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Article

Mobilization in the Context of Campaign Functions and Citizen Participation

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Abstract
Mobilization strategies are an essential part of political parties' campaign communication. By mobilizing voters and supporters, parties promote civic participation in politics, the forms of which have multiplied given the possibilities of user activities on social media. To define their online mobilization strategies, parties have to choose which forms of participation (e.g., voting, donating, or liking or sharing a post) they will seek to mobilize. Understanding mobilization as a communicative appeal to engage audiences in participatory actions, in our study we conceptually linked parties' mobilizing appeals with three campaign functions—information, interaction, and mobilization—to systematize different types of mobilization. We applied that categorization to the social media campaigns of parties and top candidates in Germany and conducted a manual quantitative content analysis of 1,495 Facebook and 1,088 Instagram posts published in the run-up to the 2021 federal election. Results show that parties primarily mobilized their audiences to vote and seek out more information (e.g., on the party's website). Although user reactions are generally an important factor of performance on social media, parties mostly avoided calls to like, share, or comment on posts. When compared, the strategies of parties and candidates indicate that mobilization is more the task of parties than of candidates. Differences between Facebook and Instagram can be attributed to the different technical affordances of the platforms. Because Facebook, unlike Instagram, supports clickable links in posts, parties are more likely to encourage users on Facebook to seek out more information online.

Keywords
Facebook; Instagram; online campaigning; political mobilization; political participation; social media

Issue
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1. Introduction

Political parties' primary tasks include promoting civic participation and engaging citizens in the political process. When parties mobilize the electorate to turn out and vote, they involve citizens in democratic politics (Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1992). From the perspective of parties, mobilization strategies are an essential part of their campaign communication. With social media channels added to their campaigning repertoire, parties can bypass traditional gatekeepers and directly address political messages to citizens and, in turn, directly mobilize them. Unlike election posters or TV commercials, which also allow parties to address their messages directly to citizens, digital media offer additional opportunities to communicate with users in more engaging, interactive ways (Lilleker et al., 2011). In the early stages of the internet, enthusiastic voices expected the new medium to improve contact and discussion between citizens and representatives, thereby allowing more people to participate in political processes (Norris, 2003). Especially in the context of social movements such as the Arab Spring, #MeToo, and Black Lives Matter, social media platforms have played an important role in connecting people and facilitating horizontal communication and self-mobilization in the spirit of connective action

(Bennett & Segerberg, 2012), resulting in bottom-up oriented communication. However, in the context of party–user communication, parties use social media primarily as top-down channels of information dissemination, whereas interaction with users is largely absent (Jungherr, 2016; Magin et al., 2017). Parties can not only convey information from the top down but also unidirectionally make appeals to mobilize citizens (Russmann et al., 2021). Those unidirectional appeals thus do not require interaction with citizens but can engage citizens in politics if they follow a party's mobilization appeal.

Following Rosenstone and Hansen's (1993, p. 25) definition, we understand *mobilization* as "the process by which candidates, parties, activists, and groups induce other people to participate." Mobilization refers to the communication of mobilizing actors and their intention to move citizens to participate in political actions. However, successful mobilization implies not only someone who *mobilizes* but also someone who *is mobilized*—that is, someone who participates upon being asked to do so. In that sense, mobilization and participation are conceptually intertwined. There are various ways for citizens to participate in politics, from institutionalized participation in representational contexts, such as voting and supporting a party campaign, to extra-representational activities, such as demonstrating and supporting a social movement (Geise & Podschuweit, 2019), and from manifest participation aimed at directly influencing political decisions to more latent forms, including discussing politics and seeking political information (Ekman & Amnå, 2012). Consequently, parties can call for a range of participatory activities while pursuing different mobilization strategies. However, not all forms of participation are equally valuable for parties. Since parties are the most important organizational units in the representative democratic process, they presumably focus on mobilizing institutionalized forms of participation with campaigns primarily intended to inform citizens about their policies and encourage citizens to vote. By contrast, they rarely call for demonstrations, which are more often a means of social movements. Digital and social media have added several avenues for participation, including activities such as following a political actor on social media and liking, sharing, or commenting on political posts, that have no offline equivalent (Theocharis et al., 2023). From the perspective of party strategy, those activities can increase the visibility and reach of parties' social media campaigns; however, an empirical question remains about how parties refer to those activities alongside traditional and institutionalized forms of participation.

In our study, we focused on mobilization strategies in the top-down communication of political parties and their top candidates on social media. Previous studies have investigated parties' mobilization in contexts encompassing various campaign elements, including information, interaction, personalization, and negative campaigning (e.g., Keller & Kleinen-von Königslöw, 2018; Magin et al., 2017; Stromer-Galley et al., 2021), but have rarely considered specific subtypes of mobilization systematically. Because parties can use social media to mobilize citizens to engage in different participatory actions (e.g., voting, supporting a campaign, seeking political information, or liking and sharing posts on social media), thereby promoting political participation on different levels, we differentiated possible types of mobilization for a more in-depth analysis of party mobilization. To that end, we adopted a broad definition of citizen participation, one including manifest as well as latent participation (Ekman & Amnå, 2012), to examine the mobilization strategies that parties use to achieve their electoral goals.

