

Tapestries of Topics: Factors Affecting the Issue Diversity of Political Parties' Social Media Campaigns

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Abstract

For citizens to make well-informed decisions, they require information on diverse policy issues, which, among others, are publicized on political parties' social media accounts. However, as strategic actors, parties carefully weigh which issues to highlight and which to play down, rather than addressing a full range of issues in their campaigns. We investigated the hitherto neglected question of which issue diversity parties prioritize on their social media accounts and which factors influence this choice. We conducted a standardized content analysis of the official Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter accounts of 10 Norwegian parties and their leaders during the 2021 national election campaign. The results of our analyses indicate that issue-related campaign strategies influence parties' issue diversity more systematically than parties' governing/opposition statuses and their choices of social media platforms.

Keywords

content analysis; election campaigning; issue diversity; issue ownership; Norway; platform comparison; riding the wave; social media

1. Introduction

Issue diversity in public discourse is always an important precondition for citizens' well-informed political decision-making (McQuail, 1992). However, it becomes especially influential during election campaigns (van Heck, 2018), when many voters intensively seek information that can affect their voting decisions. The issues shaping an election campaign may determine election victory or defeat. Due to increasing

dealignment (Dalton & Wattenberg, 2002) in recent decades, the influences of voters' party identifications as long-term factor affecting voting behavior have weakened tremendously (Bélanger & Meguid, 2008), while those of short-term factors, such as issues and candidates (Campbell et al., 1960), have increased (Karlsen & Aardal, 2016). This highlights the importance of political actors carefully deciding which issues to incorporate into their campaigns.

Besides news media (Newman et al., 2023), political actors are central sources of political information. Traditional means of party communication, such as leaflets, campaign posters, rallies, newspaper promotions, and TV spots, are still used, but social media has become another vital channel of party communication over the past decade (Magin et al., 2017). Unlike news media, which cover a broad spectrum of policy issues (McQuail, 1992), parties are strategic actors focused on winning votes. Since political issues allow parties to garner voter support (Greene, 2016), they tend to strategically emphasize certain issues on social media while playing down others, depending on what they perceive as the most effective strategy for securing votes.

However, various factors can influence this strategic decision-making. In political science, research on issue competition has shown that the issues addressed in party manifestos may be affected by parties' government versus opposition statuses (Greene, 2020). This strand of research has often focused on individual issues but neglected "why parties narrow or expand the scope of their campaigns" (Greene, 2016, p. 809)—that is, their issue diversity. Moreover, researchers have largely considered party manifestos (e.g., Greene, 2016; van Heck, 2018), with which most voters do not engage. Voters generally engage with the issues addressed in the news and on social media, which therefore tend to have a greater potential impact on voting decisions than party manifestos. Parties have limited influence over the issues with which they are associated in news media, but on their social media accounts, they have the freedom to decide which issues they address and their relative importance—that is, their tapestries of topics. Given the need for informed citizenship and following the call to take issue diversity seriously in election campaigns that can affect voting decisions and other political outcomes (Greene, 2016; van Heck, 2018), we considered it crucial to examine issue diversity on parties' social media accounts, taking the example of Norway.

We conducted a standardized content analysis of the official Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter accounts of 10 Norwegian parties and their party leaders during the 2021 national election campaign and investigated how various factors shaped their issue diversity: issue-related campaign strategies, the parties' governing versus opposition statuses, and the various actors' social media platforms. We make a threefold contribution: First, to the best of our knowledge, our study is the first to investigate the issue diversity of parties' social media accounts and the factors that influence it. Second, our cross-platform comparison helps improve the still surprisingly deficient research on how the choice of social media platforms affects the content of election campaigns (Larsson et al., 2024). Third, we investigated a multiparty system with multiple issue ownership (Karlsen & Aardal, 2016), which was an interesting case for investigating issue diversity—particularly since research on social media election campaigning is scarce in Norway.

2. Issue Diversity in Election Campaigns

In the broadest sense, diversity refers to the heterogeneity of something. In communication research, it is mostly addressed in the context of news media, regarding the diversity of available news outlets (structure),

of the breadth of content they offer (content), and of content users receive (exposure; see Loecherbach et al., 2020; McQuail, 1992). These conceptual dimensions can be transferred to political parties: the diversity of available parties (structure), of party communication (content), and of content voters receive (exposure). In this article, we focus on the content dimension, specifically the diversity of policy issues publicized on parties' social media accounts as distribution channels.

Issues “are topics below the level of broad ideological cleavages...but over which groups in society disagree and can be mobilized” (Greene, 2020, p. 489). This mobilizing potential makes issues central to election campaigns. Issue diversity is not a goal in itself but can serve as a means to achieve normative democratic objectives, such as fostering informed citizens and promoting inclusive public discourse (Loecherbach et al., 2020). In political communication research, normative expectations of content diversity are often derived from democratic theories (Jandura & Friedrich, 2014). However, there are other (sometimes contradictory) normative requirements, such as relevance: public communication should provide citizens with diverse content, but also make them aware of particularly urgent problems. This necessary issue focus makes the highest possible diversity often normatively undesirable. A stronger focus on certain issues can sometimes be normatively more desirable than greater diversity. Due to these contradictory normative requirements and the context dependence of society's needs, there is no fixed threshold above which issue diversity is considered sufficient (Magin et al., 2023).

However, normative expectations regarding news content diversity differ from those regarding issue diversity on parties' social media pages. Hence, there is a contradiction between the desirability of issue diversity and issue focus, albeit for different reasons. From a societal perspective, voters should acquire information on a wide range of issues when making voting decisions that will shape politics for the next few years, when diverse issues may become relevant. However, from a strategic party perspective, addressing too many issues can cost parties votes if voters form the impression that they lack focus (Greene, 2020). Thus, parties must show competence in various fields to be considered competent for government tasks, but they should avoid overcrowding their agendas with too many topics. A concept related to strategic decisions on issue diversity is the complexity of party political agendas: a party can focus its entire attention on one or very few issues (low complexity) or engage with a broad range of issues (high complexity; see Green-Pedersen, 2007).

