounds.<sup>11</sup> From this, it is possible to conclude that the main information and campaign ads on Facebook during the 2017 presidential election were able to reach large groups of voters.

As for the main user group on Twitter, it comprises of people who are mostly office employees, graduated from higher education institutions, and are between the ages of 30-45.<sup>12</sup> There were a number of users with many followers who were hired by the election campaign teams to tweet for certain candidates. Nonetheless, the Twitter messages were relatively narrow in terms of users and were not able to reach most of the ordinary voters, in contrast to the Twitter effect in the US presidential election. As observers have pointed out, Trump’s election team was highly effective in terms of using Twitter messages and could reach certain groups of voters during the US presidential election.<sup>13</sup> Information and messages on the Twitter network in Mongolia may have some reach on the decision-makers or politicians themselves but not the wider masses of the electorate and as a result has very minimal effect, unlike the widespread influence of Facebook. Therefore, although MPP supporters

<sup>11</sup> Maxima Consulting, “Public opinion poll,” 15-16 June 2017.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Gunn Enli, “Professionalisation Meets Amateurism: Comparing the Social Media Presence of the 2016 Clinton Campaign and the 2016 Trump Campaign,” *European Journal of Communication* Vol. 32, Issue 1 (2017): 50-61.

were prevalent in Twitter, its effect did not reach a wider array of voters in the 2017 presidential election.

The impact of social networks has been growing in elections around the world, and political campaigning based on emotions is notably spreading, as seen in the cases of the 2016 US presidential election and the 2017 Mongolian presidential election. In addition, it is also vastly common that populist politics is turning via social networks into digital populism.

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