For a case study, we analyzed the mobilization strategies of parties and top candidates in Germany by conducting a manual quantitative content analysis of their Facebook and Instagram posts published during the 2021 federal election campaign. In our analysis, we compared the mobilizing communication of parties and individual politicians, because both types of actors differ in their social media communication (Haßler et al., 2023), which might influence their mobilization strategy. We also investigated how the technical affordances of Facebook versus Instagram might affect the choice of mobilization appeals used. We concentrated on Facebook and Instagram because both platforms were by far the most-used social media platforms in Germany in 2021 when Facebook was used on a daily basis by 15% of the population more than 14 years old and Instagram by 18% (Beisch & Koch, 2021). By contrast, only 2% of the German population more than 14 years old was active on Twitter, which parties have been shown to seldom use to make appeals to mobilize (Jungherr, 2016; Keller & Kleinen-von Königslöw, 2018). For political actors, Facebook is the more important platform for communicating with supporters (Stromer-Galley et al., 2021) and for reaching the public, whereas Twitter is perceived as a tool for addressing journalists (Boulianne & Larsson, 2023). Accordingly, politicians in Germany tend to use Facebook for campaign activities, whereas Twitter is more often used to discuss political issues (Stier et al., 2018). Past research has usually focused on Facebook and Twitter, whereas Instagram, as the youngest of the three platforms, has remained relatively unexplored in the context of campaign communication, even though Instagram has a high number of users and politicians are relatively active on this platform (Boulianne & Larsson, 2023; Haßler et al., 2023).

2. Mobilization in Political Communication

Rosenstone and Hansen's (1993) work highlighting the centrality of strategic mobilization in participation processes marked a "turning point" in research on civic participation (Green & Schwam-Baird, 2016, p. 158). While previous studies had primarily considered citizens' individual attributes, including education, income,

age, and sense of political efficacy, to explain why some citizens participated more in politics than others, Rosenstone and Hansen (1993) focused on how electoral competition and mobilization affect citizen participation. Defining *mobilization* in a broad sense as occurring in both campaign appeals and private conversations with friends and family, they statistically showed that while individual characteristics can explain some of the decline in voter turnout between 1960 and 1980 in the US, most of it relates to a parallel decrease in parties' campaign efforts. Based on those results, Rosenstone and Hansen (1993, p. 5) theorized that "people participate in politics not so much because of who they are but because of the political choices and incentives they are offered." Years earlier, Snow et al. (1980) indicated the relevance of mobilization in the context of activities within social movements, as simply not being asked was a reason frequently mentioned by people for not participating in activities, along with not having enough time and not knowing anyone who would also participate. Verba et al.'s (1995, p. 269) civic voluntarism model conclusively captures citizens' nonparticipation in politics in the triad of reasons "because they can't, because they don't want to, or because nobody asked." Subsequent randomized experiments have largely confirmed Rosenstone and Hansen's (1993) assumption that campaign efforts can promote voter turnout (Green & Schwam-Baird, 2016), thereby making mobilization an essential condition along with individual prerequisites for political participation.

Even though being asked to participate is an important prerequisite for participation (Verba et al., 1995), the mobilizing effects on citizens' participation are not limited to direct mobilization appeals, because certain elements of information can have such an activating effect that audiences are already mobilized on that basis (Russmann et al., 2021). Research has measured the impact of various communication elements and shown that negative emotions and populist content in particular can have mobilizing effects and, for instance, lead to higher user reactions (e.g., Bene et al., 2022; Bos et al., 2020; Valentino et al., 2011). However, because the effects on voter turnout are multifaceted and depend on citizens' individual attributes and political actors' mobilization (Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993), the effects of particular communication elements, including negative campaigning (Lau et al., 2007), are not unambiguous. Nonetheless, that strand of research has shown that not only explicit mobilization calls can prompt participation, but parties could also pursue a mobilization strategy without such calls and primarily use activating content instead.

2.1. Mobilization in Social Media Communication

With the emergence of social media, new opportunities for online participation have been created that have no direct equivalents offline (Theocharis et al., 2023). By engaging in low-effort participation, citizens can express political interest and support online, for example, by following political accounts, liking, and/or sharing posts. Those new online activities complement the existing range of offline civic participation. Consequently, various mobilization strategies to influence citizens' participation intentions are conceivable for parties' campaigns on social media. Assuming that parties' election campaigns primarily aim to win elections, developing effective communication strategies is essential. That effort involves two objectives that differ according to the electorate targeted (Stuckelberger, 2021). Whereas supporters of one's own party have to be mobilized to go out and vote, especially in electoral systems where voting is not compulsory, swing voters have to be convinced of the party's objectives to get them to vote for one's own party. Direct *calls to vote* are one way for a party to mobilize. Those simple calls to vote can increase the mere awareness of the upcoming election but are more likely to work with already convinced party supporters than with undecided citizens. Because such calls could prove ineffective with undecided citizens, parties may first seek to persuade those by inviting them to discussions on political topics or by providing information in social media posts about the party's policies and referring to further information available on their websites. For an alternative mobilization strategy, parties may also try to encourage users to support the campaign by, for example, becoming active campaign workers and mobilizing other citizens to vote for the party. Although those activities do not directly put votes in the ballot box, they can be decisive for a campaign. Especially on social media, user activities such as liking, sharing, and commenting on posts lead to further dissemination in the network and thus higher visibility of the posts due to network effects and algorithmic curation (Bene et al., 2022). Therefore, producing viral content is an important goal of parties' social media communication (Cremers et al., 2022). In sum, to define their mobilization strategies, parties can choose and combine the various objectives of mobilization to encourage citizens to engage in different forms of participation.