When deciding what to address in their campaigns, parties may choose between different types of issues related to the “three constituents of political logic” (Strömbäck & Esser, 2014, p. 16): *Polity* comprises the institutional and formal aspects of politics (e.g., electoral system rules and the structure of the party system). *Politics* concerns “power- and publicity-gaining presentational politics” (Strömbäck & Esser, 2014, p. 15; e.g., campaign organization, political process, and speculations about election results). *Policy* refers to policies within a specific institutional framework (e.g., economic, environmental, and social policies; see Strömbäck & Esser, 2014). To make well-informed political decisions (including voting decisions), voters require information about which issues parties prioritize highly (or do not) and the parties' plans regarding these issues for the next few years. Policy issues are so central to election campaigns that their absence is an alarming signal of depoliticization, which can diminish the active engagement of citizens in political processes (Van Aelst et al., 2017).

3. Factors Influencing Issue Diversity on Parties' Social Media Pages

To distinguish themselves from their competitors, parties must present clearly recognizable profiles via their tapestries of topics. Usually, parties only broaden the range of issues they address “if they [expect] an electoral payoff” (Greene, 2016, p. 811). However, compared to two-party systems, developing distinct profiles is not as easy in multiparty systems, such as Norway’s, in which many parties—some with similar ideological orientations—compete for voters’ favor. We wanted to investigate factors influencing parties’ issue diversity on social media based on the following research question:

RQ1. Which factors affected the diversity of issues addressed on parties’ social media pages during the 2021 Norwegian national election?

In our study, we considered several factors mentioned in the literature to affect parties’ issue selection: Issue-related strategies (issue ownership and riding the wave) have been investigated regarding parties’ issue selection on social media, but researchers have not, to our knowledge, investigated parties’ statuses as governing versus opposition parties and their social media platform choices as factors influencing their issue diversity on social media. When considering several potential influencing factors, we assumed that parties can, will, and often must “integrate multiple strategies simultaneously” (Greene, 2016, p. 810).

3.1. Issue Ownership Strategy

Issue ownership (Budge & Farlie, 1983; Petrocik, 1996) is defined as the connection between political parties and particular issues in voters’ perceptions. Parties that are perceived to be closely connected with certain issues (e.g., social democratic parties with social policy, conservative parties with taxes, and green parties with the environment) “own” these issues. Issue ownership comprises two dimensions: competence issue ownership (parties’ perceived ability to deal with and solve certain problems) and associative issue ownership (spontaneous alignment between certain parties and specific issues; see Walgrave et al., 2015). Issues are classed as position issues or valence issues (Stokes, 1992). Regarding position issues, parties may take alternative positions (e.g., higher or lower taxes, restrictive or liberal immigration policies, pro or against European Union membership; see Hesstvedt et al., 2021). Regarding valence issues, there are no substantial policy disagreements; parties agree on goals but compete on perceptions of competence. While position issues often divide parties and voters into different camps, valence issues are more fleeting, and parties gain issue ownership across the political spectrum.

Issue ownership is “most consequential during campaigns” (Enders et al., 2022, p. 961). Emphasizing party-owned issues can give parties advantages in ballots (Walgrave et al., 2015). Therefore, an important campaign strategy (Sandberg, 2022) relates to priming (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987): Parties try to ensure that voters make voting decisions based on issues that are favorable for the parties (Karlsen & Aardal, 2016).

However, party-owned issues are not unchangeable or uncontested, particularly in multiparty systems such as Norway’s. While issues in countries with two-party systems, such as the United States, are often clearly owned by only one party, election campaigns in multiparty systems entail battles over issue agendas when several parties claim ownership of the same issues (Karlsen, 2005). Voters in multiparty systems often trust different parties to solve the same problems (Karlsen & Aardal, 2016). This provides room for campaign

maneuvers: parties can try to occupy new or previously ignored issues (issue entrepreneurship; Baumann et al., 2021) or “steal” issues from each other through reframing (Bélanger & Meguid, 2008). Research has shown that parties can enhance their issue ownership by engaging in communication regarding particular issues (Dahlberg & Martinsson, 2015), particularly in the short term, which is highly relevant to election campaigns (Sandberg, 2022).

There are two main research directions regarding issue ownership: Research on voting behavior focuses on the criteria underpinning voters’ decision-making, showing that issue ownership significantly influences individuals’ voting decisions (Walgrave et al., 2015), including in Norway (Karlsen & Aardal, 2016). Research on the supply side—which our study aligned with—focuses on the issues addressed in parties’ manifestos or campaign materials (Bélanger & Meguid, 2008; Walgrave et al., 2015). Studies have repeatedly, widely, and consistently shown that the issues parties address in their campaigns reflect their issue ownership (e.g., Budge & Farlie, 1983; Green-Pedersen, 2020), including on social media (Haßler et al., 2021; Plescia et al., 2020; Sandberg, 2022). Therefore, we hypothesized:

H1. The parties emphasized the issues they own on their social media pages.

3.2. Riding-the-Wave Strategy

Research has shown that issue ownership influences voting decisions only for the issues voters consider important (Bélanger & Meguid, 2008). This underscores the importance of parties being linked to issues that feature prominently in voters’ minds during election campaigns (Baumann et al., 2021). To maximize their votes, parties must thus consider public opinion when planning their issue strategies, which they can do by implementing the so-called riding-the-wave strategy (Ansolabehre & Iyengar, 1994). Unlike a top-down issue ownership strategy, in which parties decide strategically on which topics to highlight, a riding-the-wave strategy assumes that “issue competition is...a bottom-up process in which political parties respond to the issue priorities of citizens” (Klüver & Sagarzazu, 2016, p. 384), irrespective of who owns them.

