

Public Opinion and Social Media and Their Impact on Political Decisions-Making in Iraq

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Abstract: *This study seeks to examine the influence of media in shaping public opinion and its implications for political decision-making since social media has become a fundamental aspect of global communication and information access. One possible consequence of social media is its capacity to galvanize public opinion, augmenting political engagement and influencing political decision-making. Social media functions as a medium for disseminating political information, enhancing political consciousness, and encouraging active engagement in the political process. This research employed a qualitative methodology to gather data from existing literature. The gathered data undergoes analysis in three phases: data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion formulation. The findings indicate that social media substantially influences public opinion and governmental decision-making in Iraq. This impact can be seen in the easy and quick access to political information, the creation of places where people can talk about politics, and the ease with which opinions and goals can be expressed.*

Keywords: Public Opinion, Social Media, Political Decisions Making

Introduction

The power elite is a small group of influential people who hold significant sway over politics and society. They shape events, have access to and control over important resources, know each other, and generally think and act alike. A key aspect of their power is their ability to influence how situations are understood and interpreted. The "political elite" is a smaller group within this larger power elite. This group consists of high-ranking government officials, politicians, and their close advisors. The political elite plays a critical role in creating policies and making political decisions, especially when it comes to major infrastructure projects and significant policy changes (Wynn et al., 2024). The interaction between politics and the media is intertwined. Political leaders, parties, and government structures actively use the media as a tool for public coverage of their programs, strategies, and actions. This provides them with the opportunity not only to communicate with voters but also to contribute to the formation of a positive image by manipulating information flows. The media thus becomes not only a channel for transmitting political messages but also an active participant in the political game, influencing the decision-making process. On the other hand, the media can influence the political sphere by choosing the topics they cover and shaping the agenda of public and political debates. By selecting information, media actors can contribute to the coverage of important social and political problems and divert attention from key issues that need to be addressed. In this way, they create opportunities for public debate, which often determines the issues that are of current concern to society (Volos, 2024).

Public opinion has become a central concern for political scientists because it's a powerful social force that can influence government leaders and their decisions. Ideally, those decisions should reflect the overall interests of society. However, when this connection between public opinion and government action breaks down, public opinion becomes a driving force for political awareness. This awareness can motivate people to pressure the government to adopt policies that better reflect their needs and desires. This pressure can take many forms, as citizens try to match the power of the government and push it towards positive change. This dynamic is visible in both democratic and authoritarian countries, highlighting the growing importance of public opinion in modern politics. Studying public opinion helps us understand how

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public policy is made and implemented in a country. In essence, public opinion acts as a guardian of the people's interests. It shapes and reinforces specific viewpoints about the "public good" to keep people informed and engaged. The strong link between public opinion and public policy is forged through rational public discourse. When people come together to discuss and agree on an issue of common concern, their collective judgment creates pressure on the ruling elite. This pressure compels them to make political decisions that translate the public's perceived interest into concrete policies across various aspects of social life. On the other hand, the increasing integration of media into our lives has led to the "medicalization of politics," where mass media plays a significant role in shaping political debate and decision-making. This trend is characterized by the expectation that individuals will show greater interest in media coverage of political issues and that media norms and values will become increasingly influential in the policymaking process at all levels of government (Lennartsson, 2011). Given the importance of the media in influencing public opinion among decision-makers and diverse political systems, there is an urgent need to understand what the public thinks about every subject that is on the decision-maker's mind. This can only be recognized by building specialist public opinion polling centres that can assist the decision-maker and his unit by delivering live and real-time information so that they may make informed judgments.

This research aims to study the relationship between the media and public opinion and how it is reflected in the political decision-making in Iraq, especially since Iraq has witnessed a wide openness to the world after three decades of the dominance of dictatorial regimes. This research is important because it examines how recent changes in the global landscape impact political systems. Specifically, it looks at how the growing number of actors involved in international affairs and the increasingly complex decision-making processes (and the factors influencing them) affect political systems. This complexity has led to new ways of analyzing political systems, their goals, and the crises they face, particularly in political decision-making. The study aims to identify the key variables that influence these decisions. It recognizes that every political decision is shaped by the system's underlying philosophy, its political ideology and approach, the nature of the society where the decision originates, and the level of crisis present within that society.