Research on mobilization in parties' online campaigning shows that parties complement the dissemination of information with mobilizing calls to a considerable extent. In the US, social media platforms have become vital tools for mobilization within overall political campaigns (Stromer-Galley et al., 2021). In Europe, parties also use their social media presence to mobilize during campaigns. In Germany, Austria, and Switzerland, in 2013 and 2015, nearly half of the parties' Facebook posts published during national election campaigns contained mobilizing content (Keller & Kleinen-von Königslöw, 2018; Magin et al., 2017). However, their attempts at mobilization are mostly limited to calls to vote. Although parties aim for viral posts to spread their messages (Cremers et al., 2022), they rarely use calls for social media actions (Keller & Kleinen-von Königslöw, 2018). They avoid calls to support their campaigns in

other ways as well—for instance, by donating or becoming a campaign worker—because they fear that such calls for high-effort participation "could scare the voters away" (Magin et al., 2017, p. 1712).

Now that social media have developed into a standard campaign tool (Cremers et al., 2022), the question remains how parties have further developed their online mobilization strategies. Previous studies on mobilization in social media messages have not consistently characterized different types of mobilization and tended to limit them to traditional forms of participation, including calls for political actions such as voting or participating in campaign events (e.g., Stromer-Galley et al., 2021) or to a distinction between online and offline engagement (e.g., Keller & Kleinen-von Königslöw, 2018). An exception is the work of Magin et al. (2017), who operationalized calls to receive information or interact with the party as subtypes of mobilization alongside traditional party-supporting activities. Adopting that operationalization, we propose a systematization based on the central campaign functions of information, interaction, and mobilization (Foot & Schneider, 2006; Geise & Podschuweit, 2019; Lilleker et al., 2011; Magin et al., 2017) to cover the complex targets of mobilization calls directed at citizens.

2.2. Campaign Functions

To systematize possible types of mobilization in parties' social media campaigns, we have conceptually linked mobilizing calls with campaign functions, following the approach of Russmann et al. (2021). The campaign functions that political actors apply in their online campaign messages help them to reach voters and supporters and to integrate citizens into political processes (Geise & Podschuweit, 2019). From the perspective of citizen participation, different forms of participation induce different levels of civic involvement in politics, which build on each other in a multistage process involving the initial stages of informing and interacting as prerequisites for more extensive forms of participation (Arnstein, 1969; Geise & Podschuweit, 2019). By combining the campaign functions of information, interaction, and mobilization with civic participation, we integrate the parties' and citizens' perspectives, as parties seek to mobilize the intended participatory activities of citizens.

2.2.1. Information

Information is the most fundamental prerequisite in voter communication (Russmann et al., 2021). From the perspective of participation, seeking and consuming political information requires the least participatory effort from citizens and is a rather passive activity. Because it is not directly associated with influencing political decisions, Arnstein (1969) has not classified it as a form of active participation but as an essential precondition for further participatory activities. Ekman and Amnå (2012, p. 296), by contrast, have referred to information-seeking and other activities that contribute to "citizens' readiness and willingness to take political action" as *latent participation*, which influences subsequent manifest participation. For a political party, in turn, providing information about their policies, activities, or candidates (Gibson & Ward, 2000) can help to persuade citizens. Empirical evidence suggests that political actors use social media primarily as a top-down channel to disseminate information to their audiences (Magin et al., 2017). While the presentation of information in social media posts is somewhat restricted due to their conventionally limited volume, websites can serve as archives for background information due to their nearly unlimited data volume (Gibson & Ward, 2000). By providing links to their websites or news articles, parties can point to additional informative content and encourage users to follow the links for more detailed information, thereby integrating *calls to inform* in their social media posts.

2.2.2. Interaction

Using online features such as forums, chats, and comment functions of social media, citizens can participate communicatively in vertical discussions with the political elite (Foot & Schneider, 2006) or in horizontal interactions with other citizens (Lilleker et al., 2011). Especially in the internet's early days, expectations were high that citizens would be able to participate more frequently in online public debates and become more involved in politics (Norris, 2003). Meanwhile, in discussions with citizens, parties could obtain a detailed picture of citizens' opinions to tailor their policies accordingly and interactively persuade citizens of their positions (Russmann et al., 2021). However, parties have almost wholly ignored the interaction potential of social media primarily due to their limited resources. Moderating users' comments and leading discussions on social media involves considerable effort (Magin et al., 2021), and given the unpredictability of interactions with citizens, parties may suspect a loss of control over their communication. Nonetheless, social media still provide parties with the opportunity to initiate communicative interactions with users, and by using *calls to interact* in their posts parties can invite users to engage in discussions with politicians or encourage them to leave a comment.

