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How Political Issues Shape Social Media Campaigns for National Elections

Edited by Márton Bene, Jörg Haßler, and Melanie Magin

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Political Issues in Social Media Campaigns for National Elections: A Plea for Comparative Research

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Abstract

As ideological, class-based voting has waned, issue-based voting has become more prevalent. Political parties can sway election outcomes by promoting certain topics, particularly on social media, which has become pivotal to political communication. However, our understanding of political actors’ social media strategies remains limited. This thematic issue, based on the international research project Digital Election Campaigning Worldwide (DigiWorld), aims to broaden such understanding. Examining 14 countries across Western Europe, Eastern Europe, North America, Latin America, and Oceania, the 10 articles in this issue reveal diverse approaches to issue-based political communication on social media, emphasizing the significance of comparative research in this field.

Keywords

comparative research; election campaigning; political issues; social media

1. Introduction

The focus on political actors’ social media strategies has intensified in recent decades, driven by events such as Obama’s 2008 win, Trump’s 2016 victory, the Brexit referendum, and the rapid rise of populist actors’ and political outsiders’ effective social media use in many countries. Key areas of political communication research on political actors’ social media activity have included populist communication (Engesser et al., 2017), disinformation (Bennett & Livingston, 2020), microtargeting (Dommett et al., 2024), mobilization

(Haßler, Magin, & Rußmann, 2023), and personalization (Enli & Skogerbø, 2013). However, the substance of political actors' communication—the issues they address as the “raw material of politics” (Praet et al., 2021, p. 196)—has been rather neglected in political communication research. This is an interesting gap since the most prominent effect theories—agenda-setting theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972), priming theory (Iyengar et al., 1982), issue ownership theory (Petrocik, 1996), and the policy-focused theory of punctuated equilibrium (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993)—are based on the idea that the issues political actors strategically emphasize shape political processes and voters' behavior. Moreover, empirical research has proven that issue-based communication comprises a large part of political actors' social media activity (Haßler, Kümpel, & Keller, 2023; Horn & Jensen, 2023) and shapes voting intentions (Giger et al., 2021).

In other fields, political issues have evoked continuing academic attention, namely in the study of party competition (Green-Pedersen, 2023). With the decline of ideological class-based voting, party competition has increasingly become a struggle to determine “which issues should dominate the party political agenda” (Green-Pedersen, 2007, p. 211). Growing electoral volatility has fostered the rise of catch-all parties and single-issue niche parties seeking to gain an edge through their focus on particular issues (De Sio, 2017). The complexity of social and political conflicts defies simple left-right categorization, creating a multidimensional political landscape in which competition revolves around specific issues, reshaping the traditional logic of political contestation (De Sio, 2017; Riker, 1986).

Although the literature on party competition offers valuable insights into issue-based political communication, we argue that a communication-focused approach is essential for gaining a comprehensive understanding of social media's role in such communication. Researchers investigating issue-based competition have often focused solely on the issues themselves, neglecting the various ways in which they are discussed and presented. Crucially, they have also frequently been insensitive to how the communication context shapes political actors' issue strategies. Although they have examined political actors' communication across various channels (manifestos, news media, parliamentary speeches, and social media), they have failed to deeply explore how these channels impact the issue agenda, and they have thus overlooked the implications of the ongoing structural transformations of the public sphere on parties' issue strategies (Bruns, 2023). This was exemplified in an otherwise fascinating special issue by De Sio and Lachat (2020), which presented highly insightful empirical findings from a research project on issue competition in Western Europe using Twitter data. The authors argued that political parties' communication on Twitter could be viewed as a press release for political actors to “communicate their desired messages to the media”; thus, they considered Twitter “a valid indicator of [their] actual strategic priorities” (De Sio et al., 2018, p. 1218).

This perspective neglects the fact that social media platforms are specific issue communication contexts, as shown by the few existing studies on political actors' social media-based issue strategies. First, rather than conforming to the narrative structure of elite-level public discourse, as press releases do, these platforms facilitate a self-centered style of communication that permits the construction of unique narratives and narrower, more focused issue strategies that directly target voters (Bene et al., 2022; Van Dalen et al., 2015). Second, they facilitate immediate reactions and foster a need for constant novelty and freshness, resulting in significant fluctuations in issue attention and event-driven communication (Ceron et al., 2022; Praet et al., 2021). Third, users' short attention spans and heterogeneous content flow make discussing complex issues challenging, influencing which issues political actors present and how (Berger & Jäger, 2023; Searles &

Feezell, 2023). Finally, although political actors can somewhat disregard traditional political and media expectations on social media, the need to gain visibility means that they must adapt to users' communication preferences. Given that users' interactions influence message distribution and visibility via algorithmic interfaces, political actors are motivated to promote issues that engage users cognitively, emotionally, communicatively, and socially (Bene et al., 2022; Ennsner-Jedenastik et al., 2022).

Thus, despite significant overlaps, the issue agendas of political actors on social media differ from those conveyed through, for example, press releases (Ivanusch, 2024; Peeters et al., 2021). Hence, equating social media communication with press releases neglects how social media characteristics shape which issues are discussed and how. However, for the reasons given, our understanding of political actors' issue strategies on social media remains limited. Given the significance of social media platforms in modern political communication and the importance of issue competition, addressing this gap is crucial.

2. Comparing Issue-Based Campaign Strategies on Social Media

This thematic issue aims to enhance our understanding of the interplay between issue-based political communication and social media. The articles herein stem from the international research project Digital Election Campaigning Worldwide (DigiWorld), which was formed in 2021 to facilitate global and longitudinal comparisons of political actors' campaign strategies on digital platforms during national elections. Our comparative approach recognizes that political communication content on social media is shaped both by the platforms and by political factors, such as parties (at the meso level) and countries (at the macro level). The network now spans around 40 countries across diverse regions, diverging from the typical focus on Western nations in political communication research. We employ manual standardized content analysis using a shared codebook to ensure data comparability. This facilitates an in-depth analyses of single-country studies, cross-country comparisons, longitudinal comparisons, and mixed cross-country and longitudinal comparisons. Political communication databases, such as the DigiWorld database, remain rare, but they are crucial for understanding the implications of ongoing structural changes in the public sphere (Bruns, 2023) across diverse regions.

We begin our discussion with five detailed single-country analyses of issue-related strategies during national elections. Haßler et al. (2024) compared political parties' issue strategies across various Facebook posts (organic posts, sponsored posts, and advertisements) during the 2021 German Federal Election Campaign. Although parties generally followed an issue ownership strategy in organic posts, sponsored posts and advertisements often diverged from this pattern, with many highlighting social policy, which contradicted some parties' issue ownership. Decker et al. (2024) similarly examined organic and paid content during the 2022 Australian federal election campaign, finding that both types of content displayed similar topic diversity and focused on core political themes aligned with party ideologies. Magin et al. (2024) added another comparative dimension: they explored issue diversity in social media campaigns during the 2021 Norwegian election across three platforms (Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter), concluding that parties' issue diversity was shaped by their strategies rather than the platforms. Two studies considered how crises threatening the political community influenced the campaign agenda. Ceron et al. (2024) demonstrated that crisis-related posts (particularly those posted by populist actors) evoked considerable user engagement during the 2022 Italian general election campaign, but irresponsible claims in crisis-related posts did not. Farkas et al. (2024) found that external shocks altered political leaders' issue strategies, as evidenced by

Viktor Orbán's victory in Hungary's 2022 election. Orbán's adaptation to the outbreak of the Russian–Ukrainian war allowed him to shape the dominant narrative, giving him a strategic advantage over leaders who maintained their original strategies despite the crisis.

Two longitudinal studies started from the observation that while social media campaigns are not static entities, we still know little about how they change over time. Boulianne and Larsson (2024) compared the 2019 and 2021 Canadian federal elections, revealing a shift from environmental concerns predominating in 2019 to the Covid-19 pandemic taking center stage in 2021. This shift clearly aligned with users' preferences because pandemic-related posts garnered more engagement than environment-related ones. Gonçalves et al. (2024), focusing on Brazil's 2018 and 2022 general elections, found that substantive policy issues were not particularly prevalent in negative posts. Instead, education and health featured prominently in positive campaigns, corruption and Covid-19 (in 2022) in negative campaigns, and gender policy in both negative and positive campaigns. The level of negativity increased across the two elections.

Three cross-country comparisons conclude this thematic issue, shedding light on regions often overlooked in political communication research: Central and Eastern Europe and Latin America. Against the backdrop of the conflict between Russia-backed separatists and Ukrainian forces in Eastern Ukraine, Grechanaya and Ceron (2024) examined Facebook campaigns during Ukraine's 2019 and Russia's 2021 legislative elections and discovered that patriotic symbols evoked higher user engagement in Russia, but defense and foreign policy did so in Ukraine. Balaban et al. (2024) investigated the relationships between topics, negativity, and user engagement across election campaigns on Facebook in Czechia, Hungary, Lithuania, Moldova, and Romania. They observed that major events, such as the Covid-19 pandemic and the recent Russia–Ukraine War, significantly influenced negativity levels and stimulated user engagement. Fenoll et al. (2024) explored the emotional impact of divisive issues across four Latin American countries. Although the issues did not consistently evoke strong emotional responses, cross-country differences existed; for instance, crime elicited more anger in Brazil and Peru than in Chile and Colombia.

3. Conclusion

The 10 articles collectively highlight various approaches to examining the role of issues in parties' election campaigns on social media, offering a glimpse into the possibilities afforded by DigiWorld data, both presently and in the future. Encompassing 14 countries across Western Europe, Eastern Europe, North America, Latin America, and Oceania, these studies emphasize the value of revising the Western-centric focus of political communication research. Although the DigiWorld network is already substantial, its expansion in the future is expected to facilitate even more insightful comparative studies on political actors' strategic use of social media in national election campaigns across time and space.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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A Consistent Picture? Issue-Based Campaigning on Facebook During the 2021 German Federal Election Campaign

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Abstract

In times of declining party identification, political parties need to persuade and mobilize their voters from election to election. Setting topics in such a way that voters are convinced to cast their vote has become an essential prerequisite for success in modern election campaigns. Social media are suitable for this, as parties can set their own topics or highlight the topics most important to the voters and communicate them to a large audience in organic posts or target specific voter groups with ads. While tendencies of issue ownership in posts on Facebook are repeatedly shown empirically, there is a lack of studies investigating which strategies parties follow in their investment decisions on Facebook ads. Based on theoretical expectations derived from the literature about digital political marketing and issue prioritization in election campaigns, this article investigates whether parties communicated consistently on Facebook with regard to the issues they set in organic posts, sponsored posts, and ads during the 2021 German federal election campaign. The results of a manual quantitative content analysis ($n = 1,029$ posts, $n = 1,197$ sponsored posts, $n = 2,643$ ads) show that parties focused on issue ownership in their posts. Still, their investments in sponsored posts and ads followed different strategies. Here, most parties highlighted social policy, contradicting issue ownership for some parties. The article provides novel insights into digital campaigning and discusses the extent to which parties can engage audiences beyond their organic reach within party-affiliated audiences.

Keywords

ads; content analysis; Facebook; issue ownership; issue salience; micro-targeting; organic posts; riding-the-wave; social media; sponsored posts

1. Introduction

Social networking platforms, with their sophisticated algorithms for targeted and personalized messaging, have revolutionized the way political messages are produced and disseminated (Römmele & Gibson, 2020; Votta et al., 2024). Notably, Facebook is leveraged by parties to understand and respond to voter preferences, develop targeted communication strategies, and interact with the electorate (Kreiss, 2016). This influences various strategic aspects of a campaign, such as issue prioritization (e.g., Dobber & de Vreese, 2022; Hillygus & Shields, 2009; Kruikemeier et al., 2022). Since party identification is tending to decline (Dassonneville et al., 2012), short-term factors, such as convincing voters by prioritizing certain political issues, are becoming increasingly important for parties' campaigns.

In general, two broader strategies for how parties emphasize issues during election campaigns are discussed in the literature: They can either focus on issues where they have issue ownership (the issue ownership strategy; Budge & Farlie, 1983; Petrocik, 1996) or they can focus on issues that are of great concern to the voters at the time of the election (the riding-the-wave strategy; Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1994; for an overview see also Wagner & Meyer, 2014). Previous research on parties' strategic issue prioritization has intensively focused on party manifestos (e.g., Wagner & Meyer, 2014), press releases (e.g., Klüver & Sagarzazu, 2016; Seeberg, 2022), and social media (Twitter: De Sio & Weber, 2020; Facebook: Ennser-Jedenastik et al., 2022), and investigated whether parties are consistent in the topics they emphasize across different communication channels (e.g., Elmelund-Præstekær, 2011; Ivanusch, 2024; Norris et al., 1999; Tresch et al., 2018).

Our study aims to extend current research by comparing different post types within one platform, namely organic and paid posts on Facebook. Facebook is the most intensely used social networking platform in many Western democracies and focusing on this platform allows us to compare strategies that are free of charge to strategies that parties pay for. Organic posts are regular posts that page owners (here: political parties) post to appear on their Facebook page. These organic posts are also shown on the timelines of the page's followers. Sponsored posts are organic posts that are "boosted," that is, paid for, to reach specific audiences beyond the followers of a page. Facebook ads are paid advertisements that are shown on the timelines of targeted users. Ads can be used to reach even more finely defined target groups with various advertising objectives, such as increased traffic or engagement (Kruschinski & Bene, 2022). By comparing these post types, we seek to answer the central question of whether parties consistently emphasize an issue ownership strategy or a riding-the-wave strategy in the different post types (organic posts, sponsored posts, and ads) and whether parties spend more money to spread owned issues or issues important to voters.

To this end, we conducted a quantitative content analysis of all organic posts, sponsored posts, and ads from all seven German parliamentary parties in the four weeks before the 2021 federal election ($n = 1,029$ posts, $n = 1,197$ sponsored posts, $n = 2,643$ ads). The identified issues highlighted in the posts were matched with survey results from the German Longitudinal Election Study (GLES) on the importance of issues in the week before the election and the problem-solving skills that respondents associated with the German parties (Debus et al., 2023; Roßteutscher et al., 2023).

Our results provide important insights into how parties in a European country with strict EU data protection regulations spend their money on the most far-reaching social networking platform to emphasize campaign issues and whether the underlying strategy complements or extends the strategy applied "for free" in the

organic posts. Thus, our study presents important descriptive data upon which future studies that investigate targeting decisions on social networking platforms can be built.

2. Theoretical Framework: Issue-Based Campaigning on Facebook

2.1. Political Campaigning With Facebook's Organic and Paid Media

Facebook, with its vast user base and strategic functionalities, has emerged as a pivotal social networking platform in political campaigning (Haßler et al., 2021). The platform's capabilities for organic (i.e., regular posts) and paid media (i.e., sponsored posts and ads) are integral to today's political marketing strategies (Kruschinski & Bene, 2022; Stuckelberger & Koedam, 2022). Both media types offer direct access to voters as they bypass traditional journalistic gatekeeping, yet they differ in cost, production, marketing objectives, and audience reach.

Organic media on Facebook allows political actors to post content on their pages at a low cost, reaching users who follow their page and potentially the networks of these users when they share and like the posts. This form of media is particularly advantageous for campaigns with an engaged followership or limited budget, providing direct access to supporters without having to rely on coverage in the traditional mass media (Kalsnes, 2016; Ross et al., 2020).

Paid media enables political campaigners to pay for the distribution and targeting of messages to specific users on the platform in two ways. While sponsored posts are organic posts that are boosted with payment to reach a wider, targeted audience, Facebook ads are tailored for specific campaign objectives and do not appear on the advertiser's Facebook page. In comparison to the very basic advertising capabilities of sponsored posts, ads require more sophisticated marketing skills and offer nuanced targeting options, making them suitable for advanced campaign strategies (Kruschinski & Bene, 2022).

2.2. Issue Prioritization in Parties' Campaign Communication

Research indicates that electoral campaigns strategically assess Facebook's organic and paid media in line with their broader marketing strategies, tailoring their messaging and resource distribution accordingly (Kruschinski et al., 2022). This adaptation includes considerations about timing and content in light of party characteristics. Content strategies regarding political issues are of special importance, as they allow parties to emphasize their stances on current political topics while simultaneously enabling voters to connect parties to issues salient to them (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1994; Hillygus & Shields, 2009).

In German federal and state elections, political parties strategically utilize their Facebook pages for issue management (e.g., Magin et al., 2017). This involves a systematic approach of observing, analyzing, selecting, coordinating, and controlling communication to assert dominance in public debates on specific issues. The core strategy is to proactively emphasize favorable issues (Tresch et al., 2018) with the underlying objective of shaping and influencing voter preferences (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1994).

Two ideal-typical main strategies of parties for selecting possible policy topics are discussed in the literature: issue ownership and riding the wave on publicly salient issues.

The issue ownership hypothesis suggests that parties focus their campaign efforts on issues that they are identified with and perceived as competent in addressing by the electorate (Budge & Farlie, 1983; Petrocik, 1996). Empirical studies indicate that emphasizing the issues a party “owns” can provide electoral attention and advantages at the polls (Karlsen & Aardal, 2016; Kleinnijenhuis & Ridder, 1998; Lefevere et al., 2015). Thus, it is crucial for parties to continually remind voters of their key issues, utilizing direct communication channels like Facebook to sustain issue ownership (Kruschinski et al., 2022).

Issue ownership in the German political landscape is typically stable, a result of a party’s historical focus and achievements in specific areas (Seeberg, 2017; Walgrave et al., 2009). Despite a trend toward ideological convergence among parties, voters tend to distinguish them based on their issue-handling capabilities (Kleinnijenhuis & Ridder, 1998). The priority for voters remains the party’s ability to address current and relevant problems. Conservative parties, akin to the CDU/CSU, are often seen as more capable of handling economic, security, and fiscal issues. Right-wing parties, like the AfD, are typically associated with immigration, national identity, and security concerns. On the other hand, socialist and social democratic parties like the Left party and the SPD are perceived as more competent at addressing social issues like unemployment, welfare, and healthcare. The Greens in Germany are primarily identified with environmental issues, including climate change and sustainable energy policies (Seeberg, 2017). In multi-party systems like Germany’s, of course, attempts to “steal” issue ownership from other parties or to “become associative owners of issues” are possible, meaning that different parties can compete for ownership of the same issues (Walgrave et al., 2015, p. 789).

However, concentrating only on owned issues might lead to the public impression that the party is ignoring important current issues if the owned issues are not the most salient issues for citizens. As an alternative, parties can engage more in topics from the media agenda and from their political rivals (Seeberg, 2022), and therefore “ride the wave” of currently salient topics (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1994). In doing so, parties show responsiveness to the upcoming issues that most concern the citizens (Ennsner-Jedenastik et al., 2022; Klüver & Sagarzazu, 2016).

Both strategies have been observed empirically with some studies supporting the use of the issue ownership strategy (e.g., Walgrave et al., 2015), while others show the use of the riding-the-wave strategy (e.g., Klüver & Sagarzazu, 2016). Furthermore, different parties can use different strategies in different communication channels, for example, depending on their institutional organization (Wagner & Meyer, 2014). Seeberg (2022) interprets these inconclusive findings in view of the different communication channels used by the parties and at different points in time in the election campaign, considering issue ownership as a long-term strategy and riding-the-wave as a short-term strategy. This reflects the relative stability of issue ownership based on their social origins (Petrocik, 1996; Walgrave et al., 2009) as well as the responsiveness of parties when reacting to sudden events (Dalmus et al., 2017). Therefore, since parties do not necessarily have to prioritize the same issues in different communication channels (Seeberg, 2022; Tresch et al., 2018), both strategies can be applied by the same party. A third approach extends the issue ownership concept: The issue yield approach assumes that it is profitable for parties to focus on issues on which both the electorate as a whole and their own supporters attribute the party a high level of problem-solving competence and which also dominate the current issue agenda (De Sio & Weber, 2020, pp. 723–725). It cannot be denied that a distinction between the assessment of the problem-solving competence of parties by the entire electorate and the party supporters can be

conceptually fruitful, but for reasons of stringency we focus here on the ideal types of the issue ownership and riding-the-wave strategies.

2.3. Issue-Based Messaging Strategies in Organic and Paid Posts on Facebook

As Facebook's organic and paid media differ in cost, production, marketing objectives, and audiences, it is worthwhile to investigate how these differences influence the strategic prioritization of policy issues. However, only limited research exists on the comparison of organic and paid messaging strategies of different political parties on Facebook with a specific focus on strategic issue management (cf. Kruschinski et al., 2022).

Organic posts on Facebook allow political parties to reach a broad audience, typically consisting of their established supporters. Thus, these posts often focus on consensus-driven topics that resonate with a party's core ideology and principles (Kruschinski et al., 2022). The autonomous nature of organic media means that parties have full control over the content and messaging, which is crucial for maintaining a consistent party image and ideology (Stier et al., 2018). Manual content analyses reveal that European parties put an emphasis on consensual policy issues in their organic posts that are traditionally connected to their party (Lucht et al., 2017), a phenomenon that can also be witnessed in German state elections (Kruschinski et al., 2022).

Based on these insights, we argue that German parties strategically steer debates towards issues they "own" in their organic Facebook posts. This leads to the first hypothesis:

H1: German political parties predominantly employ an issue ownership strategy in their organic posts on Facebook.

In contrast to organic posts, sponsored posts and ads on Facebook offer targeted and personalized message delivery to specific segments of the electorate. This targeting is often based on issues presumed to be of interest to these segments, aiding in the development of a unique party image (Kruikemeier et al., 2022; Votta et al., 2024). While organic posts tend to embrace broader, consensus-driven topics that resonate with the party's core supporters, paid media facilitates more tailored and potentially divisive campaigning. Thus, it could lead parties to focus on wedge issues that may appeal to diverse voter segments with varying viewpoints (Kruikemeier et al., 2022).

Despite the potential for such audience-segmented issue strategies, research indicates that parties often choose to focus on established, non-controversial issues in ads. Evidence from studies conducted in the US and Canada suggests that parties reinforce their own core messages with ads that resonate with their primary voter base, who are more likely to be receptive to these familiar topics (Bennett & Gordon, 2021; Fowler et al., 2020). This cautious approach is likely due to the high stakes of elections, where missteps in communication can have significant electoral repercussions. However, other research in Germany indicates that parties tend to use more diverse issues in their ads, especially in their sponsored posts (Kruschinski et al., 2022).

Given these discrepancies in the current literature, we want to find answers to the following research questions:

RQ1: Do German political parties employ an issue ownership strategy or a riding-the-wave strategy in their sponsored posts and ads on Facebook?

RQ2: Do German political parties spend more money on sponsored posts and ads employing an issue ownership strategy or a riding-the-wave strategy?

3. Method

To test our hypothesis and answer our research questions, we conducted a manual quantitative content analysis of parties' organic and paid Facebook posts—including organic posts, sponsored posts, and ads—during the 2021 German federal election campaign. We focused on parties in the national parliament: the conservative Christian democratic CDU/CSU, the social democratic SPD, the liberal FDP, the Green party (Bündnis90/Die Grünen), the left-wing Left party (Die Linke), and the right-wing populist AfD. All Facebook posts published on the pages of the national parties during the hot election phase four weeks before the election (August 30, 2021–September 26, 2021) were collected daily using the application programming interface (API) of CrowdTangle. The ads and sponsored posts were collected using Meta's AdLibrary API. The cleaned sample contains 1,029 organic posts, 1,197 sponsored posts, and 2,643 ads.

Germany, with its mixed-member electoral system and multi-party system, represents a special case among Western democracies (Tomuschat, 2013). As such, the theoretical underpinnings of election campaign communication strategies might differ from those of parties in other countries. Nonetheless, our focus on Facebook—as in many countries the most popular social networking platform in Germany in 2021 (Newman et al., 2022)—provides a starting point for comparisons with online strategies of parties in other countries, as the digital architecture (Bossetta, 2018) of Facebook remains constant between different countries where parties use Facebook as a communication channel. Our analysis can serve as a reference to compare the campaign strategies of different parties in organic posts, sponsored posts, and ads on Facebook.

The organic posts were coded by six coders. For the sponsored posts and ads, all categories were coded by four coders. All coders were intensively trained in the coding scheme. Reliability tests with 100 organic posts coded by all coders in the organic posts team and 60 paid posts coded by all coders in the paid posts team indicate a common understanding of the coded categories (see Table 1). We used Brennan & Prediger's Kappa (B&P Kappa) as an indicator for reliability because we utilized binary variables and the underlying data was often zero-inflated. In such cases, B&P Kappa has been shown to be a valid and robust chance-corrected indicator (Quarfoot & Levine, 2016). Holsti is reported as a second reliability indicator.

We measured which issues a post addressed to detect whether parties used an issue ownership or a riding-the-wave strategy. Policy issues could have been addressed in text elements (text of the post, slogan, quote) as well as visual elements (i.e., the image, the first minute of a video, the preview of a link, or the first image of an album). The issues were considered independently from each other to code as many different issues as were present in the post.

Policy issues addressed in the posts were measured in fine-grained detail. To match the post content to the data from the GLES, broader policy issues were recoded from the original coding (see Table 1). Therefore, we differentiated eight different policy issues: (a) "environment," whenever posts addressed climate change,

safety of endangered species, or policy to save forests; (b) “Covid-19” when Covid-19 case numbers or measures against Covid-19 were addressed in the post; (c) “social issues” when topics such as pensions, rents, wages, or working hours were mentioned; (d) “domestic policy” when topics such as criminality/crime rate, political radicalism, disaster management, or flood protection, or topics related to immigration or the integration of refugees were addressed; (e) “economy” when topics such as the European crisis, austerity measures, trade agreements, or protectionism were mentioned; (f) “infrastructure” when public

Table 1. Operationalizations and reliability scores.