The riding-the-wave strategy enables parties to boost their popularity by showing that they are attentive to voters’ concerns (Klüver & Sagarzazu, 2016). This is particularly favorable for parties owning issues that rank highly on the public agenda. However, the public agenda also entails risks. Despite all efforts to select issues that are favorable to them, parties never have full control over their issue agendas. News media influence which issues voters consider important (Sandberg, 2022), including current, unpredictable events (Ceron et al., 2022; Green-Pedersen, 2007) that can change key issues even in the middle of a campaign, which may require parties to adjust their issue strategies promptly. Parties can hardly avoid addressing unpleasant topics that attract high public interest. If they do not account for citizens’ issue priorities, parties may be considered unresponsive (Greene, 2020), which forces them to adopt different positions on the issues (Enders et al., 2022) to distinguish themselves from their competitors (Green-Pedersen, 2007).

Research on the riding-the-wave strategy is mixed, with some studies supporting (Ennsner-Jedenastik et al., 2022; Klüver & Sagarzazu, 2016) and others contradicting its use (Ivanusch et al., 2023). Most researchers have investigated the topic using press releases, while studies on social media are scarce, despite this strategy allowing parties to react rapidly to current events and citizens’ changing issue priorities (Ceron et al., 2022). A few studies have indicated that riding the wave is a common strategy on social media, reflecting volatile and

highly dynamic communication on platforms (Ceron et al., 2022; Plescia et al., 2020). Since no such studies have so far considered Norway, we hypothesized the following:

H2. The parties' posts focused on issues that ranked highly on the public agenda—particularly in the case of parties owning these issues.

3.3. Governing vs. Opposition Parties

The third factor we considered might influence parties' issue diversity is their statuses as governing versus opposition parties, which has been discussed in the literature on issue competition in party manifestos (e.g., Green-Pedersen, 2020; Green-Pedersen & Mortensen, 2010) and which we argue can be transferred to parties' social media campaigns: Party manifestos form the basis for election campaign communication. Although social media enables parties to react quickly to current developments (Ceron et al., 2022), it is still an important means for them to publicize their long-term plans, which typically align with their manifestos. Parties are highly unlikely to completely stray from their carefully planned party manifestos on social media. Therefore, we reasonably assumed that the factors influencing party manifestos would also affect which issues they promoted on social media.

For a governing party, it is most convincing to emphasize the issues on which they have performed well, but they must also justify their past performance on many different issues, including unfavorable ones (Greene, 2016; Green-Pedersen & Mortensen, 2010). The latter are particularly likely to be integrated into opposition parties' agendas to weaken the government's chances of re-election. Governing parties must respond to such attacks (Greene, 2016, 2020), thus (unintentionally) increasing their issue diversity. Opposition parties, by contrast, are likely to focus strongly on the issues that benefit them (Green-Pedersen & Mortensen, 2010), which narrows their issue diversity (Greene, 2016; van Heck, 2018). We therefore hypothesized the following:

H3. The posts of governing parties showed greater issue diversity than those of opposition parties.

3.4. Platform Characteristics

The final factor whose relationship with issue diversity we investigated is the characteristics of different social media platforms. Different platforms allow different topics to be presented to different target groups. In Norway, for example, Facebook and Twitter users are older than Instagram users, and the percentage of female users is highest on Instagram and lowest on Twitter (Newman et al., 2023). Parties can thus provide distinct platform user groups with tailored tapestries of topics. Instagram focuses strongly on visual communication, whereas Facebook is text-heavy and allows posts longer than 280 characters, unlike Twitter (Larsson et al., 2024). These differences could play a role in parties' tapestries, since certain issues are more effectively communicated through visual means than others. However, it is unclear exactly how these platform differences affect issue diversity on parties' accounts. Although studies on the role of issues in parties' social media campaigns are expanding, they usually consider only one platform, mostly Facebook (e.g., Haßler et al., 2021) or Twitter (e.g., Ceron et al., 2022; Enders et al., 2022; Sandberg, 2022), and largely neglect Instagram. Thus, we took a more open approach and formulated a second RQ as follows:

RQ2. To what degree did issue diversity vary across the parties' Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter accounts?

4. Case Selection

Norway is a relevant case to investigate this because it shares many characteristics with other European democracies. It has a multiparty political system, “a multidimensional cleavage structure” (Karlsen & Aardal, 2016, p. 265), and a strong role of parties in politics. Individual candidates are strongly integrated into parties' contexts, and parties' and party leaders' election campaigns are closely coordinated (Skogerbø & Karlsen, 2014). Voters' traditionally strong party identifications have significantly weakened in recent decades, as is typical in Western democracies (Dalton & Wattenberg, 2002). The proportion of late deciders in Norway rose from 20% to 60% between 1960 and 2010 (Baumann et al., 2021), making issues in election campaigns influential in the short term. Social media platforms are attractive channels for election campaigning due to their extensive reach (Newman et al., 2023).

Norway has a typical Scandinavian party system, with parties classified into two blocs on the left-right continuum: a center-left (red) and a center-right (blue) bloc (Table 1). Before the 2021 election campaign, Norway was governed by a center-right coalition consisting of the Conservative Party (Høyre, H), the Liberal Party (Venstre, V), and the Christian People's Party (Kristelig Folkeparti, KrF). The right-wing Progress Party (Frenskrittspartiet, Frp), after governing from 2013 to 2020, withdrew from the government 1.5 years before the election but still belonged to a parliamentary minority coalition. Since Frp could thus be held responsible for many of the sitting government's policies, it occupied a somewhat ambiguous position in the governing/opposition distinction. The polls suggested that the center-left bloc led by the Labor Party (Arbeiderpartiet, Ap) would win the 2021 election. As measured by the number of seats in parliament before the 2021 election, Ap, H, and Frp were clearly larger than the other parties.