2.2.3. Mobilization

Citizens are mobilized by political actors to support specific goals and to influence political processes and decisions. Digital media are an important tool for connecting people and facilitating horizontal communication and citizens' self-mobilization, which plays an essential role in social movements (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). Parties integrate mobilization appeals into their top-down communications in order to activate voters and supporters. Along those lines, the campaign function

of mobilization addresses the goal to recruit voters and generate resources by, for instance, raising financial support or attracting new members (Gibson & Ward, 2000). In today's hybrid media context, possibilities for support are extended to specific social media practices such as following an account of a party or candidate or sharing or liking their posts (Theocharis et al., 2023). Studies have shown that parties use social media as a tool to mobilize citizens in election campaigns mostly by focusing on appeals to vote while eschewing other objectives such as donating, supporting the campaign, or sharing party posts (Keller & Kleinen-von Königslöw, 2018; Magin et al., 2017; Stromer-Galley et al., 2021). In the literature on campaign functions, mobilization is often understood as parties' calling on citizens for "one-way support of the party through symbolic or material resources" (Schweitzer, 2011, p. 315). Thus, in the literature, the campaign function of mobilization is closely associated with resource-oriented objectives to support the party's campaign and less associated with a broad range of activities of citizen participation. However, in our study, we conceived participation and mobilization in a broader sense, where political actors can engage citizens in any kind of participatory activity. With civic political participation including latent activities such as informing and interacting (Ekman & Amnå, 2012), mobilization in a broader sense consequently encompasses calls to inform and calls to interact. In our study, we, therefore, translated the literature's narrow understanding of the mobilization function as *calls to support*, which refers to forms of participation that directly benefit the party.

Because the three campaign functions of information, interaction, and mobilization are not independent but build on each other (Geise & Podschuweit, 2019), a sensible combination of those functions can help to ensure a campaign's success (Russmann et al., 2021). According to Arnstein's (1969) levels of participation, parties may first seek to attract users' attention by providing information and convincing voters of their position with persuasive arguments before making a more elaborate attempt to mobilize users, since "voters who are convinced of a party are easier to mobilise" (Russmann et al., 2021, p. 30). Parties may also engage users in interactive discussions to explain their arguments and present their policies. Because information and interaction can serve to convince users to vote for parties, parties might mobilize users for these activities and call users to receive further information or interact with them, thereby priming them for further mobilization (Keller & Kleinen-von Königslöw, 2018). Therefore, we have conceptualized the three types of calls to inform, calls to interact, and calls to support under the collective term *calls to participate* or *mobilization*.

2.3. Mobilization Strategies

When parties develop their mobilization strategies for social media, they can invite users to participate in various ways on- and offline and in activities at different levels. In our study, we analyzed the mobilization strategies of parties in Germany by investigating their calls to inform, interact, and support. In doing so, we address several aspects that have received less attention in research to date. Although the informing function has emerged as central to parties, calls to seek further information, for example, by following links to parties' websites are hardly considered to constitute mobilization. However, the literature on participation indicates that being informed is an essential prerequisite for political participation. Moreover, examining calls to inform can provide insights into whether social media are considered to be stand-alone platforms for information or whether parties want to direct people away from the platform to external sources of information. Although parties have rarely promoted interactivity with citizens due to deeming it too costly and risky, they nevertheless consider interacting with citizens, engaging with them, and involving them in politics to be important (Geise & Podschuweit, 2019). Once parties have developed a "routine presence on social media" (Stromer-Galley et al., 2021, p. 1), their interaction-oriented efforts could increase in order to differentiate themselves from competitors and establish proximity to citizens. Therefore, we consider that campaign function while examining the social media communication of political actors in the 2021 German federal election, and our first research question was:

> RQ1: How did parties and top candidates integrate calls to inform, interact, and support in their 2021 federal election campaigns on Facebook and Instagram?

Because social media platforms allow politicians to communicate directly with voters independent of their associated party (Metz et al., 2020), candidates can set their own priorities and pursue their own mobilization strategies. Studies have shown that self-personalization is of growing importance for candidates who promote themselves in social media campaigns (Metz et al., 2020). In the 2017 federal election campaign in Germany, parties tended to communicate about policies, whereas candidates used more professional personalization in their Instagram posts (Haßler et al., 2023). Germany's electoral system is a personalized proportional representation voting system that combines proportional with direct personal elements. However, the party vote is more decisive for power in the elected Bundestag, and candidates can be elected only by direct election in their own electoral constituency (i.e., only by a part of the population), which might influence the mobilization strategy of parties and candidates. Given the importance of the party vote, parties have great incentives to call to vote. By contrast, candidates who pursue a more personalized communication strategy and who cannot be chosen on the ballot by most citizens might have fewer incentives to mobilize voters. Even so, top candidates, in

becoming well-known figures to represent their parties, can be expected to have an electoral impact beyond their own constituency. We thus compared the mobilization behavior of parties and top candidates by asking our second research question:

> RQ2: To what extent do the mobilization strategies of candidates and parties differ?