Variable short name	Topics summarized	Holsti B&P Kappa		Holsti B&P Kappa	
		Organic posts		Paid posts	
Environment	Environmental policy Energy policy	0.939	0.868	0.975	0.942
Covid-19	Covid-19 case numbers Measures against Covid-19 Vaccination-related issues, health policy in general	0.970	0.923	0.944	0.884
Social	Labor and social issues (e.g., wages, pensions) Family and children policy (e.g., childcare) Culture policy Education and research policy Sport policy	0.945	0.868	0.955	0.903
Domestic	Immigration and integration Criminality Political radicalism Disaster management	0.928	0.802	0.949	0.884
Economy	Economy and finance (e.g., austerity measures, trade agreements, taxation, customs duties)	0.877	0.693	0.983	0.961
Infrastructure	Media policy and digitalization Transport (also: automotive) and infrastructure policy	0.947	0.868	0.938	0.864
Foreign	Foreign policy International relations Developmental policy Defense policy	0.985	0.967	0.938	0.864
Other	Agricultural policy LGBTQ+/gender policy Other policy topics	0.977	0.934	0.963	0.923

transportation, Autobahn or electrical infrastructure, and digitalization were mentioned; (g) “foreign policy” when the post addressed international relations between states, development policy, or the arms trade; and (h) “other” if a post dealt with a topic that did not fit into these categories.

The amount of money spent for sponsored posts and ads by each party was analyzed using the data from Meta’s AdLibrary API. Since Meta only provides intervals of the money spent in the form of “lower” and “upper” boundaries, we calculated a midpoint of these values by using the mean value to be able to compare the amounts of money spent between parties and between issues.

To identify the most salient issues and to introduce an external empirical indicator of issue salience among voters and issue ownership of parties, we combined the content analysis with a secondary analysis of the data from the GLES. In the GLES Tracking Study from September 2021, 1,688 people were asked between 15 and 24 September (10 days before the election) what they think is currently the most important political problem in Germany (Debus et al., 2023). These answers were summarized in various thematic categories (Roßteutscher et al., 2023). Participants were also asked which German party was best qualified to solve this problem (attributed solution competence of the parties). In a first step, we focused on the top 10 most important political problems. To match these top 10 with the topics coded in the content analysis, “environmental policy” and “climate policy” were recoded to “environmental and climate policy.” Similarly, “social justice,” “pensions and demographic change,” “poverty,” and “housing” were recoded to “labor and social policy.” The variable names of the GLES were adopted as far as possible. Since the issue “values, political culture and social criticism”—in 9th place in the GLES list—is not a single policy field, but affects more or less all policy fields, we did not include this issue in our analysis. As a result, we have created a top 5 list of the most important topics from the GLES data, which is comparable to the data from the content analysis (see Table 2).

A disadvantage of this approach is that the two GLES items measure the salience of issues by asking for the respondents’ opinion as to what the most important political problems would be and the problem-solving competence for these most salient issues (for a discussion of the challenges in measuring issue salience see Wlezien, 2005; for a discussion of issue concerns of different party electorates see Neundorf & Adams, 2018). However, we consider the ascribed problem-solving competence on the most important issues as measured by the GLES to be a good benchmark for discussing the issue strategies of parties on Facebook.

4. Results: Issue Ownership or Riding-the-Wave in Organic and Paid Posts on Facebook

The secondary analysis of the results of the GLES data shows that, in the run-up to the 2021 federal election, German citizens primarily rated environmental and climate policy as important for Germany ($n = 336$; see Table 2), followed by issues related to the Covid-19 pandemic ($n = 283$), labor and social policy ($n = 255$), immigration and integration policy ($n = 218$), and economic policy ($n = 65$). The GLES data provides empirical insights into the issue ownership approach, when asking the participants about the party with the highest problem-solving competence: In the case of environmental and climate policy, most participants stated that the Green party was best suited to solve these problems (50%). For immigration and integration policy, most participants named the AfD as the most competent problem solver (55%), while the CDU/CSU was named most frequently for problems regarding economic policy (29%). When it came to the problems surrounding the Covid-19 pandemic and social issues, most participants stated that no German party was particularly

Table 2. Salient issues to the public during the 2021 German election campaign and issue ownership.

	Rank 1	Rank 2	Rank 3	Rank 4	Rank 5
	Environmental and climate policy	Covid-19 pandemic	Labor and social policy	Immigration and integration policy	Economic policy
	(n = 336) in %	(n = 283) in %	(n = 255) in %	(n = 218) in %	(n = 65) in %
CDU/CSU (conservative)	10	21	8	5	29
SPD (social democratic)	12	18	27	7	17
FDP (liberal)	3	7	6	6	14
Greens	50	3	4	1	5
Left party (socialist)	4	5	17	4	2
AfD (right-wing populist)	0	11	4	55	5
Other party	4	3	2	1	2
None of these parties	14	25	29	19	25
All parties equally good	5	8	3	3	3
Sum	102	101	100	101	102

Notes: $n = 1,157$; top 5 most frequently mentioned problems in Germany combined with information on which parties citizens ascribe the problem-solving competence for these problems (percentages); the top 5 exclude “no response,” “other,” and “not specified/not applicable”; cells marked in dark contain the most problem-solving competence attributions by the participants; lighter colored fields are the alternative if “none of these parties” was mentioned most frequently; sums deviating from 100 result from rounding errors; read: 10% of 336 respondents who named “Environmental and climate policy” as the most important problem also found the CDU/CSU to be best suited to solve the problems regarding this issue. Source: Debus et al. (2023).

well-placed to solve these problems. Compared with the other parties, the CDU/CSU is considered to have the best problem-solving skills in relation to the pandemic (21%) and the SPD in relation to social issues (27%). The FDP and the Left party did not reach the highest problem-solving competence scores in any of the top 5 issues. The FDP achieved its highest scores in terms of problem-solving competence in economic policy (14%). The Left party’s highest scores were reached in the field of labor and social policy (17%).

Focusing on the posting activity of the parties on Facebook, it can be observed that the parties pursued different strategies (see Table 3). Most parties relied heavily on paid ads since they published more ads than organic and sponsored posts. Most strikingly, the FDP published 1,681 paid ads compared to 117 organic posts and 879 sponsored posts. In contrast to this strategy, the Christian conservative CSU published more organic posts ($n = 225$) than sponsored posts ($n = 9$) and ads ($n = 14$). The right-wing AfD used organic posts ($n = 160$) and paid ads ($n = 164$) in equal measure. In the mix of communication channels, Facebook and, in particular, the various types of (paid) posts and ads were attributed varying degrees of importance by the parties, potentially depending on the size of the party, the assumed electorate, and the money available for the campaign. However, all parties were active to a certain extent and also invested money during the election campaign on Facebook.

In their organic posts, the social democratic SPD and the Left party both most frequently referred to labor and social issues (see Figure 1). This issue can be labeled as owned by the SPD, since of all parliamentary parties the social democrats scored highest regarding the problem-solving competence on this issue.

Table 3. Number and percentage shares of posts, sponsored posts, and paid ads.

	Posts		Sponsored posts		Paid ads	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Left party	55	5	8	1	84	3
Greens	80	8	3	0	115	4
SPD	122	12	162	14	281	11
CDU	270	26	119	10	304	12
CSU	225	22	9	1	14	1
FDP	117	11	879	73	1,681	64
AfD	160	16	17	1	164	6
Total	1,029	100	1,197	100	2,643	100

Notes: The investigation period was August 30, 2021–September 26, 2021; the numbers of sponsored posts and ads include “duplicates” used for A/B testing; in an A/B test (slightly) different versions of messages are presented to different audiences to test which version generates more clicks.

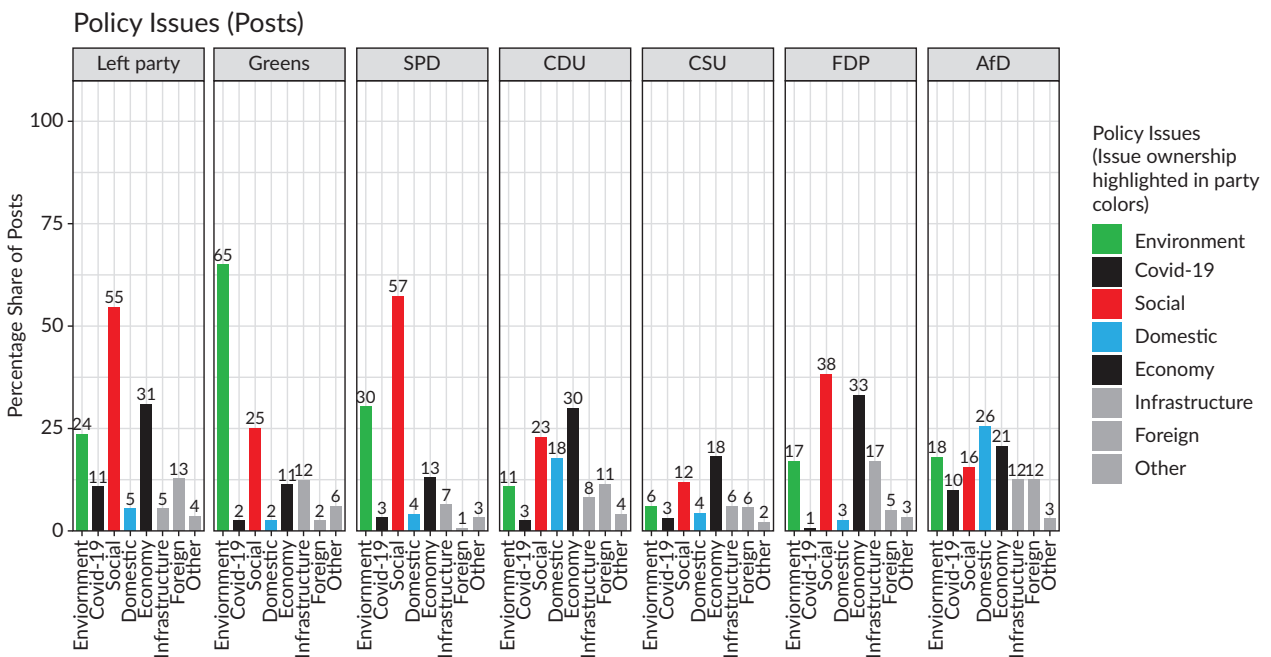


Figure 1. Percentage share of policy issues addressed in organic posts. Notes: The investigation period was August 30, 2021–September 26, 2021; n = 1,029 posts; gray bars suggest the issue was not among the top 5 most salient issues.

The Left party also scored comparatively high values and reached its highest ascribed problem-solving competence on this issue. The Green party most often referred to their owned issue of environmental and climate change policy; the two Christian conservative parties CDU/CSU referred to their owned issue of economic policy; and the right-wing AfD referred to domestic issues including immigration and integration, where the party scores highest in ascribed problem-solving competence. The liberal FDP was the only party that did not emphasize the topic on which it achieved the highest problem-solving competence score among the top 5 topics according to the GLES results. Instead, the FDP most frequently referred to labor and social issues.

Overall, it can be concluded that in the organic posts, German parties relied heavily on an issue ownership strategy, supporting H1. Especially the Greens and the SPD published more posts on their owned issues than on all other issues combined. For the Greens, the most publicly salient issue fell together with their owned issue of environmental and climate policy. Thus, they could ride the wave and emphasize their owned issue simultaneously. Instead of riding the wave on the most publicly salient issue, the CDU/CSU and the AfD referred to their owned issues. The Left party referred to the issue where it reached its highest competence scores. The FDP most frequently referred to labor and social issues. In doing so, it was the only party that focused on a topic other than the one where it reached its highest competence scores.

The picture is similar for sponsored posts—apart from a few minor deviations (see Figure 2). The Greens, SPD, CDU, and AfD most frequently referred to their owned issues in sponsored posts. The Greens, who sponsored a total of only three posts, exclusively sponsored posts that highlighted environmental and climate policy and could combine the issue ownership and riding-the-wave strategies. Again, the Greens and the SPD published more sponsored posts with their owned issues than on all other issues combined. In the sponsored posts, the FDP highlighted economic policy and not—as was the case in the organic posts—labor and social issues. The AfD kept highlighting immigration and integration policy issues and the Left party focused on labor and social issues. Interestingly, the Christian conservative regional party CSU deviated from their issue ownership strategy in the organic posts and highlighted labor and social issues instead of economic policy in their sponsored posts. Still, overall, parties also used an issue ownership strategy in their sponsored posts.

The SPD, the Greens, the CSU, and the AfD also followed the issue ownership strategy in their paid ads: The SPD addressed labor and social issues most frequently, the Green party dealt with environmental and climate change policy, the conservative CSU spoke of economic policy, and the AfD focused on immigration

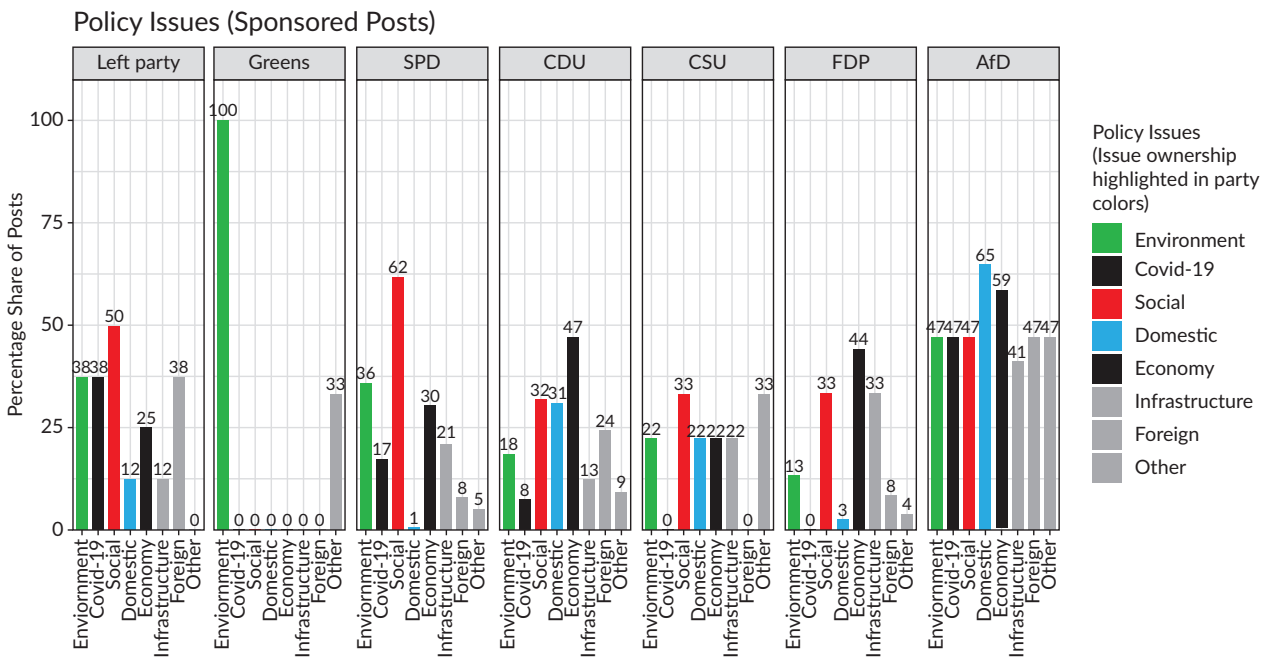


Figure 2. Percentage share of policy issues addressed in sponsored posts. Notes: Investigation period was August 30, 2021–September 26, 2021; $n = 1,197$ posts; gray bars suggest the issue was not among the top 5 most salient issues.

and integration policy (see Figure 3). Yet, there are some interesting specifics. The issue ownership strategies of the Greens and the SPD are not as pronounced in their paid ads as in their organic or sponsored posts. That is, the percentage share of ads referring to their owned issue—and the riding-the-wave issue of environmental and climate change policy in the case of the Greens—is not as high as in the organic or sponsored posts and the second most frequent issue comes close after the issue in first place. Furthermore, the Left party kept highlighting labor and social issues in their paid ads, while the CDU most frequently addressed foreign policy—an issue not owned by the party and not even among the top 5 topics—and the FDP again highlighted labor and social issues.

The analysis of the total advertising spending per policy issue (see Figure 4) shows that almost all parties spent the most money to spread posts featuring labor and social issues. Focusing on this issue translates to an issue ownership strategy only for the SPD. The AfD alone relied on spending the most money on another issue—immigration and integration policy—that was also owned by the party. The CSU spent the most money on posts featuring transport and infrastructure policy.

Thus, five out of the seven parties believed that their money was best spent on spreading posts and ads highlighting labor and social issues, and three parties did so without issue ownership. It can be assumed that the parties believed that this issue would help persuade voters who could be reached with paid posts. Interestingly, the results of the GLES showed that labor and social issues were not the top-ranked issues among the most important topics considered by citizens. Instead, the Green party especially could have amalgamated an issue ownership with a riding-the-wave strategy by paying the most money for posts highlighting environmental and climate policy.

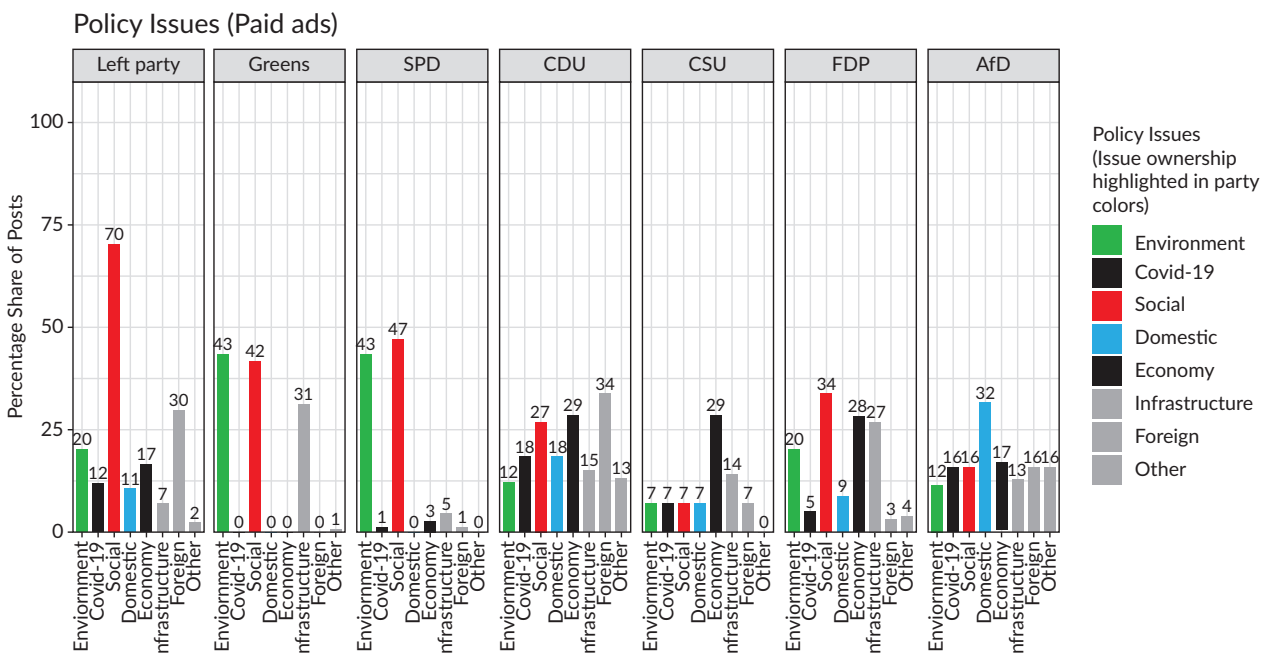


Figure 3. Percentage share of policy issues addressed in paid ads. Notes: Investigation period was August 30, 2021–September 26, 2021; $n = 2,643$ ads; gray bars suggest the issue was not among the top 5 most salient issues.

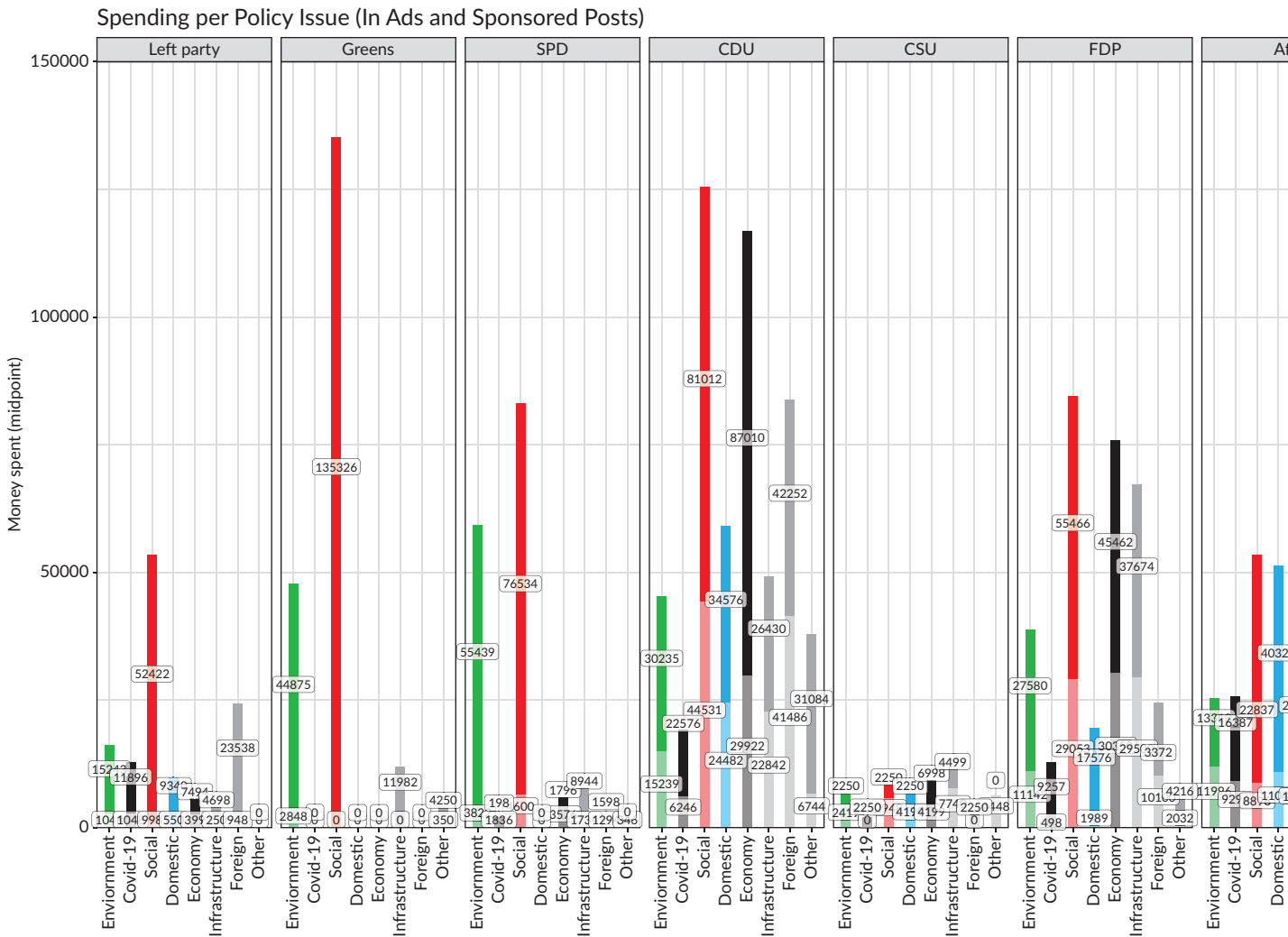


Figure 4. Amount of money spent for sponsored posts and ads containing different policy issues. Notes: Investigation period was August 30, 2021–September 26, 2021; $n = 3,840$ sponsored posts and ads; gray bars suggest the issue was not among the top 5 most salient issues.

5. Conclusion, Limitations, and Outlook

The results of our analysis show that the parties pursued different strategies of issue prioritization with regard to the target groups that follow their Facebook pages as opposed to the target groups that do not follow their page but can be reached with paid advertising. Overall, it can be concluded that German parties broadly relied on issue ownership strategies in their communication during the 2021 federal election campaign. This strategy can be found in the parties' organic posts (H1), sponsored posts, and paid ads when looking at the mere frequency of posts on specific policy issues produced for the campaign (RQ1). In organic posts, the frequency can be interpreted as an indicator of what posts Facebook users see when they visit the party's Facebook page or what the followers of a party's page see on their own timelines when the party publishes a post. For their organic posts, it can therefore be assumed that the parties believe that their followers—who are generally positive about the party anyway (Fisher et al., 2019)—are interested in the party's owned issue (Ennser-Jedenastik et al., 2022) and can best be mobilized with posts about the party's position on this issue.

Since sponsored posts are organic posts that parties pay for to reach audiences beyond their page followers, the fact that parties frequently spread posts containing owned issues shows that they did not assume issue ownership to be generally worthless when targeting audiences that do not follow the party's own Facebook page. The results for the frequencies of paid ads with specific issues suggest a similar interpretation at first glance. Yet, in the case of sponsored posts and paid ads, these frequencies should not be interpreted as a direct result, but should be weighted according to the amount of money spent on the paid content. Paid ads are especially used for targeting (very) specific audiences or for so-called A/B testing (Dommett & Power, 2019). In an A/B test (slightly) different versions of messages are presented to different audiences to test which version, for example, generates more clicks. Thus, there might be sponsored posts and ads in the dataset that were only shown to comparatively small fractions of Facebook users. The number of people who see an ad addressing a specific issue depends on how much a party pays to display this ad to targeted people on their Facebook timeline.

To analyze which issues the parties wanted to make prominent on the social networking platform, we also analyzed how much money the parties spent on sponsored posts and paid ads addressing the issues under investigation. Surprisingly, the results of this analysis indicate that all parties—except the CSU and the AfD—emphasized social issues (RQ2). From a theoretical perspective, highlighting social issues could make sense if one assumes that party positions, especially on social issues together with economic issues, effectively influence voter decisions (Stoetzer & Zittlau, 2020). However, our results only partly reflect this relation, since we find that parties spent money to spread messages on social issues to a much greater extent than economic issues. Furthermore, the GLES data showed that social issues were not the striking “super issue” during the 2021 election campaign overshadowing other issues. On the contrary, social issues ranked in third place concerning the most salient issues.

Overall, various explanations for the pattern of our results are conceivable. First, parties could apply different strategies for different audiences. An issue ownership strategy targeting page followers could be complemented by a strategy explicitly targeting audiences interested in social issues. Second, it could be the case that the pattern only emerged because sponsored posts and paid ads are more expensive for groups that are not generally in the “organic reach” of a party (e.g., as they differ from the group usually following

the party page). Thus, Facebook could demand higher prices for sponsored posts and ads that do not highlight owned issues. Third, the parties may have identified social issues as important during the campaign and responded to this trend by simply investing more money in posts that contained the trending topic and that were already in their inventory of posts and ads, rather than producing additional variations on that topic. Overall, our results provide only a starting point for further analyses of the reasons for the strategic decisions of the campaigners. Further insights can be gained by, for instance, analyzing the impressions paid posts generated per euro or looking at the chosen targeting criteria and audiences to find more explanations for the selection of different issue strategies.