Literature review

Various propaganda and political operations in Iraq have demonstrated the importance of social media and public opinion in political decision-making. For example, social media was widely used during the 2019 rallies and protests, which sparked popular outrage and resulted in a change in the reigning government. Social media was also used to dispel stereotypes about numerous political leaders and drive the government to pass legislation prohibiting low-quality content. Simply said, social media has the potential to alter and improve the Iraqi political arena if used correctly. In light of the foregoing, we will conduct a thorough examination of political decision-making and understand how public opinion and communication channels impact it.

Political Decision Making

Conceptual Framework of Political Decision-Making

Making decisions has become a beloved topic for many individuals: mathematicians, economists, sociologists, psychologists, and statisticians. New sorts of disciplines have been developed, such as the policy sciences or the sciences of management, which put this problem at the centre of their attention (Leoni, 1957). Decision and the decision-making process in terms of public policy is the more or less exploited success of these public policies in the community, at an institutional or state level, concerning what we call the general welfare designated or recognizable in the public arena (Kuzio, 2009). According to (Richard Snyder) political decision-making is the social process by which a problem is selected to be the subject of a decision, resulting in a specific number of alternatives, one of which is chosen to be implemented (Snyder, 2003). The decision-making process seeks to evaluate all potential alternatives and options, enabling the decision-maker to select with awareness, considering the subject's dimensions, understanding its possibilities, and being prepared to address them (Rosati et al., 2010). This definition signifies the presence of multiple options and alternatives concerning decisions that can attain the desired objective or address the issue the decision maker intends to confront. However, these options and

alternatives vary in their rationality and efficacy in addressing the circumstances that necessitate the decision-making process. Certain choices can accomplish the intended objective but at a significant expense, while others can attain it at a reduced cost; hence, the decision maker aims to select an option that fulfils the objective at a lesser cost.

To achieve an objective decision that effectively addresses the issue with minimal losses, the decision maker requires sufficient and accurate information that facilitates comprehension of the issue, assessment of available alternatives, and evaluation of these alternatives to discern their respective strengths and weaknesses. Beyond simply possessing enough accurate information, an effective decision-maker needs strong analytical, deductive, and foresight skills. These abilities allow them to understand the context surrounding the decision. This understanding enables them to develop realistic options, each accompanied by thorough information on its potential advantages and disadvantages, the likely outcomes if chosen, and specific mitigation strategies to minimize any negative impacts. Based on their knowledge and foresight, the decision-maker can then advise others, recommending a preferred option by explaining its likely consequences and how it might be received.

On the other hand, another team believes that the decision is the choice of the political leadership. Another group believes that the decision is the choice of the political leadership, as Muawad (1985) believes that the political leadership is the focus of the decision, and this trend focuses on the nature of the political elite, its values and preferences, considering that this elite is the one that makes and implements the important and fateful decisions in its societies. On the other hand, it is believed that the political decision is a consensus of interests, as the pioneers of this trend see the political system as the sum of institutional and behavioural interactions associated with political decision-making, and the political decision is a set of complex and overlapping procedures that aim to achieve consensus between the different interests, positions, and opinions within society (Makkawi, 2017).

The Phases of Political Decision-Making

Different experts use different theoretical frameworks to explain the steps that go into making a political decision. Some of these frameworks are broad for some experts and narrow for others. However, they all disagree on some basic points. Before discussing the stages of political decision-making (Muqalled, 1987), it is essential to consider numerous significant aspects that influence this crucial process; perhaps the most critical of these variables is:

- i. The external environment, including its dimensions, facts, forces, impacts, and areas of overlap and interaction.
- ii. The decision-maker's internal environment includes the existing social circumstances, the political system, the economics of the state, non-governmental organizations, pressure and interest groups, and political parties, among others. It encompasses the self-interests of a state, the political dynamics of its societies, and their impact on the strategies and options of decision-makers.
- iii. The pressure arises from the necessity to resolve a particular issue; in the absence of this pressure, the impetus to make a choice is entirely diminished.
- iv. The organizational environment or structure influences decision-making since decision-makers depend on the external political apparatus or the decision-making unit, sometimes referred to as the decision-maker, in various nations.
- v. Decision-makers operate inside a certain framework of values and beliefs that influence their interpretations and behaviours, hence impacting the decision-making process.
- vi. Making decisions depends on information, so there needs to be a good information system that can sort, organize, and process the data that is available. This gives the person making the decision the information they need to make the right choice.