Because differences in the digital architectures of the various social media platforms can imply different communication strategies, comparisons of platforms can offer important insights into how their socio-technical characteristics influence the communication of political actors (Bossetta, 2018; Theocharis et al., 2023). In our study, we focused on Facebook and Instagram, because both reach a broad public and because studies have shown that they are frequently used for campaign activities by political actors (Beisch & Koch, 2021; Stier et al., 2018). Although Facebook and Instagram have some similarities—both support publishing video or image content accompanied by a text description, allow liking and commenting on posts, and enable the following of political actors' pages—they also exhibit some differences. Unlike Facebook, Instagram does not provide a feature to share posts, nor is it possible to include clickable links in the description text. This limits the ability of parties to offer additional information from sources outside the platform. The visual logic of Instagram and its perception as a platform that gives a more personal, intimate look at politics (Bossetta, 2018; Haßler et al., 2023) might induce specific communication and mobilization strategies. Although the absence of any option to share posts or integrate links may lower the number of calls to share a post or follow a link on Instagram, the consequences for calls to vote remain unclear. To analyze how the architectural differences of the platforms impact parties' and candidates' mobilization strategies, we formulated our third research question:

> RQ3: To what extent do the mobilization strategies of parties and candidates differ between Facebook and Instagram?

Last, we examined how the relationship between types of mobilization evolves over the course of the election campaign. Candidates in the US have been found to adapt their social media content to the election context by including more calls to action in their posts as the campaign progresses and as election day approaches (Stromer-Galley et al., 2021). Therefore, we assumed that mobilization-oriented efforts in parties' campaigns increase over the course of the election campaign:

> H1: The number of mobilization calls increases as election day approaches.

3. Method

3.1. German Federal Elections

Germany's political landscape is characterized by a multiparty system of six party groups in the national parliament, with one conservative Christian democratic party group (i.e., CDU/CSU) and one social democratic party (i.e., SPD) in the center of the political spectrum, supplemented by minor parties with different ideologies: the liberal party (i.e., FDP), the Green Party (i.e., Bündnis90/Die Grünen), the Left Party (i.e., Die Linke), and the right-wing populist party AfD. In the 2021 German national election, the incumbent chancellor Angela Merkel (CDU) did not rerun for office after 16 years as chancellor. For most of Merkel's time in office (2005–2021), the government was formed by a grand coalition of the two major center parties—the CDU/CSU and SPD—with an interruption in 2009–2013, when the CDU and FDP formed a coalition. In the 2021 federal election, the Greens nominated a candidate for chancellor for the first time, in addition to the two candidates nominated by the CDU and SPD. After the election, the SPD, Greens, and FDP formed the new governing coalition with the SPD providing the new German chancellor, Olaf Scholz.

Following the lead of US President Barack Obama's 2008 election campaign, parties in Germany began to experiment with social media platforms. Since parties elaborated their presence on social media in the 2013 and 2017 elections, social media have become a standard campaign tool with high relevance for party communication (Cremers et al., 2022). Campaigners continue to seize opportunities of social media platforms to reach their target audiences independently of traditional media outlets, to adapt to fast-changing communication environments, and to convince audiences by elaborating their programs (Cremers et al., 2022). However, in past campaigns, parties in Germany have primarily disseminated information in a unidirectional one-to-many format and limited their mobilization-oriented efforts to calling for votes, thereby neglecting other mobilization and interaction potential (Geise & Podschuweit, 2019; Magin et al., 2017).

3.2. Data Sampling and Coding

To analyze the mobilization strategies of parties in Germany during the 2021 federal election campaign, we conducted a manual quantitative content analysis of all available Facebook (N = 1,495) and Instagram posts (N = 1,088) of the German parliamentary parties and their top candidates in the four weeks from August 30 to September 26, 2021. We collected the posts daily using the application programming interface of CrowdTangle. We followed an actor-based approach to generate the sample and considered all posts published on the official Facebook and Instagram accounts

of the SPD (*n* = 233 posts), CDU (*n* = 511), CSU (*n* = 374), Green Party (*n* = 155), FDP (*n* = 213), AfD (*n* = 213), and Left Party (*n* = 113), as well as their top candidates: Olaf Scholz (SPD, *n* = 143 posts), Armin Laschet (CDU/CSU, *n* = 130), Annalena Baerbock (Green Party, *n* = 89), Christian Lindner (FDP, *n* = 89), Alice Weidel (AfD, *n* = 64), Tino Chrupalla (AfD, *n* = 90), Janine Wissler (Left Party, *n* = 99), and Dietmar Bartsch (Left Party, *n* = 67) who has only a Facebook account. Seven coders trained on a detailed coding scheme coded different mobilization calls. For all categories, the entire post, including the visual part (i.e., the image, the first minute of a video, the preview of a link, or the first image of an album) and the text, was coded as to whether the specific category appeared or not. All categories achieved good reliability scores on a reliability test with a sample of 93 Facebook and Instagram posts ($CR_{Holsti} \geq 0.94$; $CR_{BP's\ kappa} \geq 0.85$; Lombard et al., 2002; for reliability scores for each category, see the Supplementary Material).