While providing valuable insights, our results have to be interpreted with caution because especially the data availability on money spent for paid posts is not ideal. Meta provides only lower and upper boundaries of the actual amount spent for the paid posts. In addition, more detailed information on targeting criteria and actually reached audiences with organic and paid posts would add much-needed transparency in the field of digital election campaigning. Further, the choice of Germany and Facebook as our study's context may limit the generalizability of findings. Including other countries (e.g., with different party or electoral systems) and social networking platforms would add more information about digital issue campaigning. In addition, analyzing longer or different phases of political communication outside of the last weeks and days before the election could provide important insights into political issue strategies in general.

Nonetheless, our study provides important insights into the strategies that parties implement when prioritizing issues in their election campaigns. By delving into strategic issue management in digital political marketing, this research fills a significant gap in the literature. It offers empirical evidence of how political parties adapt their communication strategies in the digital sphere, particularly in managing issues and allocating advertising resources, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of digital political marketing dynamics. Future research can build upon our results to analyze what effects these strategies have on voters, whether and how different parties use different issue strategies in different post types or different channels, how the strategies fit in the overall campaigns of parties, and whether digital campaigning leads to a fundamental change in how politics is presented to the public.

Our results can have an impact on decisions made by political parties or campaign strategists, for instance, when planning cross-platform campaign strategies or when weighing up the ethical implications of providing different election-relevant information to different target groups. Understanding strategic issue management in digital spaces is crucial for effective and responsible political communication, and policymakers might use these insights to inform the evolving landscape of digital advertising regulations.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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Topic Diversity in Social Media Campaigning: A Study of the 2022 Australian Federal Election

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Abstract

This study explores the diversity of topics in political campaign communication on social media during the 2022 Australian federal election. While political campaigns on social media are often associated with both persuasive and mobilising appeals, this research focuses on understanding the differences in persuasive content by comparing organic (non-targeted) and paid (targeted) political communication. Analysing the Australian context, which follows a Westminster system, with compulsory voting, we utilise data from the federal election 2022 to investigate how political actors employ persuasive communication strategies. Through topic modelling, we examine whether distinct themes vary in content and prevalence between organic and paid social media content disseminated by political parties and candidates. Our analysis revealed that the differences in topic diversity between paid and organic content do not seem to be substantial, despite popular concerns about higher personalisation due to advertising targeting which could lead to information fragmentation of the electorate. Both types of content predominantly focus on core political topics, aligning with party ideologies and include overall campaign information (e.g., on election procedures). However, government critique emerges as a distinct topic in both organic and paid content signalling the usage of negative campaigning to weaken opposing parties. In conclusion, this study suggests that the strategic manipulation of the electorate through social media during the Australian federal election in 2022 was limited. Nonetheless, the prevalence of negative appeals towards the government and opposing parties raises questions about the potential impact on citizens' trust in democracy and institutions.

Keywords

Australian federal election; persuasive communication; political advertising; social media campaigning; topic modelling

1. Introduction

Political social media campaigns are often assumed to influence the electorate's decision-making through somewhat questionable, yet legitimate measures: for instance, emotionalising issues, attacking opponents, or personalisation of messages. Thus, a manipulative appeal of those actors using social media for political campaigning is commonly implied (Lewandowsky et al., 2020). In contrast, empirical findings underline a mobilising appeal, in the sense that the usage of online media and social media is associated with higher political engagement and turnout (Bakker & de Vreese, 2011; Benoit et al., 2007). Hence, democratic societies could profit from social media communication when aiming to activate citizens to participate in politics. Given this ambivalence associated with social media's potential for political campaigns, new technological developments that employ data-based strategies to persuade users need critical examination. Persuasion, the process by which attitudes, beliefs, or behaviours are influenced through communication, is one goal of election campaigns. In most democracies, another one is to mobilise potential voters to get out the vote. Hence, mobilisation is about getting existing supporters to take action while persuasion is about winning over new supporters.

When researching election campaigns, understanding what techniques and strategies political actors implement to persuade citizens remains a pressing question. While research showed that data from social media can potentially be used to predict highly personal information, like political or sexual orientation and even personality traits (Kosinski et al., 2013), the effects of using those predictions to personalise messages on political attitudes or even voting decisions, so far, were only confirmed in addition to existing political preferences (Zarouali et al., 2020). However, knowledge of the potential of social media to hide specific messages from a broader audience to, for instance, spread misinformation (Wischnewski, 2022) or negative campaigning (Auter & Fine, 2016), led to the assumption that social media could polarise and thus fragment democratic societies. Thus, understanding how political actors implement social media in their communication is of relevance within democracies (Esau et al., 2023).

This becomes most prevalent during election campaigns, when parties and candidates aim to mobilise their voters and persuade undecided or opposing voters. Psychological theories on persuasive communication, like for instance advertising, ascribe a crucial role in reasoning processes to existing beliefs or attitudes (e.g., Lodge & Taber, 2013) and personal relevance of topics (e.g., Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Motivated reasoning theory even gives a direction of how existing positions towards certain issues might interfere with an unbiased, rational evaluation of information (Kunda, 1990). The motivation to defend prior beliefs on, for instance, political topics, shapes the following reasoning process. Therefore, using targeting on social media to address potential voters with messages that reflect their views and are of personal relevance might be an effective strategy. When it comes to researching online political microtargeting, a focus lies often on the assumption that personality trait matching could be a persuasion technique swaying voters' opinions or even decisions (Simchon et al., 2024; Tappin et al., 2023; Zarouali et al., 2020). When assuming that political advertising on social media is using personal data to match audience and messages and thus increase persuasion, based on the theoretical relevance of existing attitudes on persuasive outcomes, this matching could also be done by targeting individuals' opinions or topics of personal relevance.

Therefore, this study aims to analyse how diverse topics in social media campaign communication are by addressing differences between organic (non-targeted) and paid (targeted) political content. When assuming

that targeted communication could address individuals' attitudes, the topics of targeted advertising should differ from posts that parties or candidates make for a broader audience. The Australian context offers an environment where mobilisation is largely irrelevant, due to a compulsory voting system; thus, it fits the aim of analysing political persuasive communication. As such, we draw on data surrounding the 2022 Australian federal election campaign to analyse whether distinctive themes vary across the organic and paid social media posts of political parties and candidates.

2. Social Media Campaigning and Persuasion

With the growing popularity and usage of social media for political communication, concerns about how that might affect democratic societies expanded. Rackaway (2023) describes this *new world of campaigning* on social media that, especially since the Obama campaign in 2008 in the US, used vast amounts of data with the aim of increasing persuasiveness. To better differentiate types of communication in political campaigns, a closer look at the goals of political campaigns is needed. Within political campaigns, persuasion, meaning influencing people's attitudes or beliefs about issues or candidates, is one goal political actors can pursue (Brady et al., 2006). Mobilisation, on the other hand, describes the aim of getting people motivated or involved to act in a certain way. Thus, mobilisation strategies try to encourage supporters to act, such as voting in support of a political candidate or cause. Research on the mobilising effects of political social media campaigning showed that targeting information can positively affect citizens' intention and turn-out to vote (Dobber et al., 2022; Haenschen & Jennings, 2019). However, empirical findings regarding persuasive outcomes of targeted political content are still vague. With reports about the marketing firm Cambridge Analytica's alleged use of microtargeting, a highly personalised form of communication, to persuade voters, concerns about the impact of political social media usage grew further (Heawood, 2018). As of now, psychological research on the effectiveness of personalised political messages underlines that higher persuasiveness can be achieved when confirming party preferences (Zarouali et al., 2020), which is more in line with a mobilising effect. However, persuasive effects could be increased by targeting people's existing attitude positions (Decker & Krämer, 2023). Thus, concerns about political targeting focus more on political actors' increased "willingness to press wedge issues that would be highly divisive in a more public forum" (Barocas, 2012, p. 33). Confirmation biases that interfere with the rational evaluation of arguments based on people's existing opinions have been focused on various theories (Kunda, 1990; Nickerson, 1998; Taber et al., 2009). Based on this, within social media campaigns, targeting people with messages reflecting positions they already agree with could lead to them being less sensitive towards potentially false or misleading claims. To come to an overall consistent evaluation and avoid dissonance (Festinger, 1957; Kunda, 1990), the attitude towards the topic could impact the evaluation towards the sender of the message. Hence, issue-based targeting could lead to a fragmentation of issue salience in society and exclude people who disagree with questionable positions, which would potentially counterargue and thus open a more balanced public discourse on polarising issues.

However, especially in multi-party democracies, where issue positions are further spread among different parties, using citizens' individual positions to target messages on political issues would be more complex for political communicators. Also, it is more common that different parties stress different key topics rather than just underlining opposing positions on the same issues, compared to two-party systems. Studies on recent elections showed that social media campaigns seem to be more focused on mobilising communication (Bene et al., 2021). In line with this, Kefford et al. (2023) conclude that, as of now, "many aspects of parties' data

collection and analysis are long-standing and largely mundane” (p. 9), which puts the application of advanced data-based persuasion strategies in question. Nevertheless, there are good reasons why parties might start to adopt more advanced campaigning techniques, like microtargeting. Data-based targeting in political campaigns within multi-party democracies could give smaller parties a chance to effectively communicate with potential voters despite lower financial opportunities (Haller & Kruschinski, 2020).

In summary, the actual application of personalisation through targeting in political campaigns on social media, no matter if based on personal predispositions like personality traits or political issues, remains unclear. Therefore, we propose an analysis of topic diversity by comparing paid and organic political social media content of the Australian federal election campaign 2022. Through this, we aim to better understand similarities or differences in campaign messages depending on (potential) usage of targeting.

3. Topics for Persuasion: Issues, People, or Attacks?

Political actors can draw from a myriad of communication strategies to sway the opinions of potential voters. One notable approach in the realm of political persuasion on social media is microtargeting, which involves tailoring messages to specific, smaller target groups that, for instance, share a particular interest, private traits, or align with a party’s position on an issue (Papakyriakopoulos et al., 2018). This would allow political parties to address critical issues that resonate with specific demographics or other predispositions within their voter base. However, it is essential to acknowledge the potential consequences of such targeting strategies: “Issue-based microtargeting might contribute to a fragmentation of the public sphere” (Dobber et al., 2022, p. 38). Hence, by focusing on narrow subsets of the population, there is a risk of losing common ground and reinforcing existing biases (Witzleb & Paterson, 2021). Research analysing political social media advertising during the general election of 2019 in Spain sheds light on the prevailing trends in political campaigning. Sánchez-Junqueras (2022) found a greater emphasis on candidates than political issues. This observation suggests that, despite the potential to employ more profound strategies that target citizens’ interests and positions on various issues, within political advertising, the promotion of candidates is still the main priority.

While persuasive communication content could, as mentioned above, include specific issues, candidates, or parties, the salience of the message can also be adjusted. Some politicians might try to underline their own abilities or ideas, while others use negative descriptions of competitors. Haselmayer (2019) expects a higher usage of negative campaigning on social media due to their direct and ungated nature. While the effectiveness of negative appeals in campaigns is disputed, a relation to overall decreases in trust in government is a larger concern for democracies (Lau et al., 2007). Research on the effects of political microtargeting found that addressing emotions can impact persuasion (Zarouali et al., 2020). Further research underlines a trend towards more negativity in political campaigns (Klinger et al., 2023). While overall, in the complex arena of election campaigns, the approach to persuasive messaging varies, targeting potentially allows parties to connect with specific groups on pertinent issues that might be emotionally charged. Hence, the usage of targeting carries the risk of further fragmenting the public sphere not only on issues but also on affective arousal. Additionally, the emphasis on candidates over issues, as observed in recent political advertising, raises questions about the depth of engagement with substantive policy matters during election campaigns. Understanding the usage of political issues within election campaigns is thus crucial within the ever-evolving landscape of political communication. The balance between personalised, probably more engaging content, and a healthy public discourse remains a central challenge in modern democracy.

This study contributes to the understanding of political actors' use of issues and other topics on social media during an election campaign by comparing organic and paid content. While organic content is openly addressed to followers who potentially are already in favour of the sending party, and a broader audience, more critical issues might be spread through paid content to smaller target groups that put relevance on these specific issues and agree with the party's position on it. Hence, we seek to answer the following question: Which topics will be raised on social media in the 2022 Australian federal election campaign?

More precisely, we will analyse how the variety of topics differs between (RQ1) type of content (organic vs. paid), (RQ2) type of sender (party pages vs. candidate pages), and (RQ3) different parties (considering organic vs. paid content, party vs. candidate pages). Hence, two distinct topic models are used to analyse whether topic variety is larger in potentially (micro-)targeted campaign communication than non-targeted organic content.

4. Method

The following section describes the methods we applied, which were approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee at Queensland University of Technology.

4.1. Data

We gathered content from Facebook and Instagram that was published between April 10th (election announcement) and May 20th, 2022 (the day before the election). Data collection was based on a comprehensive list of relevant political Facebook and Instagram pages from Australia. The list is informed by the Australian Electoral Commission database of registered political candidates. Using the Australian Electoral Commission data, our team manually located all associated Meta pages and accounts for these candidates and parties, coding pages into two categories describing declared party affiliation (party) and whether the page was for an individual candidate, a party, or another political/lobby/issue organisation (candidate). In addition, we collected all political ad documents from the Meta Ad Transparency Library that were published during the campaign period in Australia and also manually sorted and coded relevant senders of paid content (parties, candidates, and other political organisations or campaign pages).

The final list for data scrapping incorporated 1,392 pages. Paid content ($n_{\text{ads}} = 8,323$) was collected from the Meta Ad Transparency Library. Organic content ($n_{\text{posts}} = 66,973$) was collected using Meta's official data-gathering tool, CrowdTangle. All fields of data containing text were converted into a single field, duplicates were deleted, and the manually coded party and candidate information were matched with the original list. HTML codes, URLs, special characters, numbers, and stopwords were removed and rows with less than three words were excluded. We performed the same process on post data (see Figure 1); the full process of data collection and preparation is described in the Supplemental Material.

4.2. Topic Modelling

We conducted LDA topic modelling using RStudio (version 2023.06.1) for our data analysis. The analysis was done separately for each data set (paid and unpaid) to enlighten the assumed broader topic variety due to potential targeting within the paid data set. Our first aim was to find the optimal number of topics for each data set. Hence, we created a document term matrix (stemming, unigrams), excluding terms that occurred less than

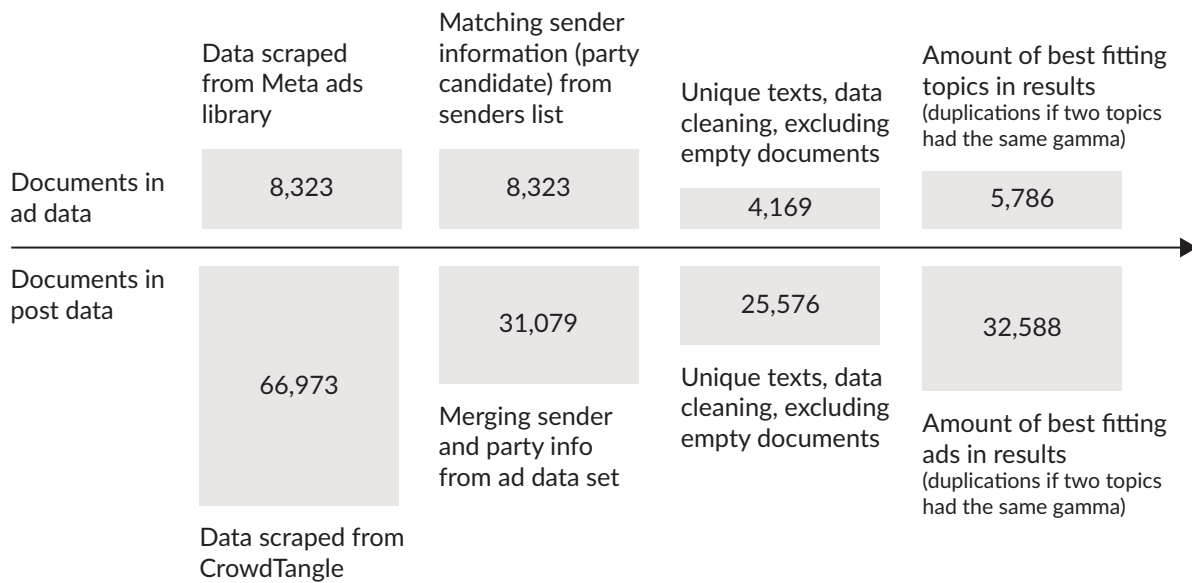


Figure 1. Amount of ad and post documents throughout the data cleaning process.

twice, and plotted metrics indicating the optimal number of topics (k) for up to 50 topics. Through analysing peaks, we found optimal values for the ad data for 16, 20, 24, and 28 topics. We repeated this procedure for the posts data set, indicating possible numbers of topics at 21, 26, 36, 45, or 48 (for further information, see the Supplementary Material). We ran LDA models for the proposed number of topics and used the topic diagnostic metrics (see the Supplementary Material) and the top 20 terms per topic to interpret and name each topic and evaluate the quality of each model. Due to overlaps between topics or semantic irrelevance of top terms, the LDA model with 16 topics matched our ad data best (Table 1). For the post data, the 26-topic model had the best semantic fit (Table 2).

Table 1. Topic, manual description, and top terms for the 16-topic model of campaign ads.

Topic	Description	Top 20 terms
1	Health care	care, health, medicar, access, ag, make, peopl, mental, deserve, system, cheaper, urgent, australian, healthcar, child, time, clinic, easier, hospit, doctor
2	Community work	commun, local, work, im, continu, support, hard, canberra, feder, proud, repres, parliament, ensur, advoc, part, iv, voic, help, strong, run
3	Small businesses and finances	busi, back, year, tax, small, time, put, dont, worker, econom, industri, monei, record, rate, made, budget, pai, polici, low, gener
4	Campaign events	great, todai, campaign, join, volunt, dai, issu, meet, minist, resid, safe, sign, week, event, share, chat, love, talk, serv, morn
5	Government change (anti-government)	morrison, candid, scott, fight, sydney, peopl, north, integr, parramatta, stand, thing, elector, auspol, restor, matter, time, win, deserve, leadership, show
6	Investments and infrastructure	upgrad, million, road, fund, park, project, reelect, commit, facil, govern, club, announc, deliv, sport, includ, centr, reserv, citi, light, safeti
7	Job security and future (renewable energy)	plan, futur, job, strong, economi, stronger, build, secur, local, creat, invest, manufactur, energi, renew, boost, opportun, emiss, part, reduc, bring
8	Small-party issues	peopl, anim, parti, polit, protect, queensland, voic, senat, live, justic, flood, environ, stop, chang, end, brisban, parliament, right, take, bill

Table 1. (Cont.) Topic, manual description, and top terms for the 16-topic model of campaign ads.

Topic	Description	Top 20 terms
9	Family and education	famili, make, work, school, educ, place, ensur, life, women, childcar, rais, live, children, learn, young, kid, student, start, tafe, high
10	(Anti-)corruption	labor, govern, albanes, south, risk, commiss, wa, anthoni, divis, elector, corrupt, establish, invest, northern, mcgowan, bank, thousand, toni, anticorrupt, follow
11	Local issues (crime, infrastructure, veterans)	local, support, region, servic, invest, provid, million, infrastructur, import, fund, coast, area, veteran, central, program, improv, announc, includ, defenc, connect
12	Local infrastructure	deliv, liber, feder, govern, member, mp, support, team, lnp, new, minist, water, macquari, pat, blue, hawkesburi, help, bradfield, releas, wilson
13	Nation, freedom, United Australia Party (UAP)	australia, nation, parti, liber, australian, unit, candid, choic, countri, freedom, good, major, polici, clear, world, face, level, let, democrat, real
14	Election procedure	vote, elect, independ, dai, pm, open, make, visit, find, st, earli, prepol, saturdai, enrol, number, centr, call, poll, cast, chanc
15	Green policies	green, vote, nsw, climat, chang, action, power, real, authoris, free, dental, crisi, give, suit, broadwai, glebe, david, hayden, big, coal
16	Housing and cost of living (health and social services)	home, australian, cost, live, year, hous, afford, save, mean, increas, card, govern, bui, price, cut, pension, medic, benefit, pressur, scheme

Notes: The description of the topics was manually assigned based on the top terms; top terms are shown in the cleaned version, meaning endings were simplified to improve the analysis; the numbers of the topics are the ones originally assigned in the analysis and will be used continuously throughout the article.

Table 2. Topic, manual description, and top terms for the 26-topic model of campaign posts.

Topic	Description	Top 20 terms
1	Climate action and change	green, chang, climat, nsw, action, power, real, make, polici, big, free, futur, authoris, elect, put, vote, ga, let, kick, balanc
2	Equal rights (people/women)	peopl, work, women, nation, support, fight, art, countri, worker, stand, stori, violenc, year, heart, full, equal, parliament, issu, achiev, advoc
3	Government critique (anti-corruption, integrity)	morrison, govern, scott, nation, labor, minist, risk, commiss, prime, year, promis, feder, trust, dont, coalit, integr, anticorrupt, scomo, mackellar, back
4	Campaign events/ meetings	great, morn, local, chat, talk, good, stop, lot, todai, afternoon, meet, catch, team, station, market, love, drop, shop, coffe, beauti
5	Community work	commun, support, local, work, great, member, organis, group, visit, grant, proud, continu, part, import, wonder, melbourn, assist, recent, help, centr
6	Community spaces, sports	club, park, commun, sport, local, facil, upgrad, plai, footbal, commit, beach, game, hill, light, team, activ, includ, room, particip, netbal
7	Energy and emissions	australia, energi, industri, renew, world, fuel, mine, environ, electr, emiss, product, power, coal, creat, develop, job, protect, farmer, reduc, carbon
8	Health care	health, medicar, australian, access, make, mental, care, hospit, medic, cut, urgent, mean, govern, strengthen, doctor, servic, gp, clinic, year, healthcar
9	Education and families	work, support, school, make, young, famili, educ, children, student, kid, train, place, hard, life, learn, univers, opportun, back, import, peopl
10	Jobs and economy	busi, job, futur, economi, plan, strong, local, stronger, small, creat, secur, australia, deliv, build, back, invest, manufactur, support, econom, grow

Table 2. (Cont.) Topic, manual description, and top terms for the 26-topic model of campaign posts.

Topic	Description	Top 20 terms
11	Representation	vote, elect, independ, parti, make, canberra, number, dont, im, repres, major, candid, voter, run, prefer, seat, parliament, voic, put, thing
12	MPs' and politicians' work and meetings	mp, today, senat, join, great, minist, member, david, andrew, yesterdai, fantast, hunter, mark, leader, colleagu, newcastl, peter, state, citi, mayor
13	Pre-poll, election process	vote, pm, prepol, earli, open, centr, st, today, poll, dai, elect, enrol, start, detail, booth, locat, mondai, street, hall, check
14	Regional/local/small parties	liber, parti, feder, senat, australia, candid, democrat, elect, wa, countri, back, john, perth, freedom, unit, northern, stand, choic, territori, ryan
15	Labor campaign issues	labor, care, albanes, ag, plan, futur, anthoni, deserv, fix, nurs, govern, cheaper, child, worker, famili, australiian, resid, secur, crisi, tasmania
16	Holidays	dai, time, love, famili, happi, today, easter, celebr, mum, friend, mother, weekend, hope, wonder, long, beauti, special, year, enjoi, spend
17	Investments and infrastructure	million, govern, fund, invest, announc, region, deliv, commit, provid, project, program, improv, upgrad, infrastructur, build, connect, reelect, addit, feder, support
18	Housing (prices)	home, hous, australiian, peopl, make, afford, year, govern, bui, price, build, scheme, save, market, plan, time, help, super, thousand, increas
19	Campaign team	campaign, volunt, week, team, sign, elect, im, time, hand, messag, big, launch, door, call, readi, offic, amaz, put, dai, weve
20	Protection, law, justice	protect, anim, end, law, justic, media, made, peopl, australia, live, social, australiian, covid, safe, onlin, state, report, stop, human, countri
21	Income and taxes	live, cost, tax, pai, year, australiian, wage, rate, monei, rise, increas, cut, econom, govern, pension, ndi, disabl, interest, real, lower
22	Anzac and veterans	servic, dai, today, anzac, veteran, australiian, honour, rememb, forget, serv, rsl, nation, war, defenc, year, attend, memori, countri, move, forc
23	Floods, roads, weather	road, local, council, region, flood, area, town, bai, river, shire, creek, resid, highwai, citi, weather, water, work, disast, recoveri, drive
24	Australian politics (general, government, election)	auspol, polit, polici, parti, australia, fusion, peopl, govern, public, ausvot, elect, democraci, donat, account, integr, feder, time, inform, page, fair
25	Candidates at events, speaking, discussions	candid, event, night, meet, issu, hear, discuss, question, post, tonight, join, forum, listen, host, ill, forward, speak, link, invit, reshar
26	States, cities	queensland, new, sydney, australia, north, lnp, coast, brisban, south, time, central, west, australiian, fight, qld, authoris, start, im, major, win

Notes: The description of the topics was manually assigned based on the top terms; top terms are shown in the cleaned version, meaning endings were simplified to improve the analysis; the numbers of the topics are the ones originally assigned in the analysis and will be used continuously throughout the article.

5. Topic Diversity: Paid vs. Organic

To evaluate the diversity of topics in comparing ads and posts (RQ1), we first calculated the share of topics per document. Although our data cleaning and possible limitations of Meta (availability of ad data) might have influenced the amount of data we could gather, we still tried to get an idea of the proportion of topics per document (k/n) for paid (0.38%) and organic (0.10%) campaign content. This indicates a wider diversity of topics per document within paid content, which could also benefit from better targeting of audiences

(e.g., through microtargeting) that are more receptive to certain topics. However, since the completeness of the data cannot be ensured in this study, we mainly focus on the semantic content of our topics when evaluating the diversity of the different topics in the organic and paid data. We therefore manually categorised the topics that were automatically analysed using the distinct topic models and sorted those according to similarity and difference (Table 3).