As for the stages of the decision-making process, there is a trend that divides it into three stages: The preparation stage comes before the decision-making stage, Decision-making, the selection stage, The stage following decision-making, and the implementation stage. These stages as a whole may be intertwined with each other; in addition to that, each stage may contain many sub-phases.

Another trend is to divide the decision-making process into five stages (Dabla, 2004):

- i. Defining the problem and its causes and separating and isolating it from the overlapping problems.

- ii. Defining and arranging the goals and values that affect the decision-maker according to their importance and degree of influence.
- iii. Defining the alternatives and choices that can be used to achieve and accomplish each of the desired goals or to address the problem under study.
- iv. Expect the results and outcomes of each alternative, including how well they meet objectives, resources, and other values, and compare them.
- v. Select the best option that fulfils the objectives and values at the highest level, lowest cost, or both.

Contributors to Political Decision Making

Political decision-making is a multifaceted process shaped by several players and variables. Comprehending these contributions is crucial for understanding the formulation and implementation of policies. The primary contributors comprise Government institutions. Political systems exist globally, each employing distinct decision-making processes. In democratic systems, decision-making often occurs via voting in legislative bodies, with each member possessing one vote. In totalitarian regimes, decision-making may rely on a single individual or group wielding ultimate authority. Decision-making in politics is a multifaceted process that necessitates the evaluation of several factors and the interplay of stakeholders. Nevertheless, if democratic values are considered and the process is characterized by transparency and openness, then decision-making may serve as an effective mechanism for achieving political objectives and fostering the democratic advancement of society. Non-governmental organizations, according to (Memeti, [2020](#)). Non-governmental organizations exert considerable impact on political choices in several ways. Agenda Setting: They promote certain topics, enhancing public awareness and campaigning for legislative reforms. Policy Formulation: NGOs offer specialized knowledge and insights during the policy formulation process to guarantee the consideration of various stakeholder interests. Decision Influence: They participate in advocacy to persuade decision-makers before voting. Execution and Oversight: NGOs frequently participate in the implementation of policies and the assessment of their results to guarantee accountability. The public's involvement in political decision-making is progressively acknowledged. Citizens can affect choices via Voting: Elections enable the populace to articulate their views about policies and representatives. Protests and Advocacy: Public protests and campaigns can highlight certain concerns, inciting governmental response. Consultation Processes: Involving citizens in dialogues on policy proposals can augment legitimacy and backing for choices. Also, there are other aspects that affect political decision-making, such as Media influence, Expert and research institutions, Political parties, Lobbyists and interest groups.

The Impact of Social Media on Political Decision-Making: Social media represents a multifaceted concept that encompasses a range of definitions across different disciplines. Academics from various fields, such as communication, media studies, sociology, and political science, have endeavoured to define it, yet a universally accepted definition remains elusive (Kaplan & Haenlein, [2010](#)). Social media platforms serve as interactive applications enabling users to generate, disseminate, and obtain information on a wide range of topics. It's important to distinguish them from the World Wide Web, as the latter does not facilitate interaction. Carr and Hayes ([2015](#)) describe social media as internet-based platforms enabling users to engage and self-represent in real-time or asynchronously with large and narrow audiences. Users gain value from user-generated information and perceived involvement, highlighting the informative, engaging, immediate, and impactful characteristics of these platforms.

The media has been a crucial tool for countries in shaping and implementing their foreign policies, with its importance gaining prominence in the first half of the 20th century. The United States, the Soviet Union, and Nazi Germany all used the media to achieve their foreign policy goals. The media plays a significant role in making and changing foreign political decisions, with political forces often establishing various media outlets to communicate their messages (Arnold, [2011](#)). In the same context, Burchill ([2005](#)) has seen Countries use media tools to influence decision-makers and public opinion to achieve their interests and goals. This includes using international communication techniques to spread divisions, incite minorities, or destabilize political stability. To succeed, propaganda must be simple, understandable, and related to the reality of the target audience. This approach attracts attention and influences the masses,