Regarding calls to participate, we distinguished the subcategories of calls to inform, calls to interact, and calls to support. We also subcategorized off- and online forms of each type of call. First, calls to inform offline consisted of calls to read a flyer of the party, for example, or to get information from traditional media (e.g., newspaper, radio, or TV); calls to inform online, by contrast, included calls to visit the party's website, calls to watch a live stream, and calls to follow the party's social media channels. Second, calls to interact offline included calls to contact a politician in person (e.g., at a party event), by phone, or by letter and to discuss political issues with others, whereas calls to interact online included calls to comment on a post or interact with politicians on online channels. Third, calls to support offline encompassed calls to vote, donate, participate in party events, or volunteer as a campaign worker, whereas calls to support online included calls to share or like a post or use the party's logo in one's own social media profile image.

To draw conclusions about the extent and composition of political actors' mobilization strategies and to compare them with each other, we described the occurrences of calls for participation in parties' and candidates' social media campaigns and compared the respective proportions of posts containing mobilization calls.

4. Results

Parties and candidates in Germany regularly used Facebook and Instagram to mobilize their audiences. In 43% of their posts, they integrated at least one mobilization call. Most parties and candidates (SPD: 42%, CDU/CSU: 46%, FDP: 41%, Left Party: 47%) sought to mobilize in slightly less than half of their Facebook and Instagram posts. Only the AfD (68%) and, most notably, the Greens (81%) sought to mobilize significantly more. Concerning the different types of mobilization (RQ1), the campaigns preferred calls for offline support (39% of all posts), 93% of which were calls to vote. The second-most used type of mobilization was calls to inform online (18%). Calls to support online were also used to a considerable amount (7%) in the social media campaigns of parties and candidates, in which users were primarily asked to donate (i.e., using bank contact information via a provided link), to share and forward the post to friends, and to use a digital frame for the profile image. By contrast, calls for offline information (1%) and interaction both online (0.3%) and offline (0.6%) were neglected in the 2021 online campaign.

Some differences surfaced in the parties' mobilization strategies (Figure 1). Nearly all parties mobilized their audience for offline support, primarily to vote for the party. The Greens, in particular, frequently relied on calls to vote. In addition to those calls for voting, the parties aimed to encourage the users to seize additional offers for external information. Only the AfD on Facebook referred more frequently to its information offerings and calls for online support (i.e., primarily donating) than to mobilizing the vote for its party. However, AfD did not apply that strategy in its Instagram posts but instead behaved similarly to the other parties on Instagram.

Parties and candidates showed different mobilization behaviors (RQ2). Whereas the parties used calls to participate in slightly more than half of their posts (51%), the candidates were somewhat restrained with that type of direct communication and targeted mobilization in only 26% of their posts. Among the candidates, the Green Party candidate sought to mobilize the most, with 45% of her posts containing at least one call to participate and thus echoing her party's mobilization strategy. The two candidates from the Left Party, who used mobilization calls in only 16% of their posts, and the CDU candidate (17%) sought to mobilize the least.

Regarding the overall number of posts aimed at mobilization, hardly any differences emerged between the two social media platforms (RQ3). Both parties and candidates behaved similarly on Facebook and Instagram, with 44% and 42% of the posts containing a mobilization call, respectively. Differences did emerge considering the various types of mobilization. All parties used more calls to access additional information on Facebook than on Instagram. By contrast, they called for offline mobilization slightly more frequently on Instagram.

The temporal course of the online campaign shows that the calls to support offline had a clear time dependency (H1). As election day approached, the parties and candidates used higher shares of calls to vote in their Facebook and Instagram posts. By contrast, the campaign's course did not have such a striking effect on the other types of mobilization. After calls to inform online appeared, in part, more frequently than calls to vote in the first half of the campaign, their share dropped slightly in the second half, whereas calls to support online increased only slightly just before election day (Figure 2).