Table 3. Results of semantic topic comparison depicting similar and different topics in ads and post data.

Similarities		Differences	
Topic ads	Topic posts	Topics ads	Topics posts
1. Health care	8. Health care	10. (Anti-)corruption	2. Equal rights
14. Election procedure	13. Pre-poll, election process	13. Nation, freedom, UAP	6. Community spaces, sports
16. Housing and cost of living (medicine)	18. Housing (prices)	3. Small businesses and finances	11. Representation
2. Community work	5. Community work		12. MPs' and politicians' work and meetings
4. Campaign events	4. Campaign events/meetings		15. Labor campaign issues
5. Government change (anti-government)	3. Government critique 24. Australian politics (government)		16. Holidays
6. Investments, infrastructure	17. Investments, infrastructure		19. Campaign team
9. Family and education	9. Education and families		21. Income and taxes
11. Local issues (crime, infrastructure, and veterans)	20. Protection, law, justice 22. Anzac and veterans		23. Floods, roads, weather
12. Local infrastructure	14. Regional/local/small parties		25. Candidates at events, speaking, discussions
7. Job security and future (energy)	7. Energy and emissions 10. Jobs and economy		26. States, cities
8. Small-party issues (animal justice, Queensland)	14. Regional/local/small parties		
15. Green policies	1. Climate action		

Notes: The similarities and differences of the analysed topics were manually derived based on the overall topic descriptions and the keywords of the original topic; topic numbers are the same as presented in Tables 1 and 2.

With 13 ad topics that were either closely ($n = 8$) or at least similarly ($n = 5$) matched across the content of organic and paid posts, differences in content between paid and organic social media communication do not appear to be systematically driven. The three ad topics that were different from the posts' content all reflected political or ideological issues. In contrast, distinct topics in the organic posts ($n = 11$) contained mostly neutral campaign information, meaning a broader variety of overall campaign information in unpaid content. However, four of the 26 post topics that differed from the ad topics focused on political issues (2. Equal rights, 6. Community spaces, sports; 21. Income and taxes; 15. Labor campaign issues). Hence, it seems that overall ad content was more issue-driven than the organic campaign content.

All in all, the topics that were found in our models using both ads and posts reflect the main policy issues voters reported after the election in the Australian Election Study (Cameron et al., 2022). Hence, considering RQ1, we did not find systematic differences in political social media content between paid and unpaid messages. However, a small tendency towards more issue-driven communication in the advertising content compared to unpaid content was found.

5.1. Paid Topics by Party

We then focused on the distribution of topics for each party's campaign advertising communication, to answer RQ2 and RQ3. To better describe the topics, similarities, and differences in comparison, we coded topic clusters that reflect the broader political or ideological content of the topics. Those clusters were: social issues (orange), politics/campaigning in general (grey), green/environmental issues (green), and economic/conservative issues (blue; see Figure 2). The Labor Party had the highest social media campaign budget (Arya, 2022) and thus posted the most ads in our dataset. Second were the Coalition parties, which again reflects the reported ad spending on social media campaigns. Third and fourth were the Greens and Independents, while minor parties posted considerably fewer ads in total. We concentrated on the top four parties based on the number of ads in our dataset for further inspection of the topic distribution (Figure 2).

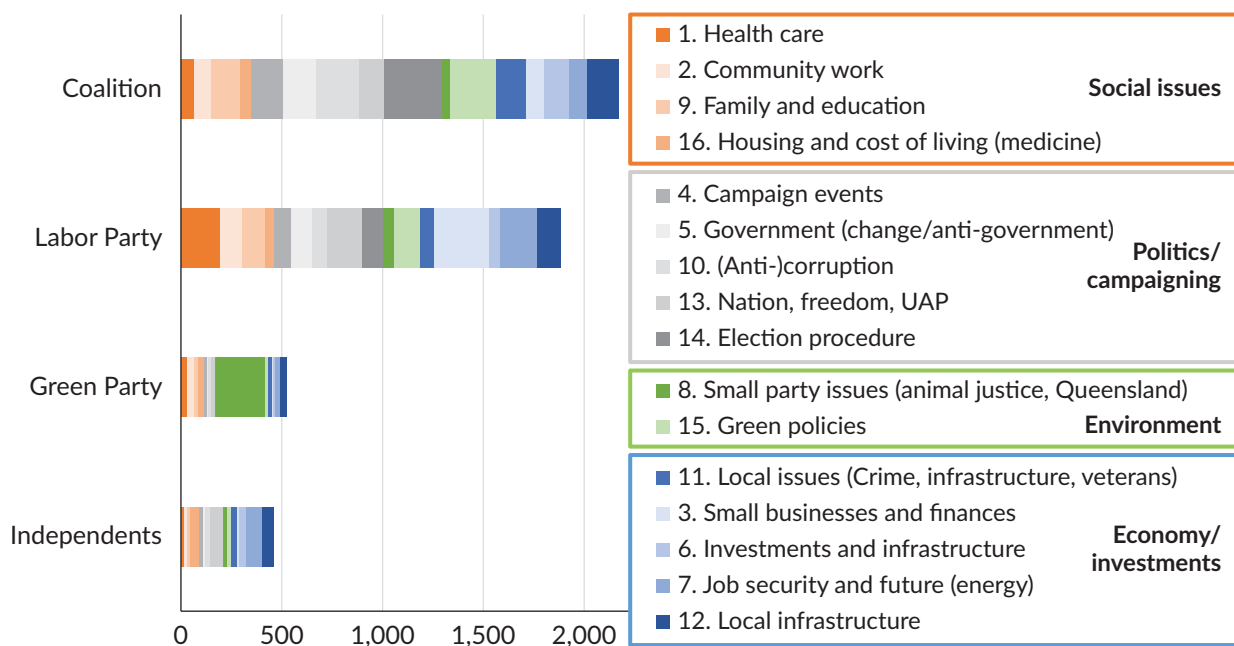


Figure 2. Share of ad topics and topic clusters of the four largest political groups: Coalition, Labor, Greens, and Independents.

A detailed analysis of the use of different topics between the larger parties shows that social media ads by the conservative Coalition parties and Labor are almost equally distributed across topics from social issues to the economy. However, the Coalition seems to advertise more neutral campaign topics in the election procedure. Labor's main social policy topic in advertising is health care, which was also found to be one of the most important issues for voters (see the Australian Election Study; Cameron et al., 2022). On more politically conservative topics, Labor's ads were mainly centred on the topic of small businesses and finances, while the Coalition focused on local issues, including crime prevention and security, or infrastructure

investments. Quite surprising was the amount of green policy ads from the Coalition parties. However, additional manual screening revealed mainly negative campaigning about the Greens. The Greens strongly advertised small-party issues, which were driven by animal and environmental protection issues without using the keyword “green”; in other words, they focused more on core green issues without actually calling them green. Lastly, Independents, who also included teals—“a loosely aligned group stressing action on climate change, gender equity, and improved standards of political integrity,” (McAllister, 2023, p. 4)—used a broader variety of topics for advertising, with a slight tendency towards more economically focused issues, like job security and future energy. With a substantial number of independent teal candidates that supported policies between green and blue (liberal) issues, a focus on new technology to produce energy is not surprising.

Finally, we looked at the differences between candidate and party profiles and examined whether the candidates’ personal pages emphasised different issues than the general party pages (Figure 3).

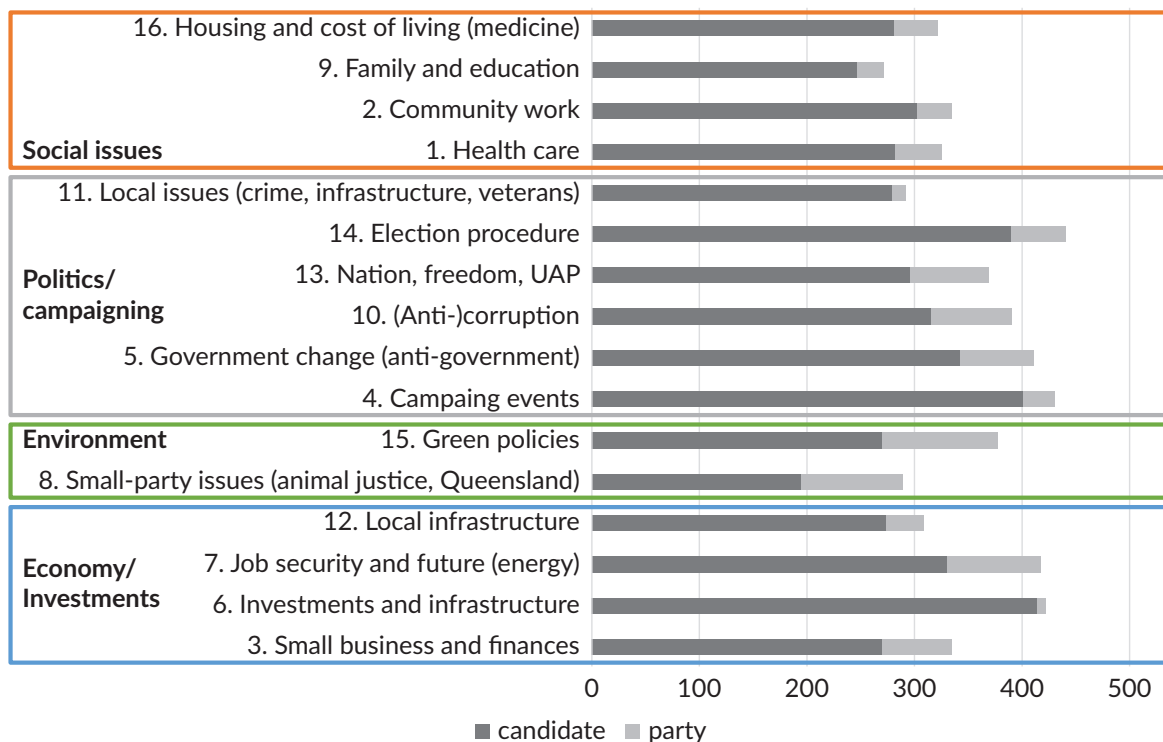


Figure 3. Number of ad documents by topics and sender comparing party or candidates.

In sum, the differentiation of ad topics by sending accounts shows that some topics are used slightly more by party than candidate accounts, even though in general the greater number of ads came from candidate profiles (RQ2). Interestingly, especially green policies and small-party issues are more often advertised by parties (RQ3). One reason could be that smaller parties like the Greens or the Animal Justice Party focused their smaller campaign budget on advertising the party accounts, or that candidate pages of these parties are not operated by campaign headquarters. While this could be seen as contradicting the idea that smaller parties could profit from targeting using more efficient personalised communication strategies (Haller & Kruschinski, 2020), the more limited capacities of smaller parties also result in less advanced advertising strategies (Kefford et al., 2023).

5.2. Organic Topics by Party

We then examined the distribution of topics in organic content. Again, we did this for each party's campaign organic communication first. Regarding the number of documents, again we see that the Labor, Liberal, and Green parties and Independents had the largest share of organic postings. Thus, for further inspection of the topic distribution, we concentrated on these senders (see Figure 4).

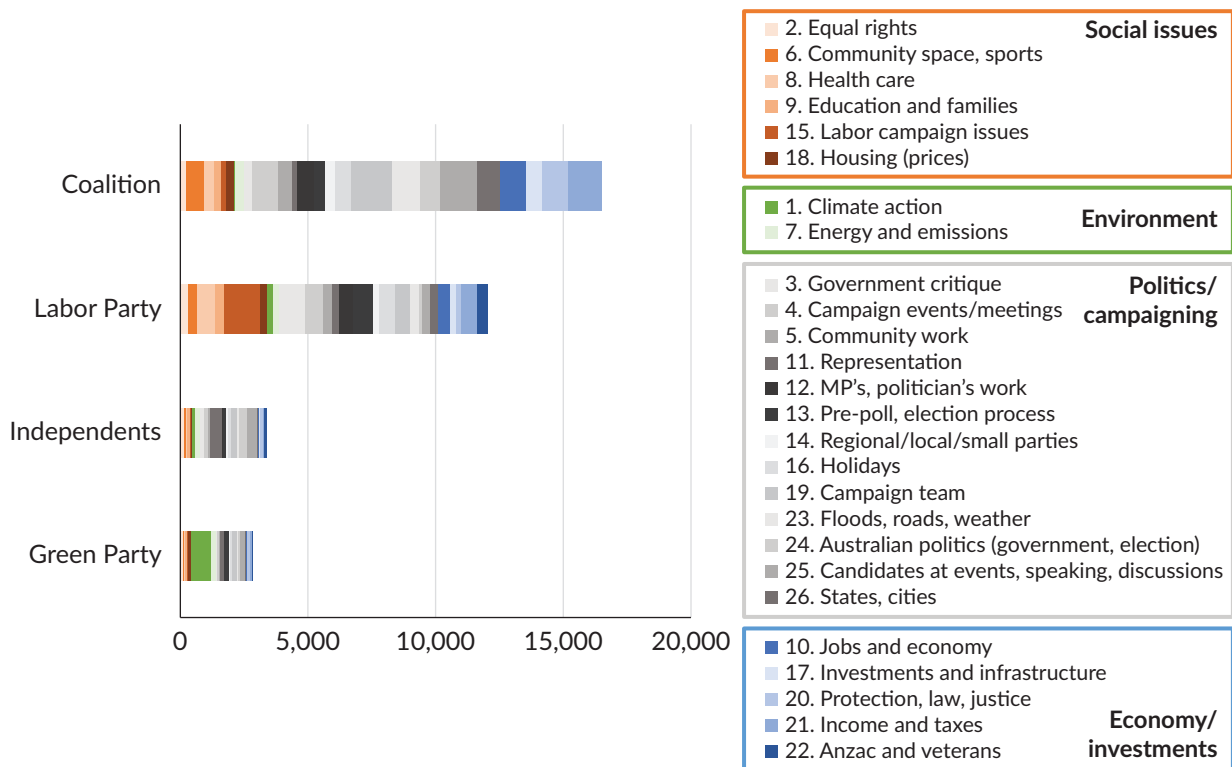


Figure 4. Share of post topics and topic clusters of the four largest political groups: Coalition, Labor, Greens, and Independents.

Overall, the more issue-neutral politics and campaign topics were more frequently used in organic postings of the political actors. The Coalition parties strongly focus on their campaign events and team. Their most mentioned issue-related topic is income and taxes. In comparison to their paid content, however, green politics or issues are not central to their organic campaigning. With generally broad societal support for more climate protection and green policies, this lack of negative mentions of the Greens and their policies in organic, untargeted messages underlines the idea that personalisation through targeting could have led to spreading more niche positions (Barocas, 2012). Hence, within ad content, the political opponent (here, the Green Party) was attacked using more negative messages, while those are not visible in more public posts (organic content). Labor again almost equally shares social and economically focused posts, representing a rather issue-based approach. Their campaign issues even form a distinct topic including, for instance, workers' rights and payment, elderly care, and similar issues, always with a focus on the party itself. Independent candidates also seem generally more focused on spreading campaign information and events. The Greens, however, stick to their main topic, climate action, in organic communication. While their main ad topic, small-party issues, included animal and environmental protection issues, in addition to other smaller party issues, the organic topic of climate action seems even more precisely aimed at behaviour (action).

We then also analysed the distribution of organic topics across party and candidate posts (Figure 5).

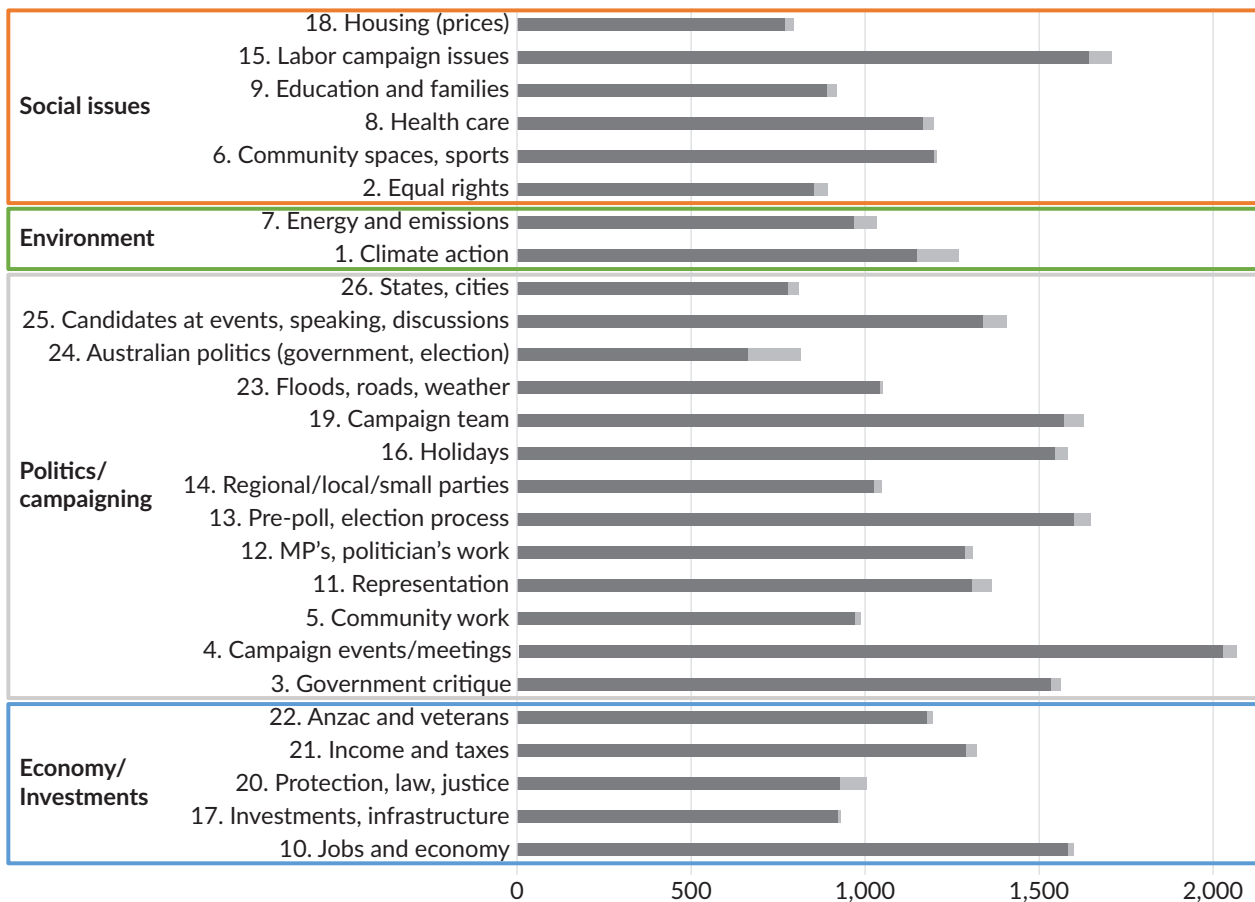


Figure 5. Number of post documents by topics and sender comparing party or candidates.

Regarding RQ2, we found that organic posts during the 2022 election campaign were mainly driven by individual candidate pages. Topics that were used slightly more often by party accounts were climate action ($n_{\text{Greens}} = 94$) and Australian politics ($n_{\text{Fusion}} = 127$). While the key topic of the Greens was also dominated by their candidates ($n_{\text{Greens}} = 714$), the Australian politics topic was mainly used by independent candidates ($n_{\text{Independents}} = 306$). All in all, it becomes clearer that candidate profiles, independent of paid or organic content, are the main campaign outlet. Even if personalisation or targeting based on detailed issue-based communication is almost invisible, this might entail a more citizen-centric form of personalisation. By actively following a candidate's social media account, people customise their social media feeds in favour of this candidate (Dylko, 2016). Larger parties could hence use the different audiences of their candidates for more individualised content distribution. However, based on this study, a strategic implementation as such is currently rather unlikely.

5.3. Exploratory Analysis: Government Critique

As derived above, some scholars argue that social media might drive more negative campaigning (Auter & Fine, 2016; Haselmayer, 2019; Lau et al., 2007). To further evaluate negative appeals in our data set, we manually coded the negativity of the messages in the topic of government critique using the qualitative content analysis

approach of Mayring (2020). Five types of government critique were identified. The results per party are depicted in Figure 6.

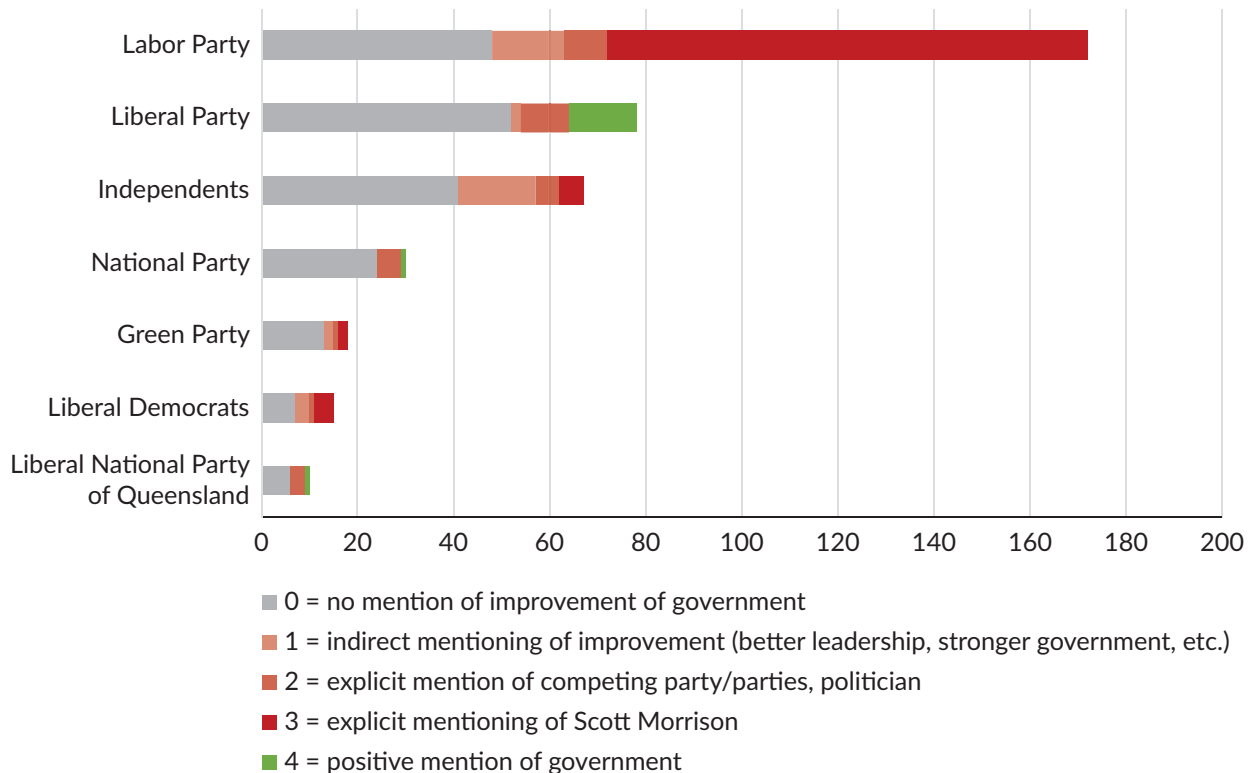


Figure 6. Number of documents per type of negative appeal in the topic of government critique per party.

Labor posts mentioned the prime minister at that time, Scott Morrison, most frequently in their attack ads. As expected, the topic also contained positive mentions of the current government by the Coalition parties. Independents mainly mentioned improvements without naming the opponent or government actors. The Greens, just like the National and Liberal parties (as government parties) have the smallest share of negative campaign content. The fringe Liberal Democrats party, just like Labor, used actual attacks more frequently, also naming Scott Morrison and other parties (mainly Labor and Green). Finally, the Liberal National Party of Queensland (LNP) used negative appeals for the same opposition parties (Labor and Green), stressing the risks their government would bring, often focusing on economic losses. Overall, our manual analysis of the negativity in the government critique topic contrasts assumptions from a meta-analysis of Lau et al. (2007), that negative campaigning is a more right-wing, smaller-party strategy. However, with Labor driving government critiques as the largest opponent, negative appeals (at least in social media) might not be such a niche communication strategy anymore. This is in line with Haselmayer's (2019) more recent review on negative campaigning, stating that negative appeals in social media might underly different principles.

6. Conclusion

Using a systematic, computational analysis of political social media content, this study investigated the question of whether potentially targeted ad content would differ in variety from presumably less

personalised content in organic campaign content. Theoretical assumptions stress confirmation biases, meaning that message persuasiveness increases when issues of relevance for the receivers or positions in line with their views are presented (Kunda, 1990; Nickerson, 1998). Based on that, a higher diversity of topics was expected within potentially targeted ad content than the unpaid postings. Acknowledging the potential consequences of such targeting strategies by directing attention towards specific issues or positions, there exists a looming threat of eroding a shared societal foundation and fragmenting the public sphere (Dobber et al., 2022; Witzleb & Paterson, 2021). Therefore, this study asked how the variety of topics differs between organic and paid content by also addressing the type of sender and different parties to analyse whether topic variety is larger in potentially (micro-)targeted campaign communication than non-targeted organic content.

We compared the content strategies of the different parties contesting the 2022 Australian federal election, with particular attention to the larger parties and manual topic clustering of the more left/social, neutral, environmental, and right/economic topics. This revealed that most parties' social media communication was mainly concentrated on the core topics that aligned with their political agenda. However, we found that no matter if paid or organic, government critique was a distinct topic on social media during the campaign. This clearly reflects the public mood in Australia in May 2022, with a conservative government and prime minister that had overstayed their welcome and were by now widely disliked. Moreover, as people following parties or candidates on social media might already be in favour of their policies, negative appeals towards opposing parties are thus spread to a supportive audience. We also find that such negative campaigning activities (government critique and green policies) were stronger in the dataset of paid content. Thus, it could be possible that parties employ more polarising issues and styles of communication when the potential audience is better known through targeting. Also, these smaller audiences might be chosen because they are likely to agree with the specific positions and unlikely to start critical discussions.