according to (Biswas et al., 2014). The impact of social media on political decision-making pertains to how the information disseminated through these platforms affects the voting choices of individuals regarding their preferred candidates. A study conducted in India indicated that individuals who are very active on social media may have their voting decisions influenced by the content they encounter regarding specific politicians. Conventional media, such as newspapers, radio, and television, have historically been essential in influencing political debate. Newspapers had a crucial role in the first spread of political ideas and the promotion of public discourse (Lippmann, 1922). Radio facilitated direct communication between political leaders and the public, enhancing the emotional resonance and immediacy of political discourse (Delli Carpini & Williams, 1987). Television introduced a visual element, enhancing the engagement and impact of political communication. The emergence of 24-hour news networks heightened public access to political information. However, it also posed the risk of promoting sensationalism and prejudice (Patterson, 2013). Notwithstanding the ascendancy of digital media, conventional media persist in shaping political discourse, frequently establishing the agenda for public debate and defining political concerns.

Countries undergoing political transition suffer from a lack of clarity about the true competence of political decision-making due to the lack of experience and lack of traction in the formal institutions that are established after the change in the form of the regime. This applies to the extent that modernity and institutional work have been characterized by the impact of the Iraqi political situation since 2003. In addition to the transformation in the form of the political system in Iraq, there are influential factors that cast a shadow over the political decision-making process, the most prominent of which are the informal actors in it. When there is a free press and effective media that express the aspirations of the people, it is the duty of political systems and decision-makers to be guided by what the press and media publish in the decision-making process because they express the aspirations and suffering of citizens. With the huge number of media and press that have spread in Iraq since 2003, their role in decision-making has increased despite the difficulty of finding an indicator to measure this role accurately.

In the case of Iraq, After 2003, Iraq transitioned to a distinct period marked by the establishment of a democratic parliamentary form of government. The global context significantly influenced the political decision-maker. Social networking sites emerged in Iraq and began to engage all societal classes, leading to widespread influence and impact from the content disseminated on these platforms. Their proliferation significantly facilitated the interaction of the Iraqi populace, both positively and negatively. They dominated the cognition of the political decision-maker, transforming these sites into platforms for political media and advertising. The politician utilized this platform throughout his political career, from the elections to his ascension in the House of Representatives and ministries. The elections are of paramount importance. The politician identified his objective in each platform that impacts society to achieve audience happiness through these platforms. Subsequently, many political programs were established to monitor the advancement of the electoral process (khadem, 2020). On the other hand, the Iraqi people have exploited these sites to influence the political decision-maker in a big way, as the Iraqi citizen has become a critic par excellence for every daily event that he goes through. This has shaped public opinion, which in turn has led to the emergence of numerous media platforms that investigate events and search for political files. These platforms have played a major role in exposing numerous financial and administrative deals. As a result, the authorities have prosecuted numerous political figures and businessmen, removed more politicians from their positions, and withdrawn immunity, all thanks to the influence of social networking sites.

The Impact of Public Opinion on Political Decision-Making: Public opinion is defined as the prevailing idea among a group of people who are linked by a shared interest in a position, behaviour, or public issue that raises concerns (Atef, 2006). The Political Encyclopaedia defines public opinion as the tendency of the majority of people in a society, a unified tendency towards issues that affect society or concern it or are presented to it. Public opinion, if it expresses itself, can often support or defeat a certain issue or proposal and is a guiding force for the ruling authorities. Public opinion is not necessarily a fixed phenomenon, and it may change towards a certain issue from time to time (Al-Kayali et al., 1991). Public opinion is a crucial element of a democratic society that may shape and influence governmental policies, decision-making processes, and public debate. Individuals seldom contemplate the responsibilities of the government

(Vincent, [1992](#)). The decision-maker for the government is contemplated, while the public participates in civil disobedience to express their opinions and influence governmental decisions; the individual responsible for the choice impacts the populace's inclination towards defence or dissent. Government decision-making is intricate and encompasses a diverse array of interests, including, but not limited to, the personal interests of the decision-maker, corporations, financial institutions, non-governmental organizations, the public, partisan conflicts, international strategic alliances, and diplomacy. Nonetheless, owing to the individualized mentality of the government or politicians, public opinion is likely to be disregarded in this process (Lin et al., [2024](#)). Public opinion denotes the ideas, opinions, expressions, interests, or beliefs of certain individuals within the larger community (Stimson, [2018](#)).