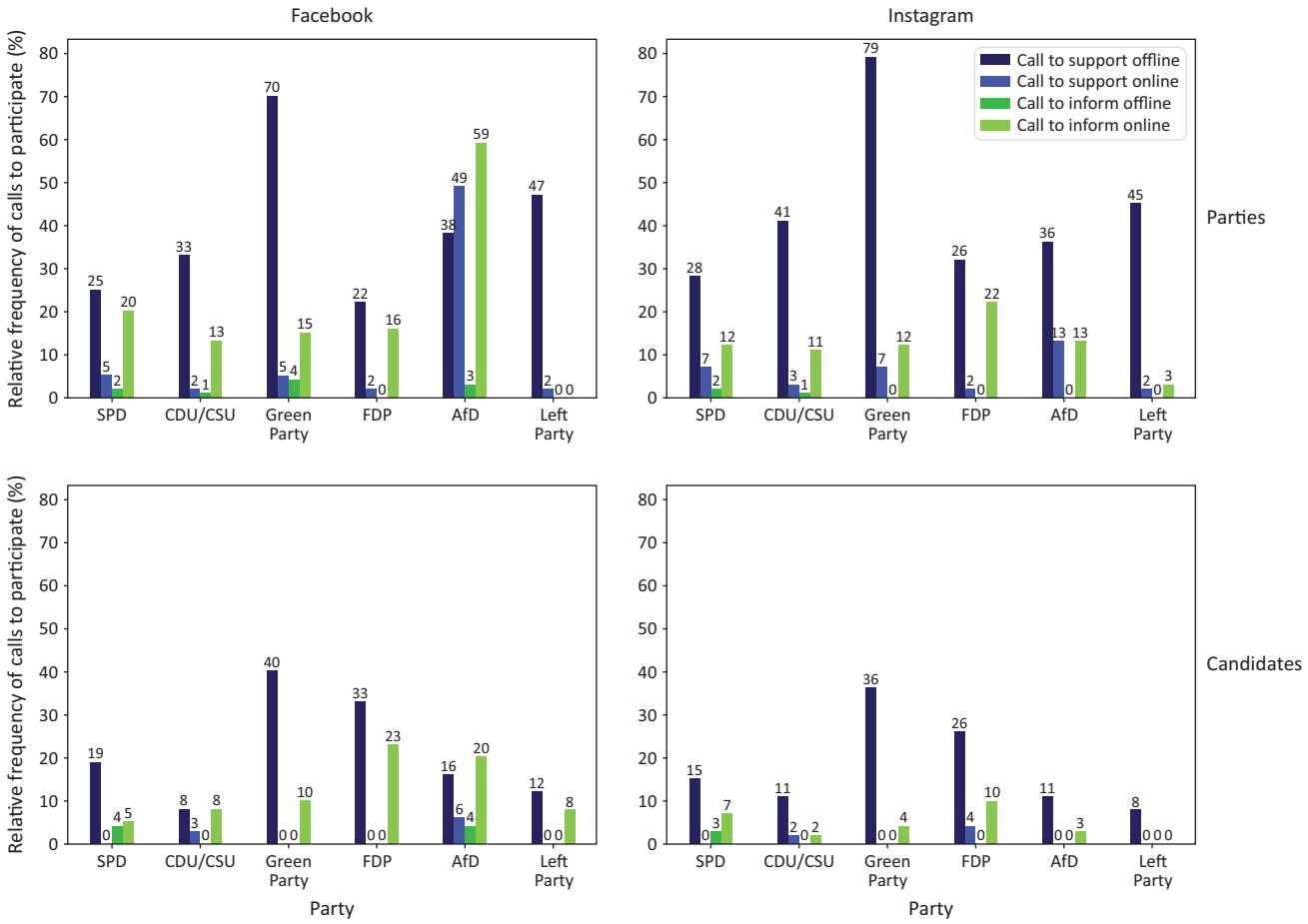

Figure 1. Relative frequency of different types of mobilization per party: Facebook and Instagram posts of parties (Facebook n = 1,029; Instagram n = 783) and candidates (Facebook n = 466; Instagram n = 305). Notes: One post could contain more than one call to participate; the parties are ordered in descending order by their share of votes in the 2021 election.

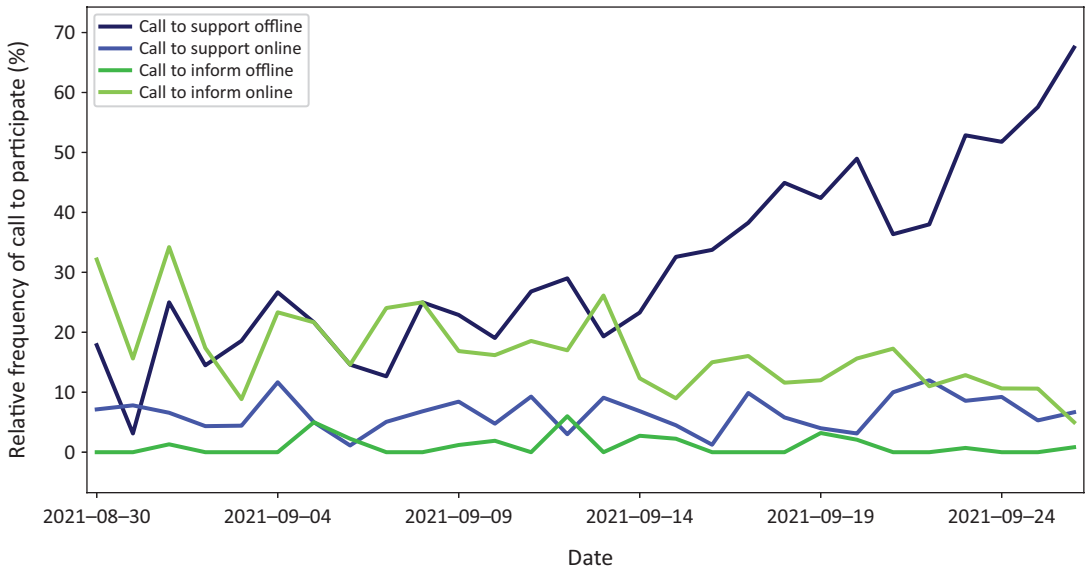

Figure 2. Relative frequency of cumulated calls to participate per day: Facebook and Instagram posts of parties and candidates (n = 2,583). Note: One post could contain more than one call to participate.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