However, as our research was based on a selection of online data and included only an analysis of the text content of organic posts and paid ads in a single Australian federal election, we cannot make broader, normative conclusions. While the large-scale automated analysis of distinct topics helped to evaluate the similarities and differences in paid and organic political content, future studies should extend our findings by adding, for instance, more guided approaches to topic definition, to identify the use of negative campaigning more precisely and perhaps also to describe communication on specific policy issues in more detail. Also, future work should aim to include audiovisual campaign content to develop a more comprehensive picture of campaign strategies.

All in all, then, this study supports the assumption that the strategic manipulation of the electorate by parties and political candidates, based on personalised targeting, was hardly an issue in the 2022 Australian federal election. However, it does find substantial evidence of political communicators emphasising negative messaging towards the government and other parties or candidates. Using social media communication to persuade voters by focusing less on their own contributions, ideas, and policy issues than on the failures of others could have the side effect of decreasing citizens' trust in democracy and its institutions overall.

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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 authors (unedited).

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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).

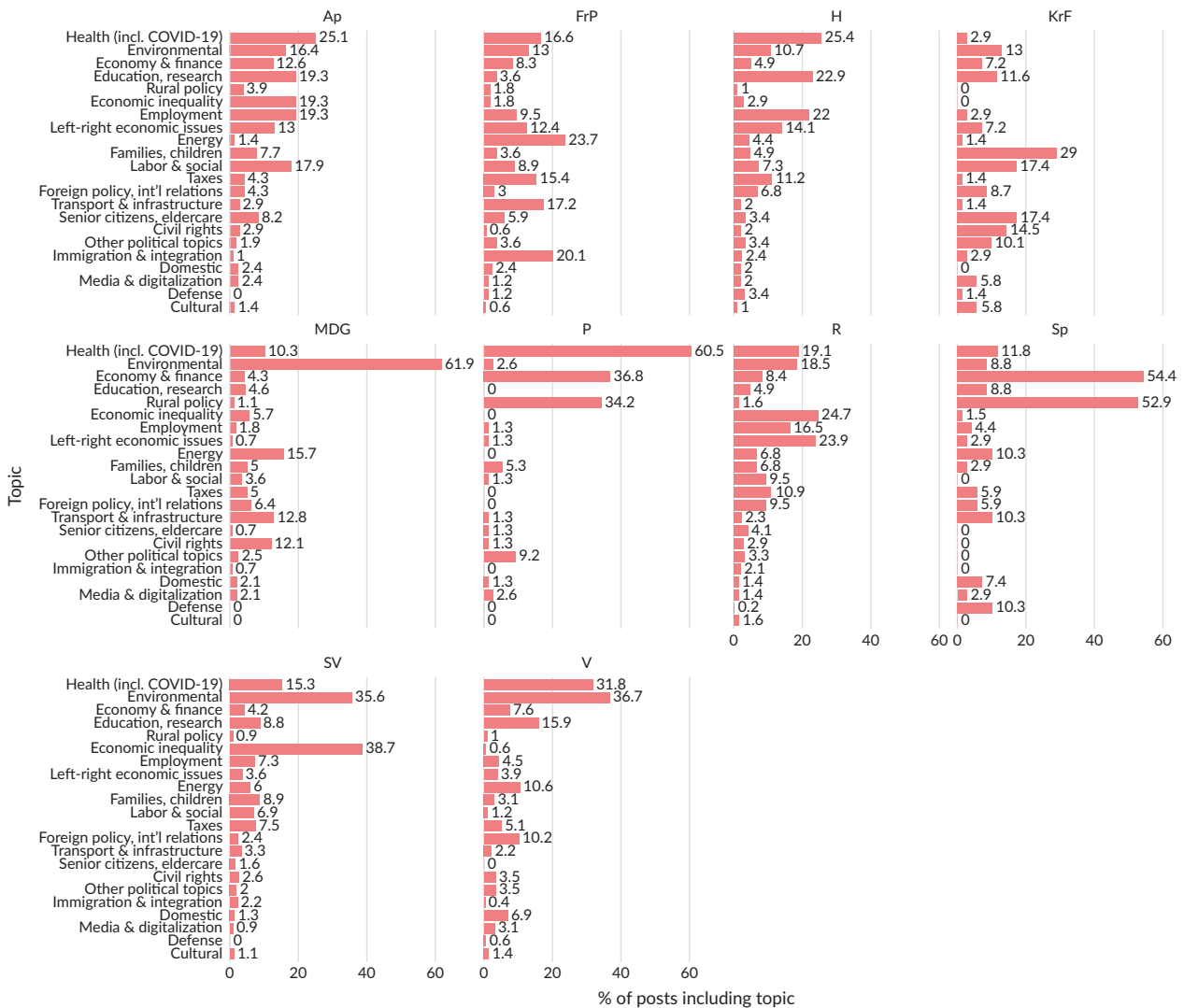


Figure 1. Percentages of posts, including issues per party, regardless of platform ($n = 2,594$).

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.

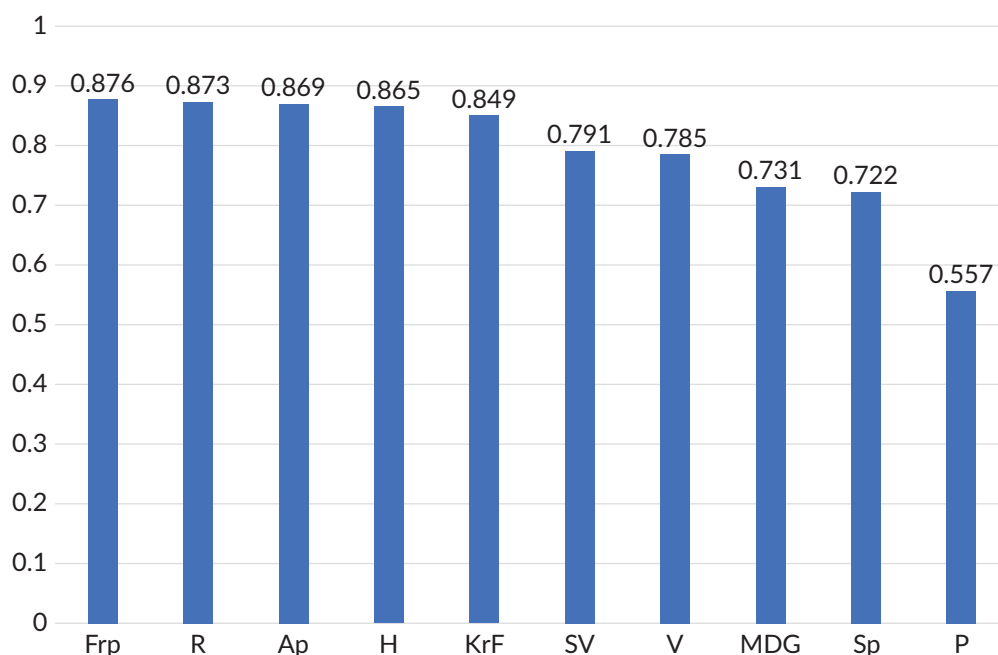


Figure 2. Parties' issue diversity regardless of social media platform (Shannon's H; $n = 2,594$).

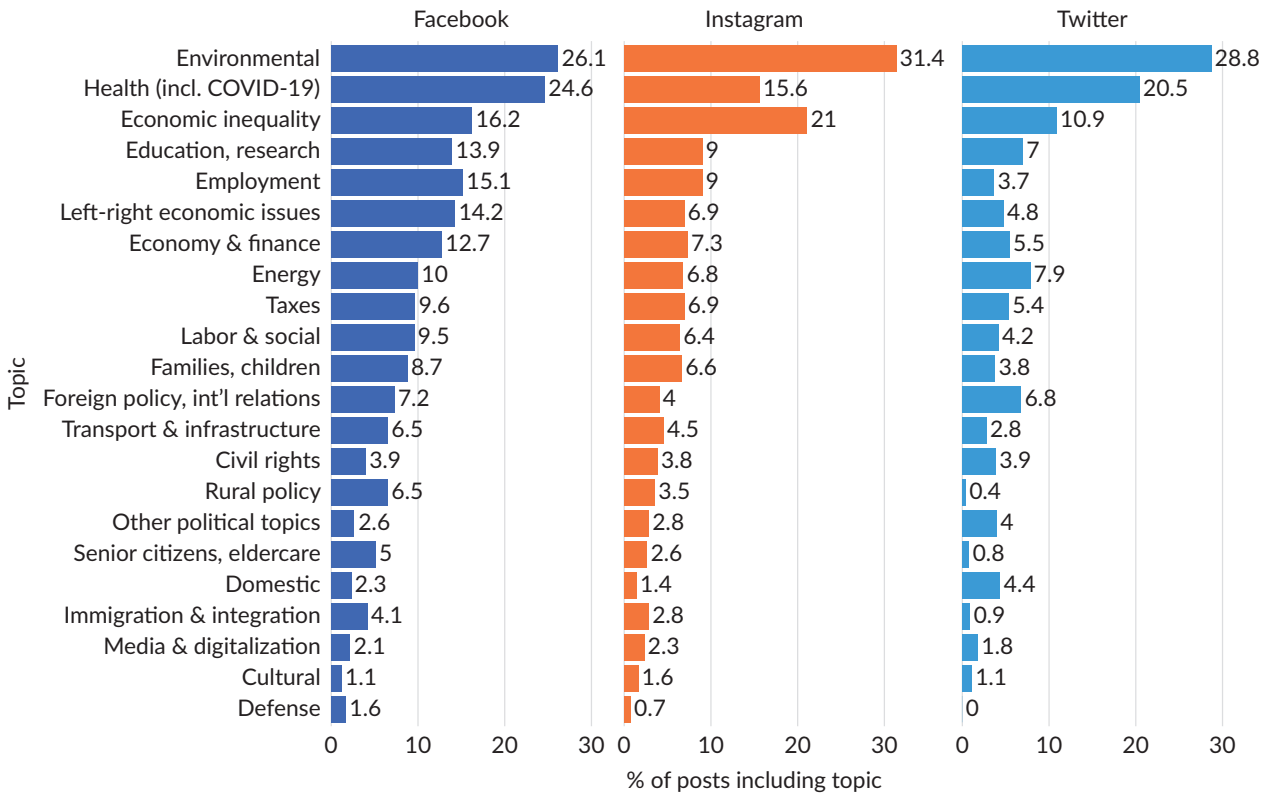


Figure 3. Percentage of posts including topics per social media platform (n = 2,594).

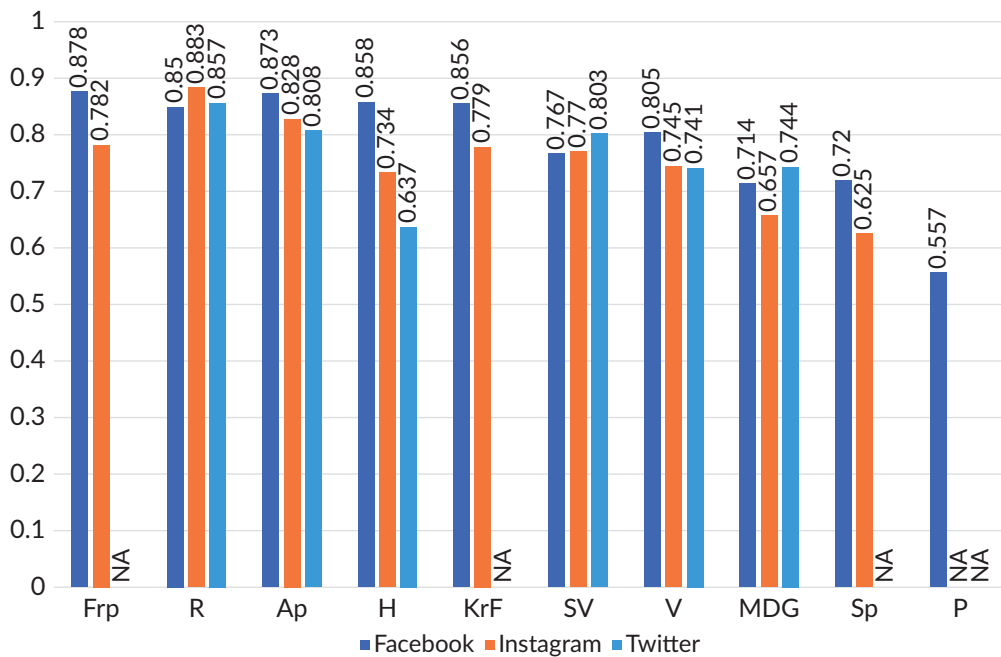


Figure 4. Parties' issue diversity across social media platforms (Shannon's H; n = 2,594).

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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What Are Crises for? The Effects on Users' Engagement in the 2022 Italian Election

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Abstract

Crises were highly relevant in the 2022 Italian general election. The label of “crisis” was associated with multiple policy issues, ranging from the environment and health to foreign policy. Previous studies have extensively discussed the impact of crises on voter behavior, demonstrating that voters are particularly concerned with parties' valence attributes, such as the effectiveness of policies and leaders' ability to resolve emergencies. However, limited attention has been paid to assessing how parties mobilize the crisis paradigm on social media. This study seeks to bridge this gap by analyzing the impact of crisis-related content on Facebook user engagement, with a special focus on distinguishing the relative effectiveness of populist versus mainstream parties in deploying such narratives. Moreover, this research explores how the intertwining of crisis narratives with portrayals of party responsibility or irresponsibility influences the virality of social media posts. To answer these questions, we manually coded 4,827 election campaign posts to create an original dataset. The evidence shows that crises have an impact on boosting user engagement, although this effect seems to be limited to populist parties. The results also suggest that irresponsible claims cease to be rewarding during a crisis. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of the strategic use of crisis narratives by political parties on digital platforms and underscores the complex interplay between crisis communication and public engagement in the contemporary political landscape.

Keywords

crisis; populism; responsibility; social media; valence issue

1. Introduction

Crises occupied a prominent place in the 2022 Italian election campaign. Throughout the electoral campaign, the crisis narrative was associated with multiple policy issues. For example, concerns about military escalations related to the Russo-Ukrainian war (Lami & Sahota, 2022) as well as the consequent increase in electricity and gas prices known as the energy shortage (Improta et al., 2022). The heritage of the Covid-19 pandemic also played a role (Rullo & Nunziata, 2021), as well as the environmental challenge of climate change (Biancalana & Ladini, 2022) and the immigration crisis (Conti et al., 2018; Giuliani, 2022).

A novelty, thus, seems to be represented precisely by the concomitant presence and interplay of different crises—a phenomenon renamed by some scholars as polycrisis (Lawrence et al., 2022)—that together contribute to feeding voters' perception that the ruling coalition will necessarily navigate turbulent domestic and international scenarios when taking office.

Obviously, parties did not assign equal weight to different crises: While we can expect that the Ukraine war, the energy shortage, and the Covid-19 crises were mobilized more homogeneously by different parties, others, such as fighting climate change, have been more vigorously mobilized by some, like the Greens and Left Alliance, and not by others, e.g., the League (Biancalana & Ladini, 2022).

Previous studies have already extensively discussed the impact of crises on voters' behavior (Braun & Tausendpfund, 2014; Serani, 2023). As a matter of fact, during elections in times of crisis, voters might care about parties' valence attributes as they are more concerned with the effectiveness of policies (Krebs, 2009) as well as leaders' competence in promptly solving the emergency (Lipsy, 2020). Accordingly, voters may be more attracted by a clear course of action proposed by one party or coalition, while they will negatively judge contradictory voices (Talving, 2018).

Shortly after the 2008 economic crisis, scholars analyzed its impact on party competition and political representation (Conti et al., 2018). More recently, researchers have explored how parties and leaders mobilized the crisis paradigm following the Covid-19 outbreak (Legnante & Splendore, 2021; Rullo & Nunziata, 2021). Many of these studies highlight the populist use of crisis rhetoric to exploit public discontent (Martella & Bracciale, 2022), with a particular focus on the prominence of populist leaders in their communication strategies (Watkins & Clevenger, 2021).

With these premises in mind, we contribute to the literature by investigating whether and to what extent the use of crises pays off also in online digital campaigns generating more user engagement on social media. Based on previous studies related to user engagement on Facebook (Bene et al., 2022), we hypothesize that the higher the emphasis on crisis, the higher the level of users' engagement. We analyzed the Italian 2022 election campaign manually coding 4,827 Facebook posts to create an original dataset. Our aim is to investigate whether significant differences exist between non-crisis and crisis issues, in terms of user engagement, and to what extent the impact of crises interacts with other strategies such as references to a responsible or irresponsible behavior in handling them. We further distinguish between populist and non-populist parties.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Crises and Their Electoral Impact

How to define a crisis? Among the various definitions provided, this article acknowledges that crises are not only related to objective exogenous conditions but can also be the outcome of a narrative frame (Hay, 1999). Political actors may refer to crises in relation to existing issues such as inflation, while in other cases they may apply the crisis framework to self-identified issues and alleged emergencies, such as immigration (Moffitt, 2015). Regarding this dual nature, several authors have recently highlighted that among the stylistic elements of populist communication (emotional tone, patriotism), one is precisely the *crisis rhetoric*, i.e., portraying a situation of crisis through the use of exaggeration, emergency rhetoric, or the declaration of a scandal (Ernst et al., 2019).

Scholars have also scrutinized the role played by crises during elections from different perspectives. A body of literature has examined the impact of a single crisis or the simultaneous occurrence of multiple crises on voting behavior (Braun & Tausendpfund, 2014; Serani, 2023; Talving, 2017). The evidence suggests that, in such contexts, voters tend to place greater importance on certain distinct factors, such as the valence attributes of political parties, as constituents are more concerned with policy effectiveness (Krebs, 2009), or the competence of leaders in formulating prompt and clear strategies to address the crisis (Esaiasson et al., 2021; Lipsy, 2020). During the decade, from 2010 to 2020, two crises played a major role: the economic crisis and the migration crisis (Mader & Schoen, 2015; Talving, 2018). Longitudinal analyses of electoral outcomes across European countries demonstrate that incumbent parties were penalized by voters when the economy performed poorly, and sometimes the same occurred when immigration levels increased (Giuliani, 2022).

However, as the presence of these (multi-faceted) crises intensified and persisted, researchers shifted their focus toward other consequences, such as the changes in the structure of the party system. Consequently, there has been a proliferation of studies examining the effects of crises on party competition (Charalambous et al., 2021) and political representation (Conti et al., 2018). For instance, Mader and Schoen (2019) analyzed the impact of Chancellor Merkel's shift in the CDU's traditional stance on immigration during the 2015–2016 refugee crisis (which moved from a hostile position to a more pro-immigration one). Studies on the impacts of the economic crises on political representation and party competition have primarily focused on Southern European countries, such as Greece, Italy, Portugal, and Spain. These studies have examined specific aspects, such as the influence of the economic crisis on the emergence of new political parties or on the policy agendas of existing parties, including anti-elite sentiments and Euroscepticism (Muro & Vidal, 2017), as well as changes in the relationship between government and opposition parties, leading to increased polarization (Giuliani & Massari, 2017; Hutter et al., 2018).

More recently, with the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, much of the crisis discourse has shifted in this direction. Given the intensity and the global impact of this event, scholars have considered it as a critical juncture that generated consequences on the political landscape, especially on political participation and electoral turnout (e.g., for France see Haute et al., 2021). In Italy, Covid-19 dominated the agenda, at least between 2020 and 2022, and studies have shown its effects on party and coalition dynamics (e.g., the advent of the Draghi government) as well as on electoral competition and on the whole party system (Russo & Valbruzzi, 2022, p. 186).

2.2. The Relation Between Crises and the Responsibility–Responsiveness Paradigm

Two aspects are strongly associated with the notion of crisis: responsibility and responsiveness (Mair, 2009). In times of crisis, indeed, the expectation that political entities demonstrate responsibility is heightened. This concept of responsibility extends beyond mere responsiveness, which refers to complying with popular, short-term demands. It indicates a principled dedication to the long-term welfare of society (Bardi et al., 2014). Responsibility involves actions such as respecting international agreements and fulfilling governmental obligations, even when these actions may not align with the short-term voters' wills (Karremans & Lefkofridi, 2020; Linde & Peters, 2020). We interpret irresponsibility as a political behavior that neglects this forward-looking principled stance in favor of responsiveness—a focus on meeting current and popular demands, in spite of their long-term consequences.

In our analysis, responsibility and irresponsibility are not mere policy views; instead, they emerge as valence characteristics of political parties and can be particularly relevant in times of crises. Following Green (2007) and Adams et al. (2011), we distinguish between different types of valences. Differently from positional issues, which define peculiar policy preferences of parties and voters, valence issues are defined by their lack of ideological contention, so that almost all parties (and almost all voters) tend to agree on a common standpoint (for instance, fighting corruption or promoting economic growth). Another type of valence is character valences, which concern the overall competence, integrity, and qualities of political entities.

Within this analytical framework, responsibility is identified as a character valence issue, particularly relevant in times of crisis (Karremans, 2021). It represents the expectation that responsible parties will take actions designed to yield benefits in the future and do their best to fulfill past commitments and agreements. When they erupt, crises tend to heighten the focus on responsibility, leading public opinion (at least in the short run) to prefer parties that exhibit such responsibility, thus promoting the country's long-term welfare and stability by making difficult choices to deal with the emergency.

2.3. User Engagement: Relevance and Connection With Crisis and Responsibility

Crises are frequently portrayed in the media (Legnante & Splendore, 2021). Studies have revealed that media exposure had a significant influence on citizens' expectations regarding the development of the crisis (Boomgaarden et al., 2011). Therefore, in various European countries, the media plays a crucial role in shaping public discourse and narratives surrounding a specific crisis (Georgiou & Zaborowski, 2017).

Recently, there has been an increasing trend among political parties and citizens to engage with each other through various social media platforms (Kalsnes, 2016). Until now, Facebook has been the most widely used platform for electoral campaigns in Italy. All major political parties and their leaders have a large number of followers on this platform (Rullo & Nunziata, 2023) and they exploit Facebook to mobilize their supporters and reach voters. While most parties' followers agree with the party's line, the virality-based dissemination logic of social media (Klinger & Svensson, 2015) allows parties to indirectly spread their messages beyond such users, reaching a broader audience (Bene, 2017). Consequently, parties' communication on Facebook can be specifically designed to stimulate user engagement (Bene et al., 2022). In turn, political parties are more likely to discuss an issue on Facebook if this generates a higher level of user engagement (Ennsner-Jedenastik et al., 2022).

The increasing variety of tools available for Facebook interactions (Eberl et al., 2020) has made user engagement, measured through the number of likes, comments, and shares, a crucial factor. In this regard, studies have shown, for instance, that users are more inclined to engage with posts that address certain topics (Bene et al., 2022), such as immigration and domestic politics, rather than others (the environment and economic issues). Furthermore, the virality of posts on Facebook is influenced by the presence of an emotional communication style (Bobba, 2017). By incorporating an emotional tone and associating it with a real or perceived crisis, parties can try to increase the visibility of their posts. Therefore, during the 2022 election campaign, characterized by various real or alleged crises, parties—especially populist ones—could strategically emphasize crises in their Facebook posts.

3. Hypotheses

Political parties frequently leverage crisis narratives in their communication strategies to influence public opinion. This approach has been particularly evident during the eurozone crisis, when populist parties adopted emotionally charged language to engage with citizens (Redlawsk, 2006). Research indicates that on platforms like Facebook, negative or highly emotional contents, especially when coupled with calls to action, memes, or videos, tend to achieve greater virality in terms of likes, comments, and shares (Bene et al., 2022; Eberl et al., 2020).

This pattern was clearly observed within European right-wing populist parties during the 2015 migration crisis, which focused public attention on security and immigration issues (Hutter & Kriesi, 2021). The League, for example, persistently framed this topic as a crisis (Colombo, 2018; Richardson & Colombo, 2013), even in the context of other significant global events, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, thereby sustaining public interest and engagement (Pirro, 2022).

The Covid-19 pandemic itself had a profound impact on Italy, affecting its economy and healthcare system and prompting then-Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte to use Facebook as a direct channel of communication with the public, blending political campaigning with governance (Rullo & Nunziata, 2021). Mario Draghi, who succeeded Conte in early 2021, initially adopted a more informative and less emotionally charged communication style (Amoretti et al., 2021). However, the subsequent Russo-Ukrainian war, and internal disagreements over Italy's response to it, underscored the complexity of crisis management and its implications for public communication and political discourse. These events culminated in Draghi's resignation and a call for early elections in September 2022 (Chiaromonte et al., 2023). This situation highlighted how crisis narratives could dominate political communication, especially when compounded by the socio-economic effects of simultaneous crises, such as the Russo-Ukrainian war and its associated impacts like rising energy costs and inflation.

Given the significant overlap and the deep socio-economic impacts of all these recent or ongoing crises, it is reasonable to anticipate that public sensitivity to how these issues are discussed and proposed to be managed by political entities would be heightened. Indeed, crises are typically defined as events that threaten significant harm to a country's population or to its values and structures, forcing it to make high-stakes political decisions under uncertainty and time pressure (Lipsky, 2020). These elements can perfectly apply to exogenous events as well as to contexts framed as such by politicians using crisis rhetoric. All these three elements, the threat, the uncertainty, and the time pressure (urgency), lead us to understand that citizens should pay stronger attention

to posts framed in terms of crisis. Consequently, on platforms like Facebook, where direct engagement with content is measurable, posts addressing these crises are likely to elicit stronger reactions from users. Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

H1: Posts referring to crisis are likely to receive higher engagement on Facebook.

Additionally, research has highlighted the tendency of populist parties and their leaders to resort to crisis rhetoric (Ernst et al., 2019) by depicting the country as affected by major troubles and emergencies, emotionalizing and dramatizing their arguments (Wirz et al., 2019). As pointed out by Martella and Bracciale (2022), populism tends to flourish within the communicative openings presented during political and economic crises, especially within the hybrid media system. These elements are particularly accentuated during election campaigns, and often establish a link between crises and populism. Hence, we hypothesize that:

H2: Posts on crisis-related issues are more effective at boosting user engagement when published by populist parties.