Typically for multiparty systems, in Norway, issues are owned by several parties and parties own multiple issues (Karlsen & Aardal, 2016). Voter surveys have revealed both stability and change in issue ownership among Norwegian parties in recent decades (Bergh & Karlsen, 2019). Norwegian national elections used to revolve around valence issues related to welfare (Bjørklund, 2020) on which parties across the spectrum mostly agreed but competed for issue ownership based on competence. For example, H and Ap shared health issue ownership—a typical valence issue in the Norwegian context (Hesstvedt et al., 2021). However, position issues have recently become more central: taxes (owned by Ap and H on opposite sides) and education (owned by H and the Socialist Left Party [Sosialistisk Venstreparti, SV] on opposite sides). Only a few issues have predominantly been owned by one party, such as rural policy (the Center Party [Senterpartiet, Sp]) and immigration policy (Frp). Ap has historically maintained strong ownership of employment, but this has decreased in recent years. Regarding the environment, SV and V had already established ownership when the Green Party (Miljøpartiet De Grønne, MDG) entered Norwegian politics, which may explain the lack of success of a green party in Norway (Aardal, 1990). Now, these parties share ownership of environmental issues. While it has been shown in Norway that “issue ownership changes considerably even during the election campaign” (Karlsen, 2005, p. 611), we expected the parties' issue ownership in the previous general election to inform their strategic decisions in 2021 (Table 2).

Table 1. Norwegian parties represented in parliament, 2021.

	% votes 2021 ¹	Mandates 2021 (change) ¹	In government before the 2021 election	Ideological position/bloc 2021	Social media platforms used in the 2021 campaign
Labour Party (Ap)	26.3	48 (–1)	No	Social-democratic/red–green	All
Conservative Party (H)	20.4	36 (–9)	Yes	Conservative-liberal/blue	All (Twitter only by party leader)
Center Party (Sp)	13.5	28 (+9)	No	Center position, non-socialist, rural/red–green	Facebook and Instagram
Progress Party (Frp)	11.6	21 (–6)	No	Populist, right-wing/blue	Facebook and Instagram
Socialist Left Party (SV)	7.6	13 (+2)	No	Socialist/red	All
Red Party (R)	4.7	8 (+7)	No	Socialist/red	All
Liberal Party (V)	4.6	8 (0)	Yes	Non-socialist/Liberal/blue	All
Christian People's Party (KrF)	3.8	3 (–5)	Yes	Non-socialist/Christian/blue	Facebook and Instagram
Green Party (MDG)	3.9	3 (+2)	No	Green	All
Patient Focus (P)	0.2	1 (+1)	No	One issue movement, regional	Facebook

Note: ¹ Based on Valgdirektoratet (2021).

Table 2. Issue ownership in 2017.

Issue	Ownership
Environment	MDG (20%), V (13%), SV (10%)
Health	H (27%), Ap (27%)
Education and research	H (30%), SV (11%)
Employment	Ap (34%), H (32%)
Taxes	H (28%), Ap (25%)
Families and children	KrF (21%), Ap (20%)
Transport and infrastructure	H (22%), Frp (21%)
Rural policy	Sp (38%)
Senior citizens and eldercare	Ap (27%)
Immigration and integration	Frp (29%)

Source: Bergh and Karlsen (2019, p. 32). Notes: Percentage of voters who thought the party had the best policies (R and P not included); the table highlights the most trusted party (or most trusted *parties* if the percentages are very similar) and highly trusted parties relative to their size (in italics); another voter survey was conducted on the Norwegian 2021 general election (Bergh et al., 2023), but since the data were collected after election day, these results were not suitable for making predictions about the Norwegian parties' issue strategies in the 2021 election campaign.

In the first phase of the 2021 election campaign, by far the most important issue for voters was the environment and climate change (33%), followed by health (16%—less important than in previous campaigns), taxation and fees (15%), economy, industry, and employment (14%), schools and education (11%), social inequality (10%), and district policy (9%) (survey data collected 18 August 2021; Bergh et al., 2023, p. 50). Environmental issues also dominated the media agenda during the election campaign, especially during the first week of the intense campaign period (Bergh et al., 2023). This provided good starting conditions for MDG, which in recent years has taken ownership of this issue (followed by V and SV). However, MDG only obtained a disappointing three seats, which Farstad and Aasen (2023) attributed to numerous parties trying to “ride the environmental wave” and contesting MDG’s issue ownership. Another notable aspect of the 2021 election was the first-time participation of Patient Focus (Pasiëntfokus, P)—a monothematic movement that ran only in one county and campaigned for a hospital expansion there.

5. Methods

We conducted a standardized content analysis of posts released on the official Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter pages of all 10 parties (and party leaders) that secured seats in the Norwegian national parliament in 2021. Given the close organizational links between parties and their leaders in Norway, we amalgamated their pages in our analyses. The examination period encompassed the final four weeks leading up to the parliamentary election (17 August–13 September 2021). We gathered the raw data using the CrowdTangle application programming interface (API) for Facebook and Instagram and the Twitter API for academic research for Twitter. In total, we collected 2,599 posts. Since five had been removed from the social media accounts at the time of coding, we coded the content of 2,594 posts (Facebook: 1,106; Instagram: 576; Twitter: 912; for an overview of the sample see Supplementary File, Table A1).

Although other researchers in this field have used automated methods and analyzed only text (e.g., Enders et al., 2022; Sandberg, 2022), we opted for manual coding to provide a more comprehensive understanding of social media posts, also considering pictures and videos. These play a crucial role in the meaning of social media posts, often address issues not mentioned in the text, and are essential for capturing users’ attention and gaining favor via social media algorithms, thereby enhancing post visibility on the platforms and the potential of influence. The significance of visual media is underscored by the fact that only 2% of all posts in our sample lacked images. For practical reasons, we coded the entire text, the first image, and/or the first minute of the first video.