As much as there are scientific studies that prove the importance of public opinion in the decision-making process, and as much as people are sure of this role, we still haven't come up with a complete and final way to classify it. This is because public opinion isn't always united around the same issues, and different decisions are made using different models. However, the most accurate generalization lies in the fact that public opinion does not interfere with the fine details of the decision-making process but rather sets the general framework within which decision-makers move. This framework is not the decision itself, nor is it completely far from it. It establishes acceptance and rejection, success and failure. This plays a crucial role in the decision-making process, as public opinion serves as the societal consensus. The response of public opinion to the decision is the decisive and influential factor in the following decisions, not in its legitimacy. Both have an effect on the other, and the amount of effect depends on the political system. Including the public in decision-making, no matter what kind or level, is an example of democratic practice. In society, therefore, all political systems claim that they are subject to public opinion in making their decisions and setting their policies. The growing role of public opinion as one of the inputs to decision-making is due to the era of globalization, the contemporary communications and information revolution, and technological development, which has made it easier for informal structures to influence political decisions and serve their goals (Hamada, [2002](#)).

There is significant apprehension about the potential for public opinion to become a powerful tool, either by aligning it with opposition forces, issuing statements, or establishing influential platforms that shape political decision-making. There are institutions around the world that study public opinion, especially in democratic countries. These institutions have created their own methodological and objective research standards and foundations. However, the Arab world still doesn't have these institutions or their interest in studying things like political variables, social issues, and sometimes media research. No matter what, it's clear that public opinion plays a big role in emergencies and other unusual situations. It exerts pressure on the decision-making system, constraining the available choices (Al Khabi et al., 2018).

In the case of Iraq, Post-2003, Iraqi public opinion emerged following the cessation of oppression and tyranny. The Iraqi media, political parties, and civil society organizations significantly influenced the formation of this public sentiment, which became evident during parliamentary and provincial council elections, as well as through peaceful demonstrations that effectively led to the annulment of retirement salaries and privileges granted to members of the Iraqi Council of Representatives and individuals with special ranks. Although Iraqi public opinion demonstrated its impact and importance in the political landscape, it ultimately did not succeed in shaping the Iraqi political decision-making process. This is attributable to the fragility of governmental structures from the inception of the Iraqi state in 1921 to the period of the research. It has progressively started to demonstrate its function and solidify its influence. We anticipate that Iraqi public opinion will significantly influence political decisions as Iraq's democratic system develops. The establishment of polling centres to gather opinions among the Iraqi populace makes this particularly relevant. It will function as a component of the decision-making process, utilizing sophisticated media and communication technologies with the assistance of political parties and civil society organizations to engage in politics.

Methodology

This research employed a desk technique. A desk study research design is typically referred to as secondary data collecting. This mostly involves gathering data from existing resources, especially because to its cost-

effectiveness relative to field research. This study examined previously published research and publications, as the data was readily available through online journals and libraries.

Conclusion

Digital media has transformed political engagement by democratizing information access and facilitating individual connectivity, information sharing, and movement organization. Notwithstanding obstacles such as the dissemination of disinformation and cursory internet involvement, mass media continues to have a formidable influence in fostering social and political engagement. The advancement of media technology will persist in influencing individuals' involvement in politics and society.

- i. The study reveals that social media significantly influences political involvement and community engagement in Iraq. It offers wider access to political information, a platform for individuals to discuss and share perspectives on political matters, and enables the direct expression of ideas, desires, and concerns, thereby enhancing active engagement in the political process.
- ii. Iraqi public opinion after 2003 was transparent and open due to a democratic government, media freedom, decentralization, and peaceful demonstrations.
- iii. The character of the political system, whether democratic or non-democratic, strongly influences political engagement. In totalitarian nations, the division between the governing and the governed engenders a deficiency in political engagement, culminating in apathy toward political power and its agents.
- iv. Public opinion is ineffective when faced with social, economic, and political backwardness. The situation is also characterized by instability and conflicts that negatively affect public opinion and weaken its role and influence in political life.

Recommendation

- i. Activating the role of public opinion in Iraq to contribute to a free and democratic public opinion based on participation and interaction.
- ii. Establishing Iraqi public opinion poll centers of a governmental nature that specialize in all aspects, such as politics, society, and economy.
- iii. Iraqi media and communication media should develop their capabilities in terms of material means and content to deliver a media message with content that expresses a free and effective public opinion.
- iv. Political parties should apply what they believe in democracy in their internal systems and organizational structure, i.e., they should be aware of the principle of legitimacy from within and move beyond being political groups.

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