In a complex political landscape intertwined with multiple crises during an electoral campaign, the interplay between responsiveness and responsibility holds significant importance. Responsiveness often refers to electoral promises, leading parties to make more irresponsible claims that mirror voters' viewpoints (Karremans & Lefkofridi, 2020). However, crises can temporarily promote responsibility, compelling governments and ruling parties to abide by rules and international agreements (Karremans, 2021).

As previously mentioned, during crises, voters pay stronger attention to parties' valence attributes, prioritizing policy effectiveness and leaders' competence in handling the crisis (Krebs, 2009; Lipsky, 2020). Given this, it is reasonable to anticipate that citizens would value responsible proposals, suggesting that the party is committed to following the right course of action and doing whatever it takes to overcome the crisis, generating future benefits (even at the expense of present sacrifices) as well as respecting and fulfilling past commitments and agreements. Therefore, a party presenting itself as responsible is expected to gain a more favorable valence (at least in the short run, when the crisis and its rhetoric are putting pressure on political actors), being seen as capable of effectively addressing the crisis by offering long-lasting solutions. Thus, our third hypothesis is:

H3: Crises-related posts conveying messages of responsibility tend to increase user engagement.

4. Data and Variables

We collected and analyzed 4,827 Facebook posts published by the official accounts of 15 Italian parties over the four-week election campaign period, spanning from August 29th to September 25th, 2022. Following a coding scheme developed within the DIGIWorld project, each post was manually analyzed by the authors. We coded the textual content, the first minute of any video, and the linguistic and visual elements of images.

The dependent variable measures *user engagement*, which is the sum of post shares and reactions, excluding comments. Most cases tend to cluster on the lower end of the variable, resulting in a highly skewed distribution.

Given the over-dispersion of this count data, our approach involved employing a longitudinal negative binomial regression with fixed effects by party accounts. This decision was also made because the alternative Poisson model, which limits the conditional variance to match the dependent variable's conditional mean, was excluded due to the variance's greater value than the mean.

Our primary explanatory variable is a dummy variable equal to 1 when a post directly mentions crises or contexts related to crises and equal to 0 otherwise. This includes instances where the term "crisis" is explicitly used, as well as references made to specific and objective ongoing crises (even without mentioning the word "crisis," e.g., the Russo-Ukrainian war) and posts in which parties adopt a crisis rhetoric communication strategy (even in absence of a real exogenous crisis: for instance, if they frame migration flows as an emergency whereas the actual number of immigrants inflow is objectively low). Analogously, this variable also accounts for statements that highlight a crisis claiming that "the incoming Parliament will face multiple emergencies."

The list of independent variables also includes several dummies relating to a series of political topics. These encompass *polity*, addressing institutional and normative facets of politics like laws, structures, and institutions, and *politics*, encompassing procedural aspects such as election forecasts, public opinion, polls, and party campaigning. Furthermore, we included additional dummies representing substantive policy domains linked to recent and current crises: (a) *labor and social policy*, (b) *economy and finance*, (c) *health*, (d) *environment and energy policy*, (e) *domestic and immigration policy*, and (f) *international relations*.

In our dataset, 8.74% of the posts specifically discussed various forms of objective or alleged crises. Overall, several types of crises were mentioned with respect to specific policy issues. Crisis-related posts concerning environmental and energy issues constituted the largest portion, accounting for 5.26% of the total, followed by economic and financial matters (1.86%) and international relations topics (1.47%). Labor and social issues were also represented, making up 1.22% of the total, whereas health-related matters were addressed in 0.80% of the posts, and domestic policy was discussed in 0.68%. Finally, a few posts addressed polity (0.31%) or politics-related aspects (1.02%) rather than specific policy issues.

Four dummies, derived from concepts of "responsibility" and "irresponsibility," are used to test interaction effects with the crisis variable. The first pair of dummies pertains to the fulfillment of government duties (*responsibility-pact*) versus disregarding external constraints and pre-existing commitments (*irresponsibility-pact*). The second pair focuses on the perceived costs associated with the proposed policy reform. A post is coded as responsible when it prioritizes the long-term benefit of the country, even if it necessitates a sacrifice from citizens in the short term (*responsibility-cost*). Conversely, it is coded as irresponsible if it pursues immediate benefits despite the potential for future harm (*irresponsibility-cost*).

Figures 1 and 2 present social media posts identified as explicitly referencing crises, which diverge in their approach to fiscal responsibility and adherence to agreements. Figure 1, from the League party, advocates for immediate fiscal policy relaxation to lift economic pressures on businesses, challenging the balanced budget requirements and suggesting short-term financial flexibility could reduce future unemployment costs. This is marked as *irresponsibility-cost* due to its potential risk to long-term financial stability. In contrast, Figure 2 from MoreEurope criticizes this approach, calling for responsible governance and adherence to fiscal and regulatory commitments during the crisis, highlighting the importance of sustainable policy measures.



++ ENERGIA, LEGA: 30 MILIARDI OGGI PER NON METTERNE 100 DOMANI ++

"Migliaia di aziende rischiano di chiudere, milioni di italiani di rimanere senza lavoro, ma il Pd preferisce tacere o parlare d'altro. Occorre immediatamente uno scostamento da 30 miliardi per evitare di doverne mettere 100 tra qualche mese per pagare cassa integrazione e disoccupazione. Il punto non è se serva fare extra deficit oppure no, ma farne meno oggi per salvare imprese, lavoro e il bilancio stesso de... See more

Figure 1. Example of a post conveying messages of irresponsibility while explicitly referencing a crisis. Source: Lega – Salvini Premier (2022).

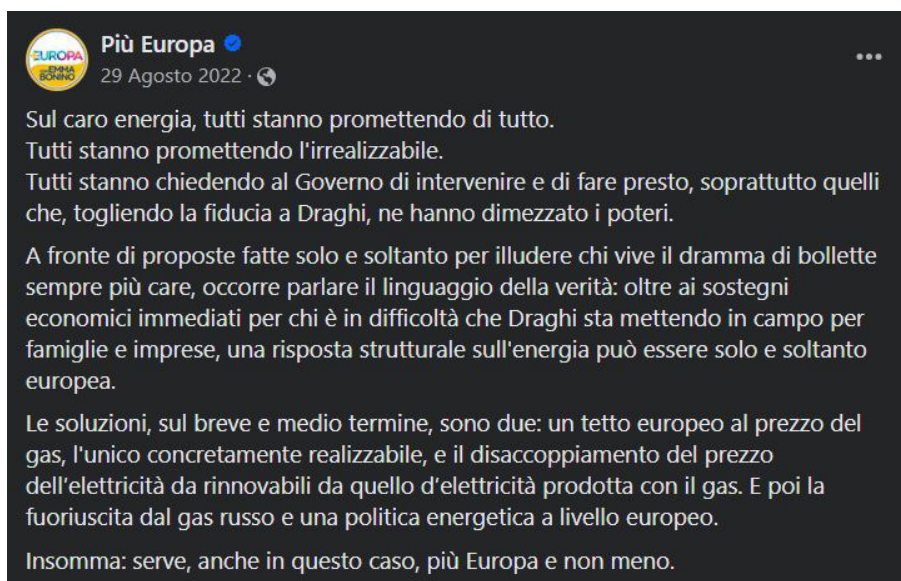


Figure 2. Example of a post criticizing rivals' messages of irresponsibility while explicitly referencing a crisis. Source: Più Europa (2022).

In all models, we control for the negative tone of a post, which is deemed highly relevant by existing studies (for a review see Bene et al., 2022). This approach is driven by the discernible impact of negative versus positive contents, due to the pronounced virality of negative messages (Eberl et al., 2020; Heiss et al., 2019), since negativity is one of the main elements driving engagement. Defined at the individual post level, our *negativity* variable assigns one of three possible values: -1 for exclusively positive posts that praise the party or its candidates (acclaim), $+1$ for purely negative posts that critique opponents (attack), and 0 for those with a neutral tone, which includes content either lacking any criticism or praise or containing both. Even when differentiating posts that feature a combination of both attack and acclaim from those devoid of either element, the main findings of our analysis remain unchanged. In particular, we notice that the effect of crises holds only for populist parties (as in H2) and the relative benefit of irresponsibility (versus responsibility) vanishes in times of crisis (sending back to H3). Both attack and acclaim include any mention of a candidate's appearance, rhetorical skills, and professional and personal competency, or a party's reputation and integrity, past issue stance, and projected performance. Note that by adding this control, we assess the impact of the crisis, independent of the post's tone.

In addition, we control for the populist style of communication (Martella & Bracciale, 2022). Following Mudde's (2004) definition, we considered three different elements of populist communication, related to the following concepts:

1. **Anti-elitism:** This involves a wide-ranging critique of "the elite" as a unified body. Although we differentiated between sectors of the elite (political, economic and financial, bureaucratic and administrative, media and journalistic, social media, and supranational) and the type of criticism (calling for resistance against the elite, blaming the elite for problems and grievances that the people suffer, accusing the elite of betrayal, and questioning the elite's legitimacy to take any decision), we combined these data into a unique dummy variable. This variable takes the value of 1 for posts that contain criticism against any elite.
2. **People-centrism:** Posts can refer to the collective people in either a political or ethnic sense by distinguishing "the people" from "the elite" and "the others." To identify this category, we looked for phrases like "will of the people," references to "our nation," mentions of "the citizens," etc., or expressions such as advocating for the people, aligning oneself with the people, claiming to represent the people, and so on.
3. **The exclusivity dimension (dangerous others):** This criterion encompasses posts that depict groups—distinct from the elite—as posing a threat to the people or being separate/excluded from the people. These groups can be framed as either political or cultural and ethnic others.

Notice that our results remain the same even if we control for populism through a dummy variable equal to 1 for parties that are commonly deemed populists in the academic literature (i.e., Brothers of Italy [Fdi], the Five Stars Movement [M5S], and the League). Finally, our analysis includes binary control variables for posts containing images, videos, or hyperlinks. Additionally, we account for the days remaining before the election.

5. Statistical Analysis and Results

Before conducting the analysis, we checked intercoder reliability (ICR) on a subsample of 140 posts coded by the three authors. On average, the ICR is high, with a 0.9 Holsti coefficient (the results of the test are

presented in Table 1A of the Supplementary File). The analysis unfolds in two stages. Initially, we delve into the main effect (Model 1 [M1]) and interaction effects (Model 2 [M2]) between crisis and responsibility/irresponsibility (Table 1). Subsequently, we examine the joint impact of crises-related topics and populist parties on our dependent variable (Model 3 [M3] in Table 2).

In M1, we observe that using a crisis framework leads to a positive shift of 0.10 in the differences within the logs of expected reaction counts, while keeping other predictors constant. In line with H1, this suggests that explicit references to crisis have a pronounced impact on users' engagement, increasing it by 10.3%.

Among the four dummies stemming from responsibility and irresponsibility, only *irresponsibility-pact* exhibits a significant positive coefficient in M1, boosting engagement by 26.6%. In M2, however, the negative interaction term indicates that posts adopting a crisis paradigm while disregarding governmental duties towards international bodies tend to generate lower user engagement. This suggests that while irresponsibility alone has a positive effect on engagement, when this strategy is placed in the context of a crisis, its effect becomes no longer statistically significant (M2). If the content conveys a party's inclination towards irresponsibility over honoring external treaties and commitments in a crisis context, Facebook users are less likely to engage with it. Therefore, in the context of a crisis, irresponsibility does not seem a rewarding strategy. In this regard, the findings partially support H3.

Table 2 outlines the marginal effects of the interaction terms in M2. Except for those related to baseline conditions, most interaction terms do not reach statistical significance, with many exhibiting a negative trend.

Table 1. Negative binomial models ($N = 4,827$).

	Total Reactions	
	M1	M2
Crisis		
Explicit reference to crisis	0.10** (0.05)	0.12** (0.06)
Topics		
Polity	-0.05 (0.07)	-0.06 (0.07)
Politics	-0.01 (0.03)	-0.01 (0.03)
Economy and finance	0.01 (0.04)	0.01 (0.04)
Labor and social issues	0.12*** (0.04)	0.12*** (0.04)
Health	0.01 (0.08)	0.02 (0.08)
Domestic and immigration policy	0.30*** (0.05)	0.28*** (0.05)
Environmental and energy policy	-0.01 (0.04)	-0.01 (0.04)
International policy	0.01 (0.06)	0.02 (0.06)

Table 1. (Cont.) Negative binomial models ($N = 4,827$).

	Total Reactions	
	M1	M2
Responsibility and irresponsibility		
Irresponsibility–pact	0.24*** (0.07)	0.40*** (0.10)
Irresponsibility–pact * Crisis		−0.31** (0.14)
Responsibility–pact	0.02 (0.09)	0.05 (0.13)
Responsibility–pact * Crisis		−0.08 (0.18)
Irresponsibility–cost	0.06 (0.06)	0.01 (0.08)
Irresponsibility–cost * Crisis		0.10 (0.13)
Responsibility–cost	0.07 (0.07)	0.06 (0.08)
Responsibility–cost * Crisis		0.03 (0.16)
Populism		
Anti-elitism	0.09 (0.06)	0.09 (0.06)
Reference to the people	0.24** (0.10)	0.26** (0.10)
Others as danger	0.21** (0.08)	0.21** (0.08)
Other controls		
Negativity	0.16*** (0.03)	0.16*** (0.03)
Days left to the election	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)
Image	0.28*** (0.07)	0.28*** (0.07)
Video	0.37*** (0.08)	0.37*** (0.08)
External link	−0.12*** (0.02)	−0.11*** (0.02)
Constant	−0.40*** (0.08)	−0.40*** (0.08)

Notes: * $p < 0.10$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$; std. errors in parentheses.

However, the marginal effect of referencing the disregard of governmental duties during non-crisis periods (*irresponsibility–pact* = 1, *crisis* = 0) emerges as positively significant, with a magnitude of 0.27 at the 95% confidence level. The corresponding average marginal effect (AME) is 0.40 (standard error of 0.10) and it is significant at the 99% confidence level, while the AME of crisis-related posts published by populist parties is 0.09 (standard error of 0.10) and does not reach significance. This result offers a nuanced interpretation

of the outcome discussed previously. It appears that Facebook users, rather than engaging less with posts referring to irresponsible behavior towards international pacts during crises, tend to engage *more* with posts that convey messages of irresponsibility during *non-crisis* periods. Essentially, the negative coefficient in M2 indicates that non-conformity to governmental duties in calmer times enhances a post's virality.

Table 2. Marginal effects of M2 ($N = 4,827$).

Irresponsibility–pact	Explicit reference to crisis	
	No	Yes
No	−0.14*** (0.02) $n = 4,352$	−0.02 (0.05) $n = 53$
Yes	0.27** (0.10) $n = 361$	0.07 (0.10) $n = 61$
Responsibility–pact		
No	−0.13*** (0.02) $n = 4,368$	−0.01 (0.05) $n = 37$
Yes	−0.07 (0.13) $n = 376$	−0.04 (0.12) $n = 46$
Irresponsibility–cost		
No	−0.13*** (0.02) $n = 4,286$	−0.02 (0.05) $n = 119$
Yes	−0.12 (0.08) $n = 357$	0.09 (0.10) $n = 65$
Responsibility–cost		
No	−0.13*** (0.02) $n = 4,294$	−0.02 (0.05) $n = 111$
Yes	−0.07 (0.08) $n = 389$	0.08 (0.14) $n = 33$

Notes: * $p < 0.10$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$; std. errors in parentheses; the dependent variable is the number of total reactions to a post.

The second part of the analysis introduces a new variable distinguishing between populist parties—namely FdI, M5S, the League—and mainstream parties, to assess the different effects of references to crises on users' engagement between these two types of parties. Looking at Table 3, we noticed that this strategy works only for populist parties: When a crisis framework is adopted by populist parties, these posts generate more user engagement (+24.6%, average marginal effect of 0.22 with a standard error of 0.06, which is significant at the 99%), whereas crises-related posts published by mainstream parties do not boost engagement (the average marginal effect is −0.01 with a standard error of 0.06, but it is not significant).

Concerning the responsibility/irresponsibility posts, like what we observed in M1 and M2, the only relevant effect is the one related to *irresponsibility–pact*. In M3 we observe its direct effect on users' engagement, which is positive and significant (+25.7% of engagement).

The behavior of the other independent variables remains consistent across all models. Notably, *labor and social issues*, as well as *domestic policy*, exhibit significant impacts on user reactions, net of any crisis-related framework. This outcome suggests that citizens show greater responsiveness to the primary leftist theme

of the labor market and the populist right's championing of the migration issue. While posts emphasizing environmental and energy policies, issues related to the healthcare sector, and international relations do not significantly mobilize voters on social networks.

Table 3. Negative binomial models distinguishing for populist parties ($N = 4,827$).

	Total Reactions
	M3
Explicit reference to crisis	-0.01 (0.06)
Populist parties	-0.27*** (0.04)
Crisis # Populist parties	0.23*** (0.08)
Topics	
Polity	-0.07 (0.07)
Politics	-0.00 (0.03)
Economy and finance	0.00 (0.04)
Labor and social issues	0.10** (0.04)
Health	-0.01 (0.08)
Domestic and immigration policy	0.29*** (0.05)
Environmental and energy policy	-0.03 (0.04)
International policy	0.00 (0.06)
Responsibility and Irresponsibility	
Irresponsibility-pact	0.23*** (0.08)
Responsibility-pact	0.04 (0.09)
Irresponsibility-cost	0.08 (0.06)
Responsibility-cost	0.06 (0.07)
Populism	
Anti-elitism	0.07 (0.06)
Reference to the people	0.25** (0.10)
Others as danger	0.18** (0.08)

Table 3. (Cont.) Negative binomial models distinguishing for populist parties ($N = 4,827$).

	Total Reactions
	M3
Other controls	
Negativity	0.15*** (0.03)
Days left to the election	0.00 (0.00)
Image	0.26*** (0.07)
Video	0.30*** (0.08)
External link	-0.12*** (0.02)
Constant	-0.19** (0.08)

Notes: * $p < 0.10$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$; std. errors in parentheses.

In addition, populist elements, such as depicting others as a danger and appealing to the people, increase the engagement (and thus the virality) of a post. These findings are in line with previous research highlighting the efficacy of populist rhetoric in mobilizing users on social networks (Bene et al., 2022; Bobba, 2017).

In line with the existing literature, the variable negativity boosts user engagement. Since positive values of the variable mean strategies of attack and negative campaigning, this finding indicates that switching from a more positive tone to a more negative one increases the engagement. This is consistent with a broad body of literature demonstrating the mobilizing power of negativity on social media (Bene et al., 2022; Eberl et al., 2020).

Finally, both photos and videos engage users more, while the presence of an external link reduces the engagement.

6. Conclusion

The analysis reveals that Facebook posts containing explicit reference to crisis or contents framed with a crisis rhetoric are associated with higher levels of user engagement. This result is unsurprising, as citizens pay particular attention to emergencies, monitoring how different political parties position themselves vis-à-vis various crises. When it comes to policy issues, net of being referenced in terms of crisis, only two macro-categories of policies affect user engagement: labor and social issues as well as domestic policy. Surprisingly, data show no significant effect when posts refer to other topics that have been at the center of the political discussion throughout the campaign (e.g., health issues, environment, international policy). This finding, however, is in line with Borgnino and Palma (2023), who found that parties did not significantly adjust their election pledges on such issues.

Having said that, overall posts with content that explicitly refers to crises do engage users more, even if such effect seems a conditional one. First of all, by distinguishing between populist parties (League, Fdl, M5S) and

their mainstream counterparts, we observed that posts with a crisis framework boost the engagement levels solely for populist parties. This suggests that populist parties are better suited to elicit positive audience reactions through crisis-driven narratives, a finding that aligns with extensive research on populist communication strategies. This finding confirms the pivotal role of crisis narratives in the digital strategy of populists.

Furthermore, references to crises also moderate the impact of communication strategies aimed at proposing “responsible” or “irresponsible” political actions (Karremans, 2021). While irresponsible pledges seem overall attractive for the Facebook audience (thus increasing the engagement), we noticed that making such irresponsible pledges is no longer a rewarding strategy in the context of a crisis. As such, we can argue that, in a crisis context, voters are less willing to express positive reactions to posts advocating irresponsible political behaviors. In summary, if being responsible is less rewarding than being irresponsible, this difference vanishes during a crisis. This insight reveals a novel dimension in the study of responsible versus irresponsible governance during crises, indicating that a responsible behavior ceases to be a disadvantage (compared to irresponsible claims made by rival parties).

Future research in this area could delve deeper into the audience’s reactions to responsible versus irresponsible political actions in other settings. This would help to determine whether the observed tendency of Italian Facebook users to engage more with posts conveying irresponsible messages, in the absence of explicit crisis references, represents a unique phenomenon. By comparing the communication strategies of populist and mainstream parties across different countries, researchers could uncover both universal patterns and country-specific distinctions in the impact of crisis-driven narratives. In this regard, other studies could further investigate to what extent populists’ communication strategies are rewarding (or not) for non-populist parties. Additionally, future research could assess crisis narratives within specific policy domains (e.g., health, environment, immigration). These insights could help political parties and policymakers to develop more nuanced and effective communication strategies.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

To have access to the data contact the corresponding author.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors.

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Shocking Experience: How Politicians' Issue Strategies Are Shaped by an External Shock During Campaigns

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Abstract

In this article, we focus on how the issue strategies of political leaders are influenced by an external shock that completely changes the public agenda of the election campaign. The 2022 Hungarian parliamentary election campaign is a unique case to investigate this question, as Russia attacked Ukraine six weeks before the election day (April 3, 2022). The study aims to investigate whether the campaign's issue strategies changed due to this shocking event, and if so, what are the main directions of the changes. The examination relies on a manual content analysis of Hungarian party leaders' Facebook posts during the campaign, covering both the period before and after the outbreak of the war. First, based on the literature, we distinguish between different issue strategies such as issue ownership, issue stealing, “riding the wave,” and multi-issue and issue-poor strategies. We categorize political leaders' issue strategies based on their issue focus before and after the external shock. Our results show that while war, economy, and foreign policy play a greater role in the communication of most political actors after February 24, there are remarkable differences between political actors. The communication of opposition party leaders seems to persist with their original issue strategies (issue-poor and multi-issue campaigns), while Viktor Orbán clearly changed his focus immediately after the invasion of Ukraine and ran a “riding the wave” campaign with a focus on war.

Keywords

campaign; content analysis; external shock; Facebook; Hungary; issue strategies; riding the wave strategy; war

1. Introduction

Six weeks before the Hungarian parliamentary elections in 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine. This event completely changed the context of the ongoing election campaign. The invasion was an unexpected shock

for the public: It closely affected Hungary since Ukraine is a neighboring country with a significant Hungarian minority and because the Hungarian government has a rather close relationship with Russia. From a campaign strategy perspective, a crisis like this poses a major challenge for political actors: While they may have a professionally pre-designed and implemented issue strategy, an external shock drastically changes the campaign environment (Kreiss et al., 2017). In this explorative and descriptive study, we investigate how the issue strategies of political actors are shaped by an external shock that radically changes the entire public agenda.

The high degree of professionalization of political communication implies that campaigns usually follow a scripted approach, designed by experts, in line with the strategic interests of the respective actors (Kreiss et al., 2017). However, this approach contrasts with the idea of continuous adaptation and response to the changing political context (Kreiss, 2016). While the “seize the moment” approach is crucial for effective political action (Palonen, 2006), it requires flexibility, which might be challenging regarding the pre-planned issue attention strategies.

This dilemma is particularly evident in social media campaigning, which is a key area of contemporary political campaigning. On the one hand, political actors’ communication is entirely under their own control and can reach their voters in an unmediated way, allowing them to implement a data-driven, carefully designed, and self-centered communication strategy (Bene et al., 2022). On the other hand, the “real-time” and interactive nature of these platforms (Kaun & Stierstedt, 2014), driven by the logic of “popularity” (Van Dijck & Poell, 2013), encourages political actors to respond to their immediate environment, current events and the fluctuations of public mood (Kreiss, 2016).

Under normal circumstances, this dilemma can be easily resolved in practice. Political actors can respond to minor changes in the campaign environment without abandoning their overall strategy: When attention to an issue is at stake, they can pay more attention to the “topic of the day” while maintaining their overall issue focus (Kreiss et al., 2017). However, sometimes an external shock can drastically change the entire campaign environment, especially in terms of issue context, and a strategy developed in a completely different issue environment may fit poorly in the new political context. Accordingly, an external shock can be a great test of the flexibility of pre-planned campaign strategies and how they can be overridden by the urge to “seize the moment.”

However, our knowledge is highly limited about the flexibility of issue campaign strategies, especially in the social media context. Most research treats campaign strategies empirically as static entities and focuses on the patterns of political actors’ communication during the whole campaign (see Carsey, 2000). The few more dynamic approach mostly concentrates on how political competition (e.g., Banda, 2013) or the closeness of election day (e.g., Baumann et al., 2021) shape campaign strategies. It is, however, not investigated how the transformation of the external campaign context affects political actors’ issue strategies.

In this research, we fill this gap by focusing on the unique case of the 2022 Hungarian general election campaign whose public agenda was strongly affected by the outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian war. In our explorative and descriptive study, we uncover the dynamics of political leaders’ issue strategies during the campaign, focusing on how an external shock—the Russian invasion—affects their issue attention. While it is not common for major external shocks to occur during a campaign, in an era of polycrisis (Henig & Knight,

2023) and due to the scandal and moral outrage amplifying the role of social media platforms (Zulli, 2021), external shocks will likely become increasingly common in future campaigns. Therefore, our explorative study can provide important insights for understanding future campaigns affected by external shocks. Also, as an extreme case, it can show the degree of resilience of professionalized campaign strategies: if they are followed even in a radically different campaign environment, it can show that professionalized campaigns are largely resistant to their environment. Our study focuses on Facebook, one of the most important campaign platforms in Hungary (Bene & Farkas, 2022). To this end, we first differentiate between five ideal-typical issue strategies and in turn, longitudinally investigate in a descriptive way how these characterize political leaders' Facebook communication over three months before election day, one and a half before, and one and a half after the outbreak of the military conflict.

2. Issue Strategies in Political Campaigning

With the change in voting behavior, Western European social-structural voting turned to issue voting: The emphasis on social-structural characteristics such as class or religion became less important in voting, and issues such as the environment or migration played a much greater role, which subsequently led to greater issue competition between the parties (Green-Pedersen, 2007). Accordingly, the question of which issues parties should emphasize in the election campaign to appeal to voters and thus win elections became a priority (Banda, 2013). Consequently, several strategies can be distinguished based on political actors' attention to different issues—the present study differentiates five issue attention strategies.