We used a shared English codebook employed in the project Digital Election Campaigning Worldwide (DigiWorld). This project encompasses various aspects of social media campaigns across numerous countries, but we used more refined issue categories to ensure accurate representation of nuances in the Norwegian election campaign. The site owner from whom a post originated was automatically coded when collecting the raw data. For each post, we manually coded whether 37 issues (34 thereof being substantial policy issues) were addressed in it (= 1) or not (= 0; for category descriptions, see Supplementary File, Table A2). The coders coded as many topics as present per post. Of the 34 policy issues, to ensure sufficient case numbers for each issue, we afterward recoded all sub-issues that were present in less than 4% of all posts under the broader issue categories to which they belonged (e.g., the only nine posts addressing Covid-19 were recoded under the broader category “health”), but categories not fitting under a broader issue category were retained even if they were coded for less than 4% of posts to obtain high differentiation (e.g., domestic

policy, defense policy, and cultural policy). We combined “other policy issues” and “other political issues” into a joint category, leaving 22 remaining issue categories. On average, 1.85 issues per post were coded (minimum 0, maximum 10).

Three student coders, extensively trained in the use of the joint English codebook, performed the coding. We assessed intercoder reliability based on 140 randomly selected posts (5.4% of the full sample) using Brennan and Prediger’s kappa—a chance-corrected measure that is more robust than Krippendorff’s alpha when dealing with variables with a skewed distribution, as in our case (Quarfoot & Levine, 2016). Additionally, we determined the “raw” agreement levels (agreement percentages). The coefficients indicated satisfactory reliability for all manually coded categories used in the subsequent analyses (see Supplementary File, Table A2).

We analyzed issue diversity in two ways. First, we considered the distribution of issues and how many of the 22 issues were addressed (the more issues addressed, the higher the issue diversity). Second, we employed the standardized Shannon’s H—a measure of entropy established for political communication research—to measure content diversity (Greene, 2016). The standardized Shannon’s H values range from 0 (indicating, in our case, a total concentration of all posts on one issue) to 1 (an equal distribution of issues, indicating the highest possible issue diversity).

6. Findings

6.1. *Issues Addressed by Parties (RQ1, H1, H2)*

Figure 1 provides an overview of the parties’ tapestries of topics as indicated by the percentages of posts per party (regardless of platform) that featured the 22 issues. Overall, we observed a clear indication of issue ownership for all parties. The larger parties had somewhat broader issue profiles than the smaller parties. The governing, conservative-liberal party H prioritized education, economy/finance (including taxes on which voters had trusted them since 2001), and health (on which they had recently built issue ownership; see Bergh & Karlsen, 2019). The social democratic Ap focused strongly on left issues, primarily health (an issue it owned with H), economic inequality, employment/unemployment, and education/research policy. The right-wing Frp highlighted right-wing issues (energy policy, immigration/integration policy, transport/infrastructure—an issue it owned—and taxes). However, somewhat surprisingly, Frp also focused somewhat on health and the environment. Since we only investigated issue priorities, not the parties’ evaluations of the issues, it is conceivable that Frp instrumentalized these issues to criticize the government.

The issue ownership strategy was particularly obvious in the case of the three minor parties with the clearest issue focus, which, at least according to their social media campaigns, can be viewed as one-issue parties: MDG shared ownership of environmental issues with the socialist-left SV and the liberal V (far behind, transport/infrastructure and energy, which were probably associated with the environment and sustainability). The center/rural Sp combined rural policy (which it solely owned) with economy/finance (since Sp strongly focused on the economic dimension of the center–periphery cleavage). The regional one-issue movement P highlighted health, rural policy, and economy/finance issues (completely focusing on the importance and economic implications of the hospital in its county). Sp and P neglected the highest number of policy issues (five and eight, respectively).