As shown by our analyses, mobilizing citizens is more the task of parties than of candidates in Germany. Approximately half of the parties' posts contained at least one mobilization call, whereas the number of candidates' posts to the same end was significantly lower. Minor differences surfaced in the parties' mobilization strategies on Facebook versus Instagram, which may relate to the technical conditions and the different audiences. Since it is not possible on Instagram to include clickable links in the description text, parties using the platform refer less to offers of external information. Compared with Facebook, Instagram is used by young audiences (Haßler et al., 2023), for whom parties in Germany seem to put forth greater effort to mobilize for the election.

On social media, parties act as independent providers of information and can thus present an unfiltered image of themselves. In turn, users have more opportunities to directly obtain information from different sources. Our analysis of mobilization strategies shows that the information function of social media is embedded in more extensive information campaigns, as parties regularly refer to additional information beyond the post (e.g., on party websites), combined with an indication to get further information and follow the links provided. However, parties primarily use social media communication to mobilize users to go vote. Although user reactions are an important factor of performance and campaigners indeed aim for viral social media campaigns (Cremers et al., 2022), they do little to mobilize users to spread the party's messages or call for other forms of online participation. Instead, parties may try to convince their audiences with shareable content that elicits user reactions. In the end, however, a successful campaign is measured by the outcome of the election. If likes do not translate into votes, then the most successful social media campaign will have achieved nothing. Consequently, and because the audience's attention is limited, especially on social media, the communication of parties focuses on the most decisive mobilization call: the call to vote for the party.

The observed mobilization strategies relate to the German context in different ways. In Germany's personalized proportional representation voting system, which encourages both candidate- and party-focused campaigns, mobilization-oriented efforts are expected from parties and candidates. On social media, however, where a more personalized strategy seems appropriate for candidates (Geise & Podschuweit, 2019; Haßler et al., 2023), candidates do not pursue mobilization as clearly as parties. In Germany's non-compulsory system, voters need to be encouraged to exercise their right to vote, because they are not obliged to do so. Since the primary goal of a campaign is to win the election, mobilizing votes is the top priority. Moreover, due to the state funding of parties in Germany, parties are not dependent on external donors and therefore do not have to call for donations. In addition, it is necessary for parties to distinguish themselves from the other parties in Germany's multiparty system, which can be achieved by informing citizens about party-specific policies and government plans and encouraging them to consume that information. Such mobilization at the level of information is also considered to be important among parties in Germany (Geise & Podschuweit, 2019).

With their focus on calls to vote, the mobilization strategies that we identified are comparable to those of past election campaigns (Geise & Podschuweit, 2019; Magin et al., 2017). Thus, the mobilization strategies within the parties' use of social media seem to have stabilized. Although the internet has potentially broadened the spectrum of forms of participation, parties in Germany (except the AfD) largely limit themselves to promoting information and addressing calls for voting to their audience. In that respect, we did not identify a specific social media strategy focused on the online environment, despite the strong embedding of social media campaigns in the parties' overall campaigns aimed at encouraging voting in the offline world. Instead of interacting with citizens on social media, parties in Germany still prefer unidirectional communication and rely on established party structures for institutionalized citizen participation. Notably, one party—the AfD—made calls to consult additional information, which suggests a comprehensive information strategy directed at citizens. Normatively, however, it is problematic if individual parties disproportionately address citizens with only their selected information. Instead, citizens should have access to a broad spectrum of information from several parties.

Several limitations of our findings warrant consideration and indicate directions for future research. We conducted a single-country study and answered our research questions in the German context while focusing on two social media platforms: Facebook and Instagram. We paid particular attention to institutionalized political communicators and their intentions to mobilize users in a top-down manner, while we empirically omitted processes of bottom-up mobilization and participation and addressed those only in the theoretical considerations. Since citizens can be mobilized by other communication elements, including emotional or catchy messages (Geise & Podschuweit, 2019; Russmann et al., 2021), parties' posts may contain more mobilization potential than we measured with specific mobilization appeals directed at citizens. Even so, our measurement can provide a lower bound of parties' evident mobilization-oriented efforts. Notwithstanding those limitations, the results of our study provide further insights into specific types of mobilization applied by parties and candidates in their social media communication. With a more differentiated view on the various possible types of mobilization, which relate to latent and manifest forms of participation (Ekman & Amnå, 2012), we have transferred the

levels of the participation process (Arnstein, 1969) to the mobilization strategies of political actors. Our conceptualization can be used in future studies to measure calls to participate in more nuanced ways and to examine the success of different mobilization strategies in media effects studies. In research on participation, detailed measurements of political engagement are common practices, and we recommend them for research on mobilization as well. Furthermore, to generalize our results in an international context, cross-national research is essential. Last, because direct mobilization is also possible in traditional media such as election posters and TV commercials, we encourage future studies to consider the hybridity of the modern media system and to extend our findings to cross-media campaigns.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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