First, “issue ownership” is a strategy that focuses on specific issues that the party “owns” for a long period (see Green-Pedersen, 2007). As Vavreck (2009, p. 17) describes, “ownership means your party is favorably associated with the issue or you have an electoral advantage on the issue.” Accordingly, the key elements of this strategy are to be seen as competent and engaged in certain policy areas while paying attention to those issues that are positively associated with the party or have long-term positive associations with the party (Petrocik, 1996). Since political actors can reach their own supporters directly with their communication on social media, it seems strategically attractive to focus on owned issues on these platforms. These followers are usually their strongest supporters (Wojcieszak et al., 2022), whose sympathy is probably based, among other things, on the issues that belong to the party (Banda, 2021). Accordingly, several studies have shown that political actors place a strong emphasis on the issues they own in their social media communication (e.g., Sandberg, 2022). However, it is not entirely clear whether followers really like it when their political actors post about their issues: Positive (Reveilhac, 2023), negative (Bene, 2021), and null effects (Bene et al., 2022) on user engagement have been found in the literature.

Second, parties and candidates can campaign with an issue, which is “owned” by an opponent party (Banda, 2013). The aim of this “issue stealing” or “issue trespassing” strategy (see Holian, 2004; Norpoth & Buchanan, 1992) is to reduce the other party's issue ownership advantage by weakening voters' identification of the party as the only credible representative. This way, a party can direct attention to the differences in issue positions, instead of issue competence. The strategy can increase support among opposing partisans and does not influence support among co-partisans (Banda, 2021). Due to the viral logic of content dissemination, political actors' posts can easily reach non-supporters on social media platforms whose impressions about the links between issues and parties can be changed this way. This strategy can be also encouraged by the fact that some studies found that followers are keen to interact with political actors' posts on issues owned

by other parties, maybe because this content can help them to argue for their parties in online debates with partisans from the other parties (Bene, 2021; Reveilhac, 2023).

Third, when a party adopts the strategy of “riding the wave” (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1994), it focuses on responding to current and popular issues that are high on the public agenda (see Sigelman & Buell, 2004). Ansolabehere and Iyengar (1994, p. 337) argue that “by advertising on the major issues of the day, candidates are more likely to be seen as concerned, responsive, and informed.” Furthermore, responding directly to currently debated issues can help influence public debate and the way issues are framed (Green-Pedersen & Mortensen, 2015). However, political actors face a dilemma when following this strategy, as their voters might react unfavorably if this overshadows the parties’ own issues (Budge, 2015). In social media, where direct feedback is provided, individual preferences can even be tracked in real-time, and the popularity of certain topics can also be measured instantly (Ceron et al., 2016), “riding the wave” strategy can be easily, and effectively applied.

The literature on party issue strategies has focused primarily on strategies that emphasize only a few issues and explained the criteria by which an issue is prioritized in a political actor’s strategy. However, we argue that a campaign does not necessarily have a strong issue focus from which two possible paths follow.

First, there are cases in which a party focuses not just on a few issues, but on several. This can be called a “multi-issue strategy,” which is close to the broad-appeal strategy (Somer-Topcu, 2015): Aiming to reach out to a wide range of voters, political actors pay balanced attention to a large number of issues. It can include strategic ambiguity (Jarzabkowski et al., 2010) with vague issue positions but actors might take clear positions on various issues (Somer-Topcu, 2015). Parties focusing on multiple issues can reach diverse voters with different issue preferences, but the wide-ranging attention to multiple issues might appear superficial too. On social media, a multi-issue strategy can provide connectivity to a broad range of voters who can carry the various messages of political actors into their own social circles (see Bennett & Segerberg, 2013). Moreover, political actors can trust that the algorithms that filter content for personal relevance will find their messages with their issue-specific audiences.

Last, it is also possible that instead of specific policy issues, political actors focus more on other political content such as mobilization, personalized communication, or specific scandals. This can be considered as an “issue-poor strategy” since it pays limited attention to specific issues. The literature—especially in a social media context—supports the idea that people care less about issues and more about political personalities, values, and scandals (see Grabe et al., 2017). Accordingly, talking about oneself, generalities, or even mobilization can be a means of attention maximization or personalization, rather than talking about issues.

Table 1 summarizes how the attention in the listed five strategies is focused on issues.

As Stokes (1963, p. 372) argued, “different weights should be given different dimensions at different times.” Accordingly, issue strategies can change, and the categories listed in Table 1 are not sharply separated. Issue strategies can be shaped by the ever-changing institutional and political context of elections (Simon, 2002), and an external shock can significantly alter the political context of a campaign.

Table 1. Conceptualization of issue strategies.

Name	No. of issues	What issues	Strategy	Goal
Issue-ownership	A few	Own	Paying attention to issues favorably tied to the party.	Being seen as competent in certain policy areas.
Issue-stealing/ passing	A few	Others	Weakening the voters' identification of that party as a credible or competent representative of that issue.	To spread ambiguity, and reduce the other party's issue ownership advantage: it is less about the difference in attention, and more about the difference in issue position.
Riding the wave	A few	Popular "hot" topic	Responding to current and popular issues, highlighting major issues of the day.	To influence the public debate and the framing of the issues.
Multi-issue	Several	Any type	Providing a balanced focus on several issues.	To create an omnipotent image and have an overarching political program; to reach more voters with different issue preferences.
Issue-poor	None	—	Paying less attention to issues, focusing on personalization, mobilization, etc.	Instead of issues, focus on political personalities, values, scandals, etc.

While it is well established that parties consciously choose their issue strategies, it is not known how dynamic these strategies are and how responsive they are to radical changes in the political agenda. It is an important question whether political actors stick to their carefully defined issue strategies even when the political environment changes significantly, or whether they react quickly to changing conditions by reshaping their issue strategies.

3. Political Communication and External Shocks

As Hay (1999) noted, a crisis is not only a period of fragmentation and disruption but also an epoch-making "moment of decisive intervention," therefore narratives are also important. The main sources of crisis narratives are leaders, who have the opportunity to reframe and capitalize on the disruptive nature of exogenous shocks (Körösényi et al., 2016). Accordingly, the crisis is a narrative construction. How an external shock becomes an event that circumscribes the political space depends on how political actors deal with it. From this perspective, it is useful to distinguish between the notions of exogenous shocks, which refer to shocking events, and crisis that refers to the narratives built around these events by political leaders and parties.

Political actors may place the external shock at the center of their issue strategies for two reasons (Körösényi et al., 2016). The first reason is that the leader adopts conventional crisis management practices to reduce the degree of contingency as quickly as possible and overcome the crisis. In this case, politicians frame the shock as an anomaly rather than a systemic problem. However, there is also the possibility that political actors try to raise the stakes, uncertainty, and urgency by interpreting the crisis as a systemic failure that can only be dealt with by the leader. Either way, they need to emphasize the issue to have a good position in the

competition for the dominant crisis narrative. However, leaders can also choose not to react to shocking events and stick to their original policy position and issue strategy (Calca & Gross, 2019)—especially during a campaign—which was already carefully designed. Further, the coherence and consistency of an issue campaign can be an important asset to risk over a shocking event whose significance and outcome are, by definition, difficult to predict.

There is little research on how political actors respond to an external shock outside of campaigns or when it occurs long before campaigns. A much-discussed case is the 2001 terrorist attack in the United States (e.g., Gershkoff & Kushner, 2005; Greenstein, 2002). The Bush administration succeeded in amplifying the sense of crisis, dominating news coverage and capitalizing politically on the shock (John et al., 2007). While the administration's communications initially focused primarily on domestic security, the external threat became a major issue over time, introducing the “war on terror” and the “axis of evil” frames, and thus gaining public support for the administration's legislative proposals (Gershkoff & Kushner, 2005; John et al., 2007), transferring his high policy competence ratings to other issues as well (Green & Jennings, 2012). The attack also affected the 2002 congressional campaign, as candidates paid more attention to issues related to 9/11, such as foreign affairs and the military, and they reacted to the shock consistent with the issue ownership of their parties—Republicans included foreign policy and military issues more frequently in their ads (Strach & Sapiro, 2011).

A more recent example of an external shock is the Covid-19 pandemic, which has influenced political communication worldwide, with different reactions from leaders; e.g., Italy's prime minister formulated a storytelling crisis narrative that provided hope while boosting public support and trust in the government (Mazzoleni & Bracciale, 2021). This was also the case in Germany and Australia, where leaders applied conventional crisis management techniques and managed to strengthen their leadership by often speaking personally about the crisis (van Aelst, 2021). Meanwhile, the US President compared the virus to regular flu and advocated keeping the economy open but he also admitted privately the lethality of the coronavirus (Yang & Bennett, 2021). The Brazilian president pursued this strategy even more consistently, questioning public health infrastructure legitimacy without proposing policy solutions, and even accusing left-wing activists of seemingly increasing the mortality rate (Davis, 2021).

As can be seen, the literature suggests that politicians respond to external shocks with different strategies. However, there is no research on issue strategies in cases where the exogenous shock does not occur before but during the election campaign and requires an immediate response from politicians. This is particularly important in the era of professionalized political communication, where campaigns are highly planned. Reacting promptly to an external shock is therefore a major strategic challenge and the response given can have a major impact on the election outcome. This study aims to fill this gap by examining how Hungarian political leaders reacted to the Russian invasion of Ukraine during the 2022 campaign period and changed or stuck to their issue agenda. Accordingly, our research question is formulated as follows:

RQ1: How did the issue strategies of the 2022 Hungarian election campaign change before and after the Russian invasion of Ukraine?

As this is an understudied area, our research follows a descriptive and exploratory logic. In differentiating issue strategies, we adopt a descriptive focus and aim to categorize political actors' strategies based on the five

strategic approaches discussed above. However, as previously mentioned, these are not clear-cut strategies and there are no existing and validated indicators to classify campaign strategies. Our approach allows for the interpretation of nuances and confluences in the strategies. In addition, in terms of temporal dynamics, we follow an explorative logic with an open research question that allows us to take an open-ended explorative approach to describe the role of external shocks in campaign strategies.

4. The Hungarian Case

The Hungarian political system can be described as a plebiscitary leader democracy (Körösényi et al., 2020), which is “democratic in form but authoritarian in substance” (Weber, 1978, as cited in Körösényi et al., 2020, p. 22) with a charismatic authority legitimized by competitive elections. The elections can be described as “free but not fair,” meaning that the act of voting is free, but the playing field is highly “unbalanced” in terms of resources, media access, and electoral rules (see Batory, 2014). To defeat Fidesz, which had by then won three elections with a two-thirds majority, in the 2022 Hungarian national election campaign, a six-party opposition coalition, United for Hungary—with Jobbik, the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP), Politics Can be Different (LMP), the Democratic Coalition (DK), the Momentum Movement (MM), Everybody’s Hungary Movement (MMM), and Párbeszéd (Dialogue)—was formed.

Social media, especially Facebook, play an important role in the election campaign for both the government and the opposition. The latter has long used Facebook as its main communication platform, where it can compensate for its limited media access (Bene et al., 2023). The government has increasingly turned to this platform since 2019. Accordingly, Facebook played a key role and was the most important social media platform in the 2022 campaign (Bene & Farkas, 2022). Further, Facebook is the most widely used social media platform in Hungary with 53 percent of the online population consuming news there, while this share is much lower in any other social network sites (9% on TikTok, 7% on Instagram, and 5% on Twitter; Newman et al., 2023). Additionally, Facebook provides a platform to examine parties’ and candidates’ campaign communication strategies and tactics without any prior journalistic selection having taken place.

In addition, the 2022 election campaign was shaped by another factor: Six weeks before election day, Russia attacked Ukraine and the war became a dominant topic of the campaign (Scheppelle, 2022).

5. Method

In this study, we analyzed the Facebook communication of Prime Minister candidates Viktor Orbán and Péter Márki-Zay as well as the opposition leaders Ferenc Gyurcsány (DK), Péter Jakab (Jobbik), Anna Donáth (Momentum), Ágnes Kunhalmi (MSZP), Máté Kanász-Nagy (LMP), and Tímea Szabó (P). The data was collected between January 1 and April 3, 2022 (election day). Posts were collected every day, using CrowdTangle.

We conducted a manual content analysis of the politicians’ published posts ($N = 2914$). The unit of analysis is the entire post, both verbal and visual elements are included. To cover a broad range of policy issues in the posts, the coded variables distinguish between 24 policy topics and an additional variable, “other policies.” The variables appear as bivalent dummy variables in the database, i.e., if they are present, they are assigned

the value 1, and 0 if they are not present. An issue to be coded present needed to be mentioned in the posts. The coding scheme is available in an online repository (https://bit.ly/CamforS_OSF).

Coding was performed by four undergraduate students who participated in a two-session coding training course. To avoid systematic coder bias, the posts were randomly distributed among the four coders. The reliability of the coding was tested on a random sample ($N = 135$), resulting in a Brennan-Prediger kappa coefficient of over 0.8 for almost all variables, except for the public policy of the war (0.77).

As a dynamic perspective, the analysis focused on the presence of each topic in 10-day blocks. There are nine blocks in total, and the first day of block 6 falls on February 22, the eve on which Putin announced the entry of peacekeepers into the breakaway states, and two days later the invasion began—this block can be considered the date of the external shock.

Issue ownership (see Table 2) was defined based on previous research. Accordingly, the leading issues for the governing parties are migration (Bíró-Nagy, 2022), family (Sata, 2023), and energy policies due to the focus on reducing utilities (Böcskei, 2016). Corruption (Bene, 2021), education, and health (Dobos et al., 2018) have long been key issues for the opposition; and also environment for the Green parties (LMP, PM). As for the “hot” topic, the most important current issue of the 2022 campaign was the economy due to the serious economic difficulties caused by record-high inflation.

6. Findings

Our findings show that the role of policy issues in campaigns varies among political leaders and within campaigns (see Table 3 and Figure 1). In general, for all political actors, the proportion of issue-related posts gradually decreases just before election day, but the outbreak of war temporarily interrupts this trend. As for the degree of policy focus, one opposition leader, Ferenc Gyurcsány, has an extremely low issue presence in his Facebook campaign in both periods, addressing policy topics only in the third and fourth of his posts in these periods respectively, which is also true for Péter Jakab in the second period. To a lesser extent, Viktor Orbán (only in the pre-war period), Péter Márki-Zay, Péter Jakab, and Ágnes Kunhalmi also pursued a

Table 2. The number of politicians’ published posts.

Politician	Period		Total	Owned issues
	Pre-war	War		
T. Szabó (P)	172	231	403	education; healthcare
M. Kanász-Nagy (LMP)	92	132	224	environment; education
Á. Kunhalmi (MSZP)	88	113	201	education
P. Jakab (Jobbik)	141	243	384	education; healthcare
A. Donáth (Momentum)	169	174	343	corruption
F. Gyurcsány (DK)	52	103	155	—
P. Márki-Zay (opp. PM cand.)	364	511	875	corruption
V. Orbán (Fidesz)	115	214	329	migration; family; energy
Total	1193	1721	2914	

Table 3. Main indicators of political leaders' issue strategy before and after the outbreak of the Ukraine–Russia war.

Leader	Period	No. 1 topic (% of all posts)	No. 2 topic (% of all posts)	Other topics (% of all posts)	Number of topics mentioned > 5% of all posts	% of posts mentioning policy issues	Strategy
V. Orbán (Fidesz)	before 22/02	foreign (13%)	economy (8%)	26%	4	50%	issue-poor with moderate
	from 22/02	war (41%)	immigration (14%)	30%	5	55%	“riding-the-wave”
P. Márki-Zay (PM Opp.)	before 22/02	corruption (12%)	economy (10%)	31%	5	48%	issue-poor with moderate issue ownership
	from 22/02	war (20%)	foreign (14%)	34%	3	45%	issue-poor with moderate “riding-the-wave”
F. Gyurcsány (DK)	before 22/02	foreign (8%)	health (4%)	21%	1	33%	issue-poor
	from 22/02	war (16%)	foreign (10%)	9%	2	24%	issue-poor with moderate “riding-the-wave”
A. Donáth (Momentum)	before 22/02	corruption (16%)	education (14%)	50%	7	66%	multi-issue with moderate issue ownership
	from 22/02	war (33%)	foreign (22%)	51%	6	76%	multi-issue with moderate “riding-the-wave”
P. Jakab (Jobbik)	before 22/02	economy (12%)	health (7%)	24%	3	46%	issue-poor
	from 22/02	war (9%)	immigration (4%)	18%	1	24%	issue-poor with moderate “riding-the-wave”
Á. Kunhalmi (MSZP)	before 22/02	education (15%)	economy (7%)	25%	4	40%	issue-poor with moderate issue ownership
	from 22/02	war (20%)	foreign (9%)	31%	2	46%	issue-poor with moderate “riding-the-wave”
M. Kanász-Nagy (LMP)	before 22/02	environment (23%)	education (9%)	53%	6	66%	multi-issue with stronger issue ownership
	from 22/02	war (21%)	energy (16%)	58%	6	61%	multi-issue with moderate “riding-the-wave”
T. Szabó (P)	before 22/02	education (15%)	health (13%)	49%	5	60%	multi-issue with moderate issue ownership
	from 22/02	war (17%)	economy (12%)	39%	3	50%	issue-poor with moderate “riding-the-wave”

low-topic strategy, mentioning policy issues in less than half of their posts. In contrast, a heavy issue-centric campaign characterizes Anna Donáth, Máté Kanász Nagy, and Tímea Szabó (only in the pre-war period).

When it comes to the dominance of specific issues, which characterizes issue ownership, issue stealing, and riding the wave strategies, we could not find any political leaders in the pre-war period, who ran a campaign with a strong issue focus. The most important topics appear in 12–16% of all posts of each politician, except for the issue-poor campaign of Ferenc Gyurcsány, and Máté Kanász-Nagy, who refers to environmental issues in almost every fourth post. However, these key issues are not particularly prominent in the overall campaign. Moreover, these key issues do not seem to be particularly prominent even within the respective candidates' campaigns. As shown by the share of other policy issues, the leaders talk about other issues more often than their top issues; this is true even for the leader with the strongest issue focus, Máté Kanász-Nagy. As suggested by the number of issues that were touched upon at least in the 5% of all posts, a few opposition leaders such as Anna Donáth, Tímea Szabó (only in the pre-war period), and Máté Kanász-Nagy pursued a multi-issue campaign strategy with an intensive discussion of numerous policy topics. However, in the case of Kanász-Nagy, this strategy is complemented by a more pronounced issue ownership focus in the first period. Interestingly, the top issue receives a similar level of attention in issue-poor (Viktor Orbán, Péter Márki-Zay, Péter Jakab, Ágnes Kunhalmi, but not Ferenc Gyurcsány) and multi-issue strategies.

Among the leaders of the opposition parties, the leading—but not overly dominant—topics in the pre-war period are “owned” issues (see Table 2): corruption (Péter Márki-Zay, Anna Donáth), education (Anna Donáth,

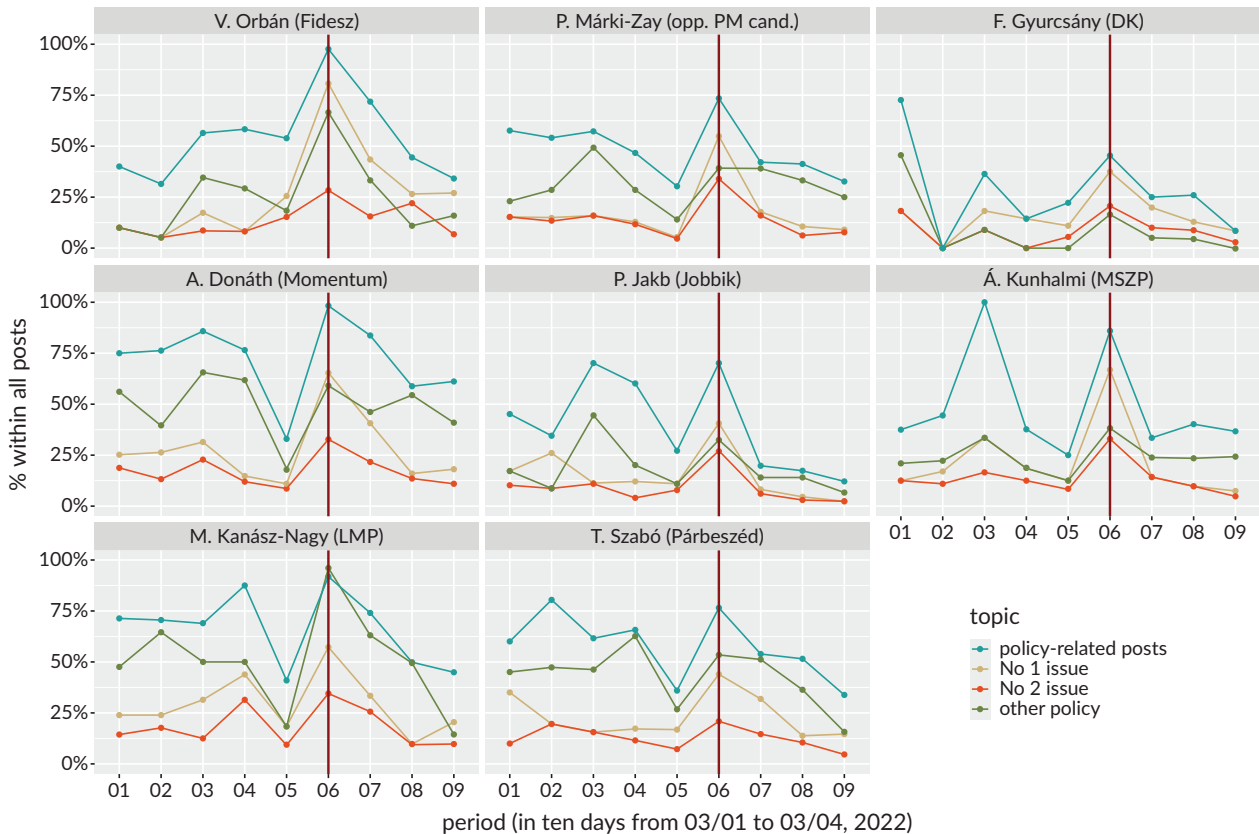


Figure 1. Temporal dynamics of the presence of issue-related posts, top issues, and other issues in political leaders' Facebook posts (10-day periods).

Ágnes Kunhalmi, Máté Kanász-Nagy, Tímea Szabó), healthcare (Péter Jakab, Tímea Szabó), and environment for the green party (Máté Kanász-Nagy). However, because these leading issues do not dominate their campaigns, the issue ownership strategy is moderate and only a complementary and subordinate strategy to the dominant issue-poor or multi-issue campaign strategies for these opposition leaders. In addition, some top politicians (Péter Márki-Zay, Péter Jakab) are paying more attention to the “hot” issue of the economy as a moderate “riding-the-wave” complementary strategy to their multi-issue and issue-poor strategy. The top issue for Viktor Orbán in the pre-war period is foreign policy. However, he has only discussed this topic intensively in the last twenty days before the outbreak of the war, so in this case, it can be interpreted as a moderate “riding the wave” approach within the dominant issue-poor strategy. In the weeks leading up to the outbreak of war, the growing tensions highlighted the role of foreign policy, so it was clearly a hot topic in those days. Previously, he also mostly focused on his “own” issues such as energy, family policy, and the hot topic of the economy. To summarize, the pre-war period was dominated by multi-issue and issue-poor strategies with moderate issue ownership focus in the case of oppositional leaders and a moderate move from issue ownership toward the “riding-the-wave” strategy in the case of Viktor Orbán.

The outbreak of the war causes significant changes in each actor’s issue strategy. From that point, war is the top issue for each leader (see Table 1 and Figure 2), however, there are variations in its role within the overall campaign strategy. Seemingly, oppositional party leaders smoothly integrate the topic of war into their

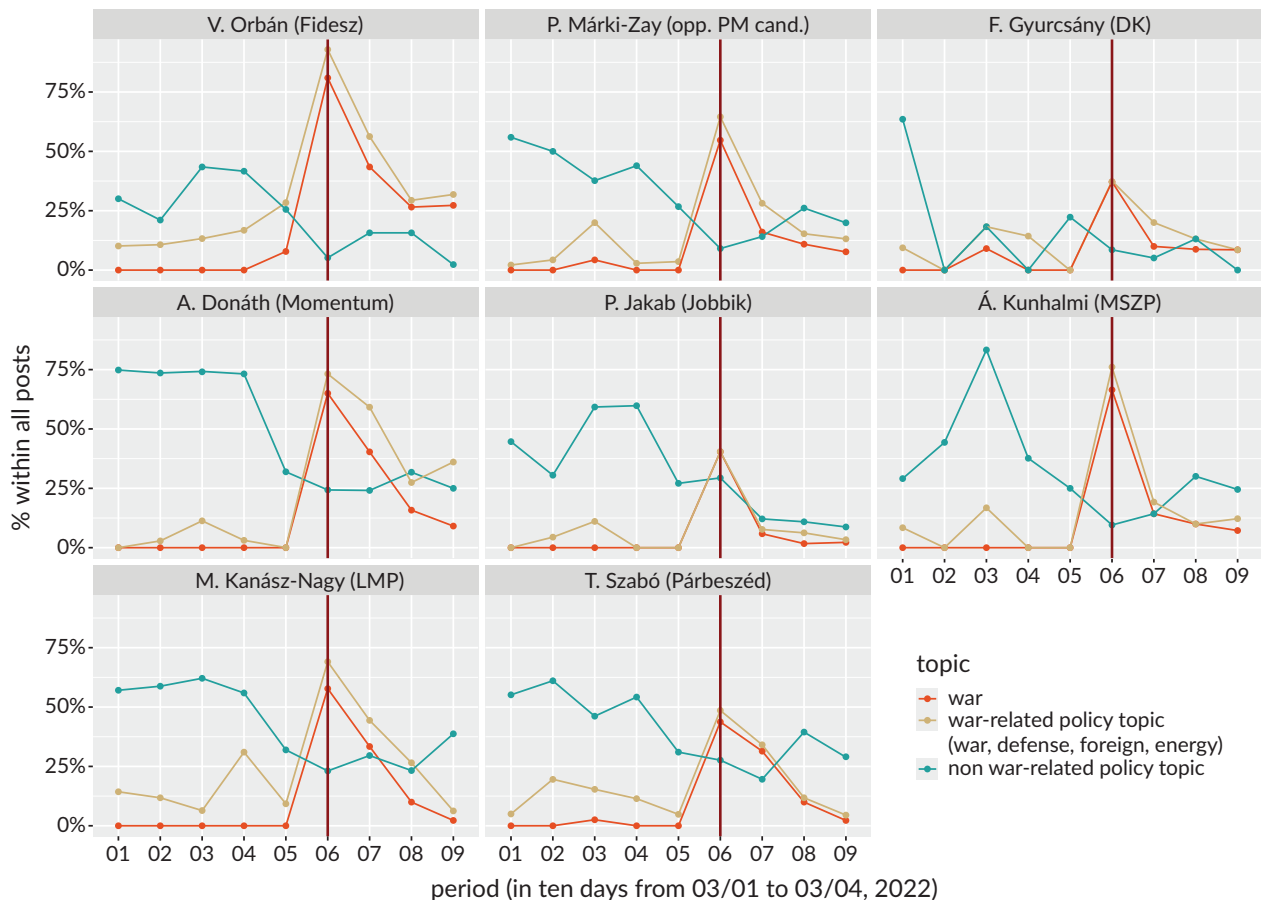


Figure 2. Temporal dynamics of the presence of the topic of war, topics associated with war (war, defense, foreign, energy), and non-war-related topics in political leaders’ Facebook posts (10-day periods).

existing campaign strategy. Multi-issue campaigners such as Máté Kanász-Nagy and Anna Donáth still discuss a lot of policy issues, but their moderate issue ownership has been replaced by a moderate “riding-the-wave” strategy by prioritizing war and foreign policy rather than their own issues. Péter Márki-Zay, Ágnes Kunhalmi, and Ferenc Gyurcsány act similarly within their existing issue-poor campaign, while Tímea Szabó and Péter Jakab significantly decrease their overall policy focus at the same time.