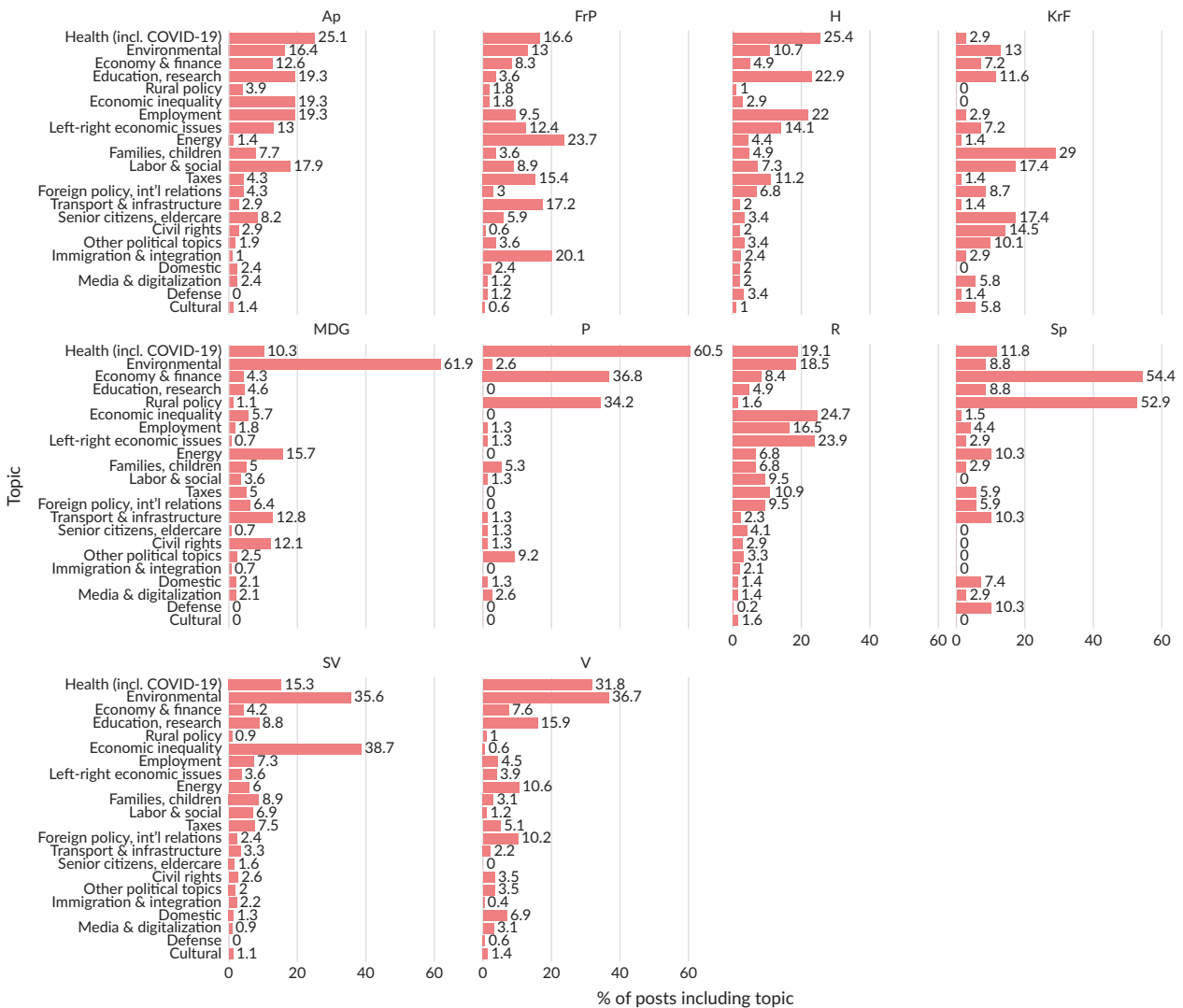


Figure 1. Percentages of posts, including issues per party, regardless of platform ($n = 2,594$).

Among the other minor parties, the governing Christian KrF had a relatively clear focus on its core issues: policies for families and children (sharing issue ownership with Ap), senior citizens, and eldercare. However, its issue focus was weaker than that of MDG, Sp, and P. The three remaining opposition parties had clearly recognizable issue profiles without concentrating strongly on individual issues. The socialist R covered mostly classic left-wing issues (e.g., economic inequality, left-right economic issues, the environment, health, and employment). Both the socialist SV and liberal V focused on environmental policy, sharing issue ownership with MDG. Moreover, SV's issue profile was similar to R's, with an even stronger focus on economic inequality. V otherwise focused on health and education/research policy.

When considering the environment as by far the most important issue on the public agenda, we found clear indications of the riding-the-wave strategy (H2)—unsurprisingly, particularly for MDG, SV, and V, which could combine issue ownership and riding-the-wave. However, we also observed some focus on the environment for several other parties across political blocs. The only exceptions were Sp and P, presumably because environmental issues were relatively unimportant and unattractive to core voters.

6.2. Issue Diversity of Governing and Opposition Parties (H3)

After this detailed examination of the parties' tapestries of topics, we turn to the issue diversity index. Figure 2 shows Shannon's H values for all 10 parties across platforms: the higher the value, the larger the issue diversity. In view of the previously described findings, it is not surprising that all three large parties (Frp, Ap, and H) had the highest rankings. The governing H had no recognizably greater diversity. Several oppositional parties with a clear focus on certain issues (MDG, Sp, and P) were ranked lowest, with a strikingly low issue diversity particularly for P. Somewhat surprisingly, the left-wing oppositional R was comparable to the large parties for issue diversity. Figure 1 suggests that this resulted from the relatively even distribution of numerous social policy issues.

The remaining minor parties fell in between. Although their issue profiles were less diverse than those of the large parties, they all showed relatively high degrees of issue diversity. However, only the governing KrF—but not the governing V—had higher issue diversity than the minor oppositional parties.

6.3. Issues Addressed on Platforms (RQ2)

Next, we compare issue diversity across social media platforms regardless of party. The issue ranking (Figure 3) was similar for all three platforms, with environmental policy leading, followed by health (Facebook and Twitter rank 2; Instagram rank 3) and economic inequality (Instagram rank 2; Facebook and Twitter rank 3). This ranking clearly reflected voters' issue priorities (Bergh et al., 2023), indicating that parties' social media campaigns mirrored the public agenda. On Facebook, many issues were addressed in a higher percentage of posts than on Instagram and Twitter, indicating generally higher issue diversity as reflected in a higher Shannon's H value for Facebook (0.915) than Instagram (0.880) and Twitter (0.847; not displayed in the figure). However, the issue diversity was high on all three platforms.

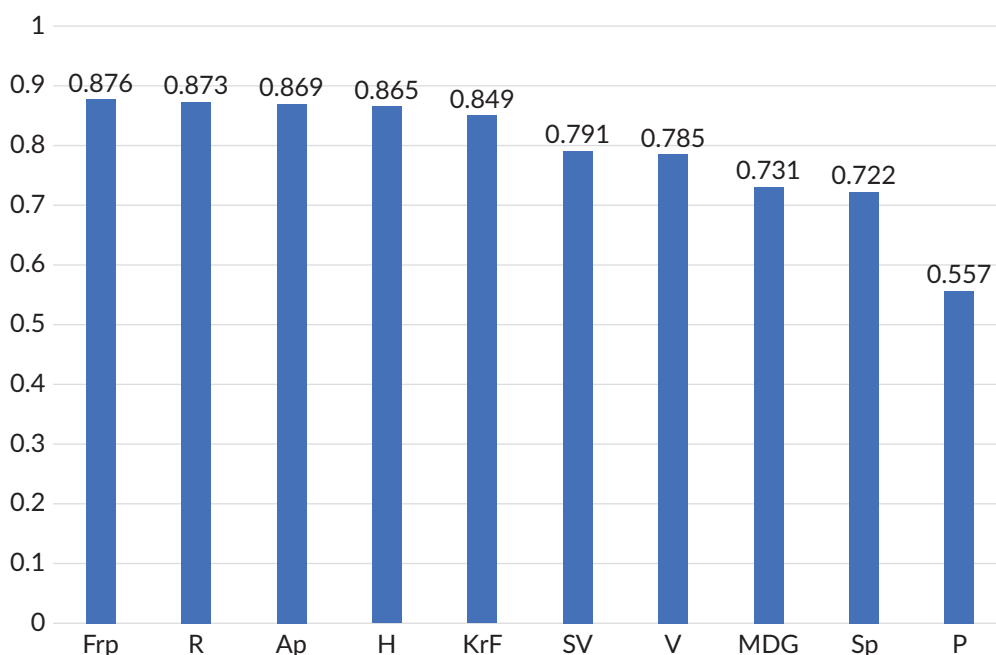


Figure 2. Parties' issue diversity regardless of social media platform (Shannon's H; $n = 2,594$).

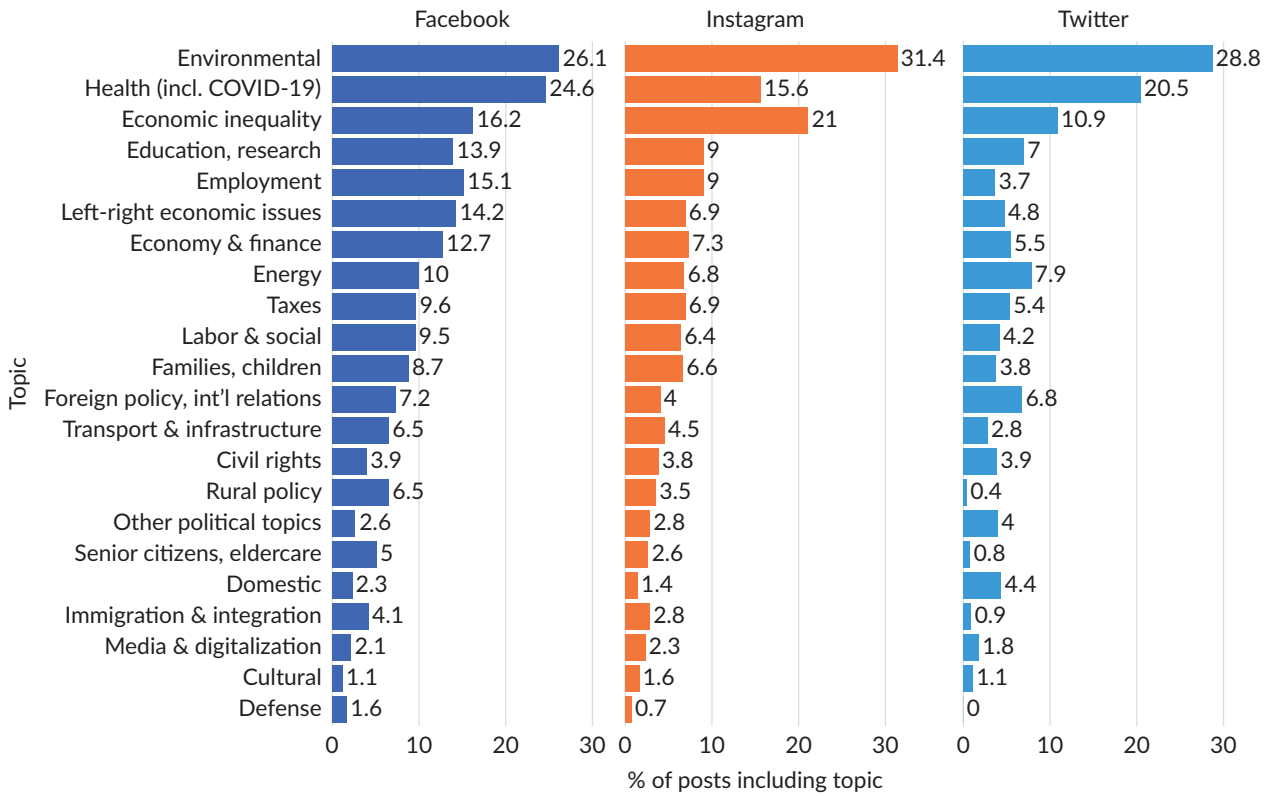


Figure 3. Percentage of posts including topics per social media platform (n = 2,594).

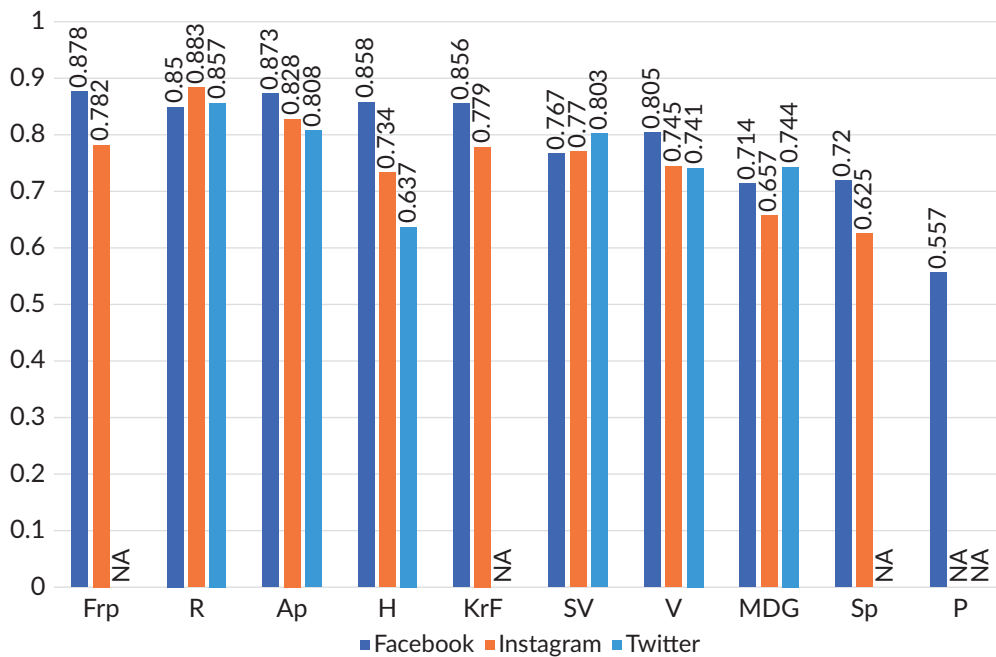


Figure 4. Parties' issue diversity across social media platforms (Shannon's H; n = 2,594).

Figure 4 shows that the issue diversity of the 10 parties differed across platforms. Seven out of ten parties had the highest issue diversity on Facebook, R on Instagram, and SV and MDG on Twitter. Some parties' issue diversity was similar across platforms (e.g., R and SV), while others had relatively large differences in issue diversity across platforms (e.g., Frp, H, KrF, and Sp). Overall, we identified no general patterns regarding the relationship between platform and issue diversity.

7. Conclusion

In this study, we investigated the diversity of policy issues Norwegian parties publicized on their official Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter pages during the 2021 national election campaign and the factors that might have led to increased or decreased issue diversity. We found that the tapestries of topics the parties wove on their social media accounts were more systematically affected by issue-related strategies than by the parties' governing/opposition statuses or by social media platforms (RQ1).

Despite the fact that the concept of issue ownership can be challenging to apply to multiparty systems with multiple, overlapping issue ownerships, our results indicate that all parties used the issue ownership strategy, in line with H1 and previous research (Haßler et al., 2021; Plescia et al., 2020; Sandberg, 2022). The riding-the-wave strategy was also commonly used, in line with H2 and confirming previous studies on social media campaigning (Ceron et al., 2022; Plescia et al., 2020). The only parties that did not “ride the environmental wave” were Sp and P, probably because they had nothing to gain from their voters regarding this topic. In the case of parties who owned the “hot” topic environment (MDG, SV, and V), both issue ownership and riding the wave became intermingled, illustrating that both strategies are “neither mutually exclusive nor collectively exhaustive” (Ennsner-Jedenastik et al., 2022, p. 844). Future research should employ interviews with party representatives to discover the extent to which they consciously decided to combine both strategies or focus on one of them and what role the parties' manifestos played in their social media campaigns. We observed that relying heavily on the issues parties owned (Sp, P, and MDG) decreased the parties' issue diversity. In contrast, if a party added a “hot” and otherwise neglected issue to its tapestry of topics, the riding-the-wave strategy could increase the party's issue diversity. Such interaction effects between different strategies and issue diversity are worth investigating in more detail.

Contrary to H3 and Greene's (2016) findings regarding party manifestos, the governing parties generally did not show higher issue diversity than the opposition parties. This only applied to the minor governing party KrF—but not to the minor governing party V—compared to the other minor parties, and not to the main governing party H compared to the other large parties (Ap and Frp). Issue diversity was higher in the case of all the large parties compared to the small parties (except only R) and particularly to the newly founded, one-issue movement P, which can be considered a niche party. The strongly similar degrees of diversity among the larger parties may be due to their size and appeal to large parts of the electorate, as well as to the fact that H was in government, Ap was expected to take over the government, and Frp (as former governing party) could still be held responsible for many of the government's decisions. Future research should closely consider the relationship between party size and issue diversity.

Regarding social media platforms, we found that aggregate issue diversity was highest on Facebook, followed by Instagram and Twitter (RQ2), probably due to Facebook's stronger text-heaviness (Magin et al., 2024), which allowed the parties to address multiple issues. However, regarding the issue diversity of individual

parties on the three platforms, we observed no consistent pattern of more or less diverse tapestries of topics. An explanation might be the parties' differing objectives regarding the use of the various platforms in their campaign strategies. If parties apply similar strategies to all platforms, their issue diversity becomes more similar across platforms than if the parties set varying priorities on different platforms to reach out to different target groups. Further analyses should consider the role of different platforms in parties' campaigns more closely, for which, again, interviews would be useful.

Naturally, this study has limitations. We investigated issues but not the parties' positions on these issues. Coding their positions would be particularly important for position issues, such as taxes or the environment. The parties would likely take different stances on position issues on social media, but it is unclear to what degree. Since a diverse political discourse requires not only issue diversity but also diverse opinions (Loecherbach et al., 2020), future research should examine parties' positions on the issues they address. Moreover, we investigated only one national election in one country. To determine whether our findings are transferable to other contexts, comparative studies are needed across countries in different geographical regions and over time. Such studies could help reveal which factors besides the ones we explored influence the tapestries of topics on parties' social media accounts (e.g., the top candidates or the characteristics of multiparty versus two-party systems).

Finally, although we have provided useful comparative insights across social media platforms, we did not explicitly examine the different functions and affordances of the three studied platforms or how they might have influenced the parties' issue prioritizations. For example, unlike Instagram, Facebook and Twitter offer the functionality for users to share or retweet content posted by the parties at the time of the 2021 election. Since sharing spreads content beyond those who follow a particular party account, gaining traction in this regard may be particularly important from the parties' strategic perspective. Thus, future researchers should further differentiate between platforms in this regard. Hopefully, the results presented here can be used as preparation for such efforts.

Our study suggests that parties' tapestries of topics on their social media pages are affected by various factors, which highlights the complexity of planning election campaigns. Diverse information is important for helping citizens make well-informed decisions, but it would be unrealistic to expect all parties—as strategic actors aiming to maximize their votes—to cover a full range of issues (Greene, 2016). Our findings indicate that parties' issue diversity is more systematically influenced by strategies related to issue ownership and the public agenda than by their status as governing versus opposition parties or social media platforms. The latter indicates that at least the choice of topics for social media campaigns continues to be influenced more strongly by political logic (Strömbäck & Esser, 2014) than by network media logic (Klinger & Svensson, 2014). Our findings also indicate that the issue diversity on almost all the parties' social media accounts is extensive, at least in Norway. Even if the information parties provide on social media is often superficial, it allows voters to gain an overview of the political issues that are key to the parties' campaigns. Thus, social media can be a useful source of political information as long as voters do not consider only one party, are aware that parties are strategic actors pursuing their own goals, and complement the content obtained from social media with more extensive, in-depth information from other sources, such as news media.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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