A remarkably different approach is demonstrated by the incumbent PM, Viktor Orbán: After the outbreak of the war, he completely replaced his issue-poor campaign with a highly war-focused strategy. While he also touches upon other issues, the topic of war clearly dominates his Facebook campaign. It is telling that in each 10-day segment after the outbreak of the military conflict, the topic of war was much more prominent than all other policy topics together in his communication (Figure 2). In the case of oppositional leaders, a more balanced picture is unfolded, and other policy topics are frequently more highlighted than the topic of war or its associated policy fields (defense, foreign policy, energy). The temporal dynamic is also telling here: while the presence of the war topic gradually decreases over time, it stabilizes at a high level for Orbán and remains the key issue until the very end of the campaign. In contrast, most opposition leaders let the topic largely overwritten by other issues soon after the outbreak of the war. For Viktor Orbán, 27% of all posts are about the war in the last two 10-day periods of the campaign, and any other policy topics appear only in the 16% and 2% of published content, respectively. Anna Donáth is the only one who keeps up with Viktor Orbán in discussing issues related to war (but not the topic of war in itself), but she still insists on keeping her multi-issue profile and not subsuming the campaign under this prominent topic.

To sum up, it seems that all leaders responded to the external crisis by changing their issue strategy accordingly, but the degree of revision differs across opposition leaders and the prime minister. The formers insisted on their original approach to the role of issues in their campaign whether it be a multi-issue or issue-poor approach, and they only changed their moderate issue focus from issue ownership to a “riding-the-wave” strategy. In contrast, Viktor Orbán reconsidered his own campaign and replaced the issue-poor strategy with a strong “riding-the-wave” campaign which is largely about the reactions to the external crisis. The temporal patterns of this campaign also showed that he was the only leader who started to adapt his strategy even before the shocking event by putting more emphasis on foreign policy in the shadow of the emerging diplomatic conflict at the border of Ukraine. Actually, as suggested by Figure 2, he started to focus on the topic of war in the 10 days right before the outbreak of the military conflict: while no other leaders mentioned this topic in this period, it appeared in 8% of the Orbán’s posts making it his second most important topic after foreign policy in the last 10 days before Russia attacked Ukraine.

7. Discussion and Conclusion

In this descriptive and explorative study, we have investigated how an external shock that drastically changes the campaign environment affects the campaign strategies of political actors. In such a situation, there is a tension between the professionalized campaign approach and the perspective of ‘seizing the moment’ (Kreiss et al., 2017). Political actors need to decide to what extent they will abandon their carefully crafted issue campaign strategy to provide an effective response to the external shock. As the war between Ukraine and Russia broke out in the middle of the 2022 Hungarian general election campaign, this particular case provided a unique opportunity to examine the issue strategies of political actors before and after the event that radically changed the public agenda.

Our findings show that the external shock affected each leader's issue strategy but they differed in the extent to which they changed their issue focus. While opposition leaders integrated the topic of war into their existing issue strategy, Orbán transformed his approach and replaced his issue-poor campaign with one largely focused on war. Moreover, he started to modify his issue strategy right before the outbreak of the war as a response to the growing tension at the Ukraine–Russia border. In contrast, opposition leaders did not really focus on the situation before the shocking event. Research suggests that government parties have more limited opportunities when choosing their campaign topics or adjusting their issue strategies during election campaigns compared to opposition parties as they are responsible for political decisions (Tresch et al., 2018). However, the outbreak of the war is a unique situation, as it does not require immediate policy reforms from the Hungarian government, therefore, both opposition and government parties can react more freely to this exogenous shock.

This receptivity to the issue is remarkable because, at the time of the outbreak of the war, this issue seemed to be less favorable for Viktor Orbán than for the opposition leaders. Firstly, one of the most divisive issues of the last decade has been Hungary's position in relations between the Western world and Russia. Orbán has long been attacked by the opposition for his close relations with Putin and Russia. They have been arguing that Russia represents a security risk which has been denied by the government party emphasizing instead the economic benefits of this relationship. To summarize, the invasion challenged one of the fundamental ideas of Orbán's foreign policy and gave support to an old opposition concern. Secondly, the war led to a huge wave of refugees, challenging the government's strong anti-immigration rhetoric (Bíró-Nagy, 2022). Despite these challenges, Orbán put this issue at the center of his campaign, while opposition leaders did not, although it fitted well with their previous communication. In this way, the prime minister had a head start in interpreting the external shock and his crisis narrative: the ruling party stood for peace while the opposition would embroil the country in war, and was able to dominate the campaign.

While we cannot evaluate the effectiveness of these issue strategies and the degree of adaption to the external shock, it is important to note that Orbán's political success is often attributed to his strong ability to adapt to changing political conditions. Palonen's (2006) idea of "seizing the moment" is directly echoed by one of the leading consultants of Viktor Orbán arguing that "ruling the moment" is one of the cornerstones of Orbán's politics (see Nagy, 2015), which is reflected in his crisis management. Crisis narratives are an important part of his communication since crises favor charismatic leadership which is the foundation of the regime (see Körösenyi et al., 2020). Orbán's ability to respond to unexpected situations and adapt to existing challenges has allowed him to gain an upper edge in defining and interpreting cases. The 2022 election campaign confirmed this idea since, unlike other leaders, he could transform his entire campaign strategy on the spur of the moment.

Nonetheless, it seems that Orbán is the exception because the campaign strategies were relatively resistant even when the campaign environment drastically changed. Our study showed that political leaders insist on the main elements of their pre-defined issue strategies and make only minor corrections, even in cases when the external shock seemingly fits well their overall and long-term political narratives. This observation indicates that the highly planned character of professionalized political communication may decrease political actors' adaption ability (Kreiss, 2016). However, future research is needed to uncover whether a more coherent and self-consistent campaign or a faster adaptation to actual situations, "ruling of the moment," is the more effective strategy. Also, future studies should find and test structural explanations for these behavior, because certain types of political actors may be more flexible than others.

Naturally, our research has some limitations. Although the 2022 Hungarian general election campaign is a unique case to investigate the dynamics of issue strategies, findings cannot be automatically generalized to other campaign contexts. Although the Russian military invasion was an exceptional shock which is not typical in other campaigns, smaller but still important scandals and unexpected events frequently appear in campaigns all over the world where the question of issue attention dynamic can be explored. Also, in the age of polycrisis (Henig & Knight, 2023), it can be more common for external shocks to occur during campaigns. Another important limitation is that our attention is limited to issue strategies. While issue attention is a key element of campaign strategies, they also have other important ingredients such as emotional dynamics, mobilization strategy, etc. which are not touched upon here.

With these limitations in mind, our research yielded important insights into the dynamics of political campaigns and it showed that political leaders give different strategic responses under similar political situations.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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Facebook Campaigning in the 2019 and 2021 Canadian Federal Elections

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Abstract

Canada’s federal elections in 2019 and 2021 produced a similar outcome—a minority Liberal government. These back-to-back elections provide an ideal context to understand trends in digital campaigning strategies and assess how the pandemic influenced campaigns’ use of social media. We examine how the three leaders of the major parties used Facebook in 2019 ($n = 712$) compared to 2021 ($n = 979$). The Conservative leader O’Toole posted more frequently than other candidates in 2021, fitting with the equalization theory of digital campaigning. In 2019 and 2021, the incumbent prime minister, Trudeau, received the most user engagement on his Facebook posts despite calling a snap election during a pandemic and less than two years into his mandate. These findings support normalization theories of digital campaigning with evidence of an accumulating incumbent advantage. The Covid-19 pandemic sidelined attention to climate change. We argue that the Liberal government owned both issues; we expected Trudeau to have greater attention to and user engagement for these policy posts. In general, Facebook posts about the pandemic yielded greater user engagement than posts that did not mention the pandemic. Candidates tested new campaign strategies in 2021, particularly making calls to interact with them; these posts yielded higher user engagement than posts that did not include a call to interact. While candidates used new social media campaign strategies, voter turnout declined from 2019 to 2021. These findings have implications for other democratic systems and the future of digital campaigning.

Keywords

Canada; climate change; election; Facebook; mobilization; pandemic; social media; user engagement

1. Introduction

In August 2021, Prime Minister Trudeau called a snap election despite being less than two years into his mandate and the possibility of staying in power for up to five years before calling another election. The snap election produced a similar outcome—Trudeau's Liberal party was re-elected as a minority government, meaning the Liberal Party did not win a majority of seats. The 2019 and 2021 back-to-back elections provide an opportunity to assess how the pandemic influenced candidates' use of social media. Stromer-Galley et al. (2021) argue that there is a lack of research on how social media messaging changes longitudinally; we address this gap, as they do, by comparing two election cycles.

Furthermore, we study a country outside the US, whereas existing political communication research focuses on the US (Boulianne, 2019a). Studying Canada provides valuable insights into election campaigns in bilingual countries, such as Belgium, Finland, India, South Africa, and Switzerland, as well as multi-party systems, such as Brazil, Denmark, Finland, Germany, India, Indonesia, Italy, Mexico, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Spain, Sweden, Philippines, and South Korea. Like Australia and New Zealand, Canada has a parliamentary system modeled after the UK's Westminster system. More generally, Canada has a parliamentary system, as do most European countries. We analyze trends in digital campaigning strategies in a Western democracy, focusing on changes in attention to policy issues and mobilization posts.

In this article, we focus on Facebook as a platform. While we do not know the profile of those who are engaging (liking, commenting, and sharing) with Facebook posts, we follow a line of research suggesting that Facebook, unlike Twitter, is a platform for political leaders to connect with their supporters (Boulianne & Larsson, 2023; Kelm et al., 2019; Rossini et al., 2018; Stromer-Galley et al., 2021; Wurst et al., 2023). According to the *Digital News Report 2023*, 62% of Canadians use Facebook (Newman et al., 2023). Furthermore, 15% of Canadians follow political candidates or a political party on social media (Boulianne & Steen-Johnsen, 2023).

We focus on the frequency of Facebook posts and user engagement with these posts, examining differences by election cycle and party leader. We refer to user engagement as how users react to Facebook posts, including liking, sharing, and commenting. Facebook has several affordances, particularly related to different types of interaction, multi-media posts, advertising, and longer posts, which are combined with widespread adoption, making it a critical tool in campaigns in Western democracies. We document the increase in Facebook posts but note that this increase is attributable to the Conservatives (an established party challenging the Liberal government). We also document that the Covid-19 pandemic sidelined attention to climate change as a policy issue. Drawing upon scholarship about issue ownership, we argue that Trudeau's incumbent government owned this issue and thus, his posts about the pandemic should produce higher levels of user engagement.

In 2019, Conservative Scheer was the only leader to post calls to interact, whereas, in 2021, all candidates posted these types of calls. In 2021, these posts produced higher levels of user engagement. We explain this pattern in terms of the pandemic, which contributed to loneliness; in this context, leaders' calls to interact appealed to Facebook users. Leaders posted more calls to participate (vote, watch the debate, etc.) in 2021 compared to 2019. Despite the increased calls to participate in this election, voter turnout dropped from 67% to 62.6% (Elections Canada, 2021). Overall, the user engagement analysis shows that Trudeau still dominates social media, supporting the normalization theories about digital campaigning. Trudeau had many advantages,

including incumbency status, a more expansive follower network, and his government “owned” the issue that was top-of-mind for Canadians during the election—the pandemic.

2. Facebook Posts in Pandemic Elections: A New Look at Normalization or Equalization Debates

The pandemic increased the health and political costs of in-person events. Specifically, there are health risks associated with door-to-door canvassing and larger events. In addition, Trudeau’s events were targeted by anti-vaxxers and those opposed to any pandemic-related restrictions. Given these risks associated with in-person interaction during a pandemic, we expect an increase in the frequency of posting to Facebook from 2019 to 2021.

We also consider whether there are party differences in the frequency of posts from 2019 versus 2021. Established and incumbent parties are more likely to have the resources to adopt social media (Quinlan et al., 2018; Xenos et al., 2017); however, other studies suggest that challenger parties post more often on social media (Stetka et al., 2019). Political parties’ differential rates of social media use are core to understanding the normalization versus equalization debates about digital campaigning (Bene, 2023; Keller & Kleinen-Von Königslöw, 2018; Margolis & Resnick, 2000; Strandberg, 2008). When established parties make greater use of this platform, this favors a normalization explanation of digital campaigning; when challenger/opposition/outsider parties use this platform to a greater degree, this supports the equalization explanation of digital campaigning. The support for normalization versus equalization likely depends on the political context and specific election. As such, this theory requires constant attention within the field of digital campaigning.

In the Canadian context, these debates must examine the tendency to re-elect leaders for multiple terms, providing a new angle to consider the role of incumbency in digital campaigning. While Gibson (2020, p. 12) suggests that tendencies of normalization and equalization over time could be considered a “pendulum swing between these two poles,” we note that there are cumulative effects that amass as candidates gain experience and followers through elections. In particular, we propose the concept of accumulating incumbency advantage, which favors parties and candidates that create and sustain large follower networks during and post-election. These large networks benefit the incumbent in subsequent elections, as they can draw upon their follower bases to maximize engagement. In countries with snap elections, these larger follower networks are a critical resource for the candidates and parties.

RQ1: Are there differences in the frequency of posting by (a) party leader or (b) time period?

3. Trudeau’s Popularity: Incumbency, Network Size, and Snap Elections

Trudeau was first elected in 2015, then re-elected in 2019, and then re-elected in 2021. Before Trudeau’s election in 2015, the Conservative Party led the Canadian government with an election in 2006, a re-election in 2008, and another in 2011. This re-election cycle may make Canadian politics distinctive from other electoral systems.

Studies show that higher-status politicians tend to elicit more user engagement (Peeters et al., 2023); this pattern would favor Trudeau as a high-profile candidate (the prime minister) and having a family legacy in

the prime ministerial role as his father won elections during the 1970s and 1980s. Established and incumbent parties are more likely to have the resources to pay for post-promotion, increasing the possibilities for engagement (Bossetta, 2018; Keller & Kleinen-Von Königslöw, 2018).

Prior research demonstrates that candidates and parties with larger numbers of followers have advantages in terms of user engagement (Bene, 2023; Brands et al., 2021; Heiss et al., 2019; Keller & Kleinen-Von Königslöw, 2018; Klinger et al., 2023). User engagement is important because when users interact with the content, the content is propelled through online networks due to Facebook's algorithm, which favors content yielding higher levels of engagement (Bene, 2023; Jost, 2023; Keller & Kleinen-Von Königslöw, 2018; Tønnesen et al., 2023).

In 2019, Trudeau received the most user engagement in terms of likes, comments, and other user engagement metrics (Boulianne & Larsson, 2023). We wanted to see if that continued to be the case, even though Trudeau called a snap election during a pandemic and less than two years after the last election. The other political leaders did not want an election and criticized the snap election as opportunistic and irresponsible given the pandemic. Turnball-Dugarte (2023) argues that when the governing party calls a snap election, it could increase trust as voters relish the chance to weigh in on the government's continuing mandate. His research focused on the UK. Furthermore, studies in Canada suggest that voters rarely punish the prime minister for calling a snap election (Blais et al., 2004). A citizen's reaction to the snap election may depend on whether they share the ideological position of the governing party calling the snap election (Blais et al., 2004; Turnball-Dugarte, 2023). To the extent that Facebook user engagement is based on supporters, we expect user engagement patterns to continue to support Trudeau's popularity. In other words, his popularity would not suffer due to calling a snap election during an ongoing pandemic.

RQ2: How does user engagement (likes, etc.) differ by (a) party leader or (b) time period?

4. Competing Policies: Climate Change Versus the Pandemic

Posts about policies are relatively rare on social media, albeit studies show that candidates are more likely to post about policies on Facebook than on other platforms (Boulianne & Larsson, 2023; Stromer-Galley et al., 2021). Stromer-Galley et al. (2021) compared candidates' social media use during the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections, finding that posts about policy issues were more common in 2020 than in 2016. They explain this change in terms of the pandemic.

During a campaign, political parties can: (a) stick to issues they "own" or (b) address issues based on public opinion or the "national public agenda" (Tønnesen et al., 2023). In terms of issue ownership, left-wing parties tend to own policies attached to social welfare and the environment (Cruz, 2017), whereas right-wing parties tend to own policies related to the economy, gun control, foreign policy, and crime (Smith, 2010; Tønnesen et al., 2023). The desire for attention on social media may trump issue ownership; parties may opt to post about policies that generate user engagement to maximize the visibility of their post.

In a study of elections in Poland and Czechia, Stetka et al. (2019) did not find a relationship between policy posts and user engagement. In the 2019 Canadian election, policy posts received less user engagement than

non-policy posts (Boulianne & Larsson, 2023). However, these studies fail to capture important nuances about issue ownership and Facebook as a platform to engage supporters.

If a party or its leader posts about a policy issue on Facebook, their followers may not engage with the post if it is not “their” issue. Climate change is an issue for left-wing parties, i.e., Liberals and the New Democratic Party (NDP), more so than right-wing parties, i.e., Conservatives (Boulianne et al., 2021). Those on the right are less concerned about or downgrade the importance of climate change versus the economy (Boulianne et al., 2021). As such, we expect more posts and higher user engagement on climate change for the left-wing leaders than those on the right. In 2019, we found support for these patterns: The right-wing Conservative leader rarely posted about climate change and yet, these types of Facebook posts produced higher user engagement for Liberal Trudeau (Boulianne et al., 2021).

Other studies have found that “environment” policy posts are relatively rare (Bene et al., 2023; Tschla et al., 2023) and produce lower levels of engagement (Bene et al., 2022; Brands et al., 2021) but, again, they do not consider party differences in patterns of user engagement on Facebook. As noted, other research suggests that Facebook is a platform for leaders to connect with supporters (see Boulianne & Larsson, 2023; Kelm et al., 2019; Rossini et al., 2018; Stromer-Galley et al., 2021; Wurst et al., 2023). Engagement with policy posts may depend on the topic and platform of the post.

The pandemic presents an interesting point of analysis. Since the policy area is new, it does not have a legacy or attachment to left or right-wing parties. Instead, pandemic policies offer a point of debate for the governing party versus the opposition parties. Indeed, Trudeau called a snap election to capitalize on the electorate’s goodwill generated from his pandemic policies and expand his support to a majority instead of a minority government (Medeiros & Gravelle, 2023). The pandemic was a critical election issue in 2021 (Medeiros & Gravelle, 2023). As such, the number of posts will be high for both the incumbent and the challenging parties; however, the question is whether followers engage differently with this policy topic. If the pandemic is framed regarding the economy, we might expect more engagement from followers of right-wing parties (Bene et al., 2023), whereas framing the pandemic in terms of health or social welfare might yield more engagement from followers of left-wing parties. Finally, we consider how this salient issue impacts attention to climate change in 2019 versus 2021. Did attention to the long-term threats related to climate change decrease due to the immediate threats related to the pandemic?

RQ3: Are there differences in attention to (a) climate change versus the pandemic, (b) policy issues by the party leader, or (c) policy issues by time period?

RQ4: Are there differences in user engagement for (a) climate change versus the pandemic posts, (b) policy issues by the party leader, or (c) climate change posts from 2019 to 2021?

5. Mobilization Posts: Calls to Participate and Interact

As mentioned, this was a snap election and there were concerns about people showing up to vote in an election less than two years after the prior election. People may be more likely to agree to a big request (show up at voting stations on election day) if they comply with a smaller request first (“like” my post). This strategy is called the foot-in-the-door (FITD) technique (Pascual & Guéguen, 2005). The effectiveness of FITD techniques

depends on several factors, especially the authority of the person making the requests and injunctive social norms supporting the activities (Guadagno, 2017). Having political leaders use the strategy and general social norms supporting voting helps the effectiveness of these FITD strategies. The idea is to ask voters to engage in low-risk online campaign activities in hopes of persuading them to participate in the higher-risk offline activity of voting. This theory of scaling up participation from low-effort online activities into high-effort offline activities has been well-established in existing scholarship on citizens' political participation (Boulianne, 2019b). However, the scholarship on "slacktivism" claims otherwise. For this article, we examine candidates' calls to participate in terms of (a) contacting them, such as texting them and (b) watching the leaders' debate, voting on election day, and other online or offline activities. We theorize that leaders implicitly use the FITD technique to increase voter turnout; unfortunately, we do not have data to test the effectiveness of this technique in real-world turnout. Instead, we document these mobilization posts and explore user engagement with this messaging.

Calls to interact are pretty rare as most studies document that politicians use social media to broadcast information rather than interact with citizens (Keller & Kleinen-Von Königslöw, 2018; Magin et al., 2017; Stromer-Galley et al., 2021; Wurst et al., 2023). However, the pandemic may have changed these dynamics. In particular, the pandemic limited opportunities for offline interaction through political rallies and door-to-door canvassing. As such, candidates may be more motivated to interact on social media to connect with voters and try to win their votes. However, Wurst et al. (2023) found that less than 1% of posts involved calls to interact (on Facebook or Instagram) in the 2021 German election. We expect that these calls to interact will be more frequent in 2021 compared to 2019 because of the limited opportunities for in-person interaction; furthermore, we expect that user engagement will be higher for these types of posts because the pandemic left many citizens feeling isolated and lonely. As such, calls to interact may appeal to voters in 2021.

Calls to participate are also quite rare, even when measured beyond merely casting a ballot (Magin et al., 2017; Wurst et al., 2023). In the 2021 German election, Wurst et al. (2023) found that 7% of party and candidate posts included a call to support online; the most popular calls were to donate, share the post, and add a party frame to one's profile picture. Heiss et al. (2019) also found that these types of posts were rare (4% for offline mobilization and 2% for online mobilization) in an Austria election; they also found these requests received lower levels of user engagement, regardless of whether the request was to participate online or offline. Tschla et al. (2023) also found that mobilization posts were rare (7%) in a national election in Greece in 2019. Looking at the EU election in 2019 and radical right party on Twitter, Heft et al. (2023) found that mobilization posts are rare (5%).

In contrast, Stetka et al. (2019) found that mobilization posts were popular in the Czechia (46%) and Polish (26%) elections; these types of posts produced higher levels of user engagement in Czechia and lower levels of engagement in Poland. As such, the frequency of mobilization posts and user engagement with these posts differ based on country context.

Stromer-Galley et al. (2021) compared candidates' social media use during the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections. They found that both Trump and Biden issued more calls to action (mobilization) in 2020 than in 2016; this pattern was evident for Facebook. These posts include calls to watch and share content. They explain the change in terms of the pandemic limiting in-person events. We expect a similar increase in

participation calls from 2019 to 2021; again, we explain this trend because of concerns about voter turnout and as part of a FITD strategy. While there is an abundance of studies documenting the (in)frequency of mobilization posts, we re-visit these findings given the pandemic and we seek to move scholarship forward by examining user engagement with these calls to participate posts (similar to Heiss et al., 2019; Stetka et al., 2019).

RQ5: Are there differences in the frequencies of (a) calls to interact versus participate, (b) type of call by the party leader, or (c) type of call by time period?

RQ6: Are there differences in user engagement with (a) calls to interact versus participate, (b) type of call by the party leader, or (c) type of call by time period?

6. Methods

6.1. Data Collection

We used CrowdTangle to gather Facebook posts and their meta-data. We considered a four-week election period. The four-week period was September 24, 2019, to October 22, 2019 ($n = 712$) and August 24, 2021, to September 20, 2021 ($n = 979$). We limited the posts to messages from the candidates, excluding retweets or shared material. We focus on three parties, covering 90% of the 338 seats in the House of Commons. The three parties cover the ideological range: Conservatives = right; Liberals = center (center-left); and NDP = left.

Using CrowdTangle data, we recorded the number of followers for each candidate's page on the first day of this data collection period. Liberal Leader and Prime Minister Trudeau had the most followers: 6.89 million in 2019 and 8.44 million in 2021. For NDP Singh, the numbers were 215,707 in 2019 and 369,962 in 2021. The Conservatives changed leaders from 2019 to 2021. For Conservative leader Scheer, the number was 304,342 in 2019; for Conservative leader O'Toole, the number was 122,031 in 2021.

6.2. Coding

Two students coded each post independently. They were instructed to read through posts once and assign codes to six different variables about the content. They were also instructed to use the "find" command to verify they had caught all mentions of keywords. The first author repeated this process to confirm the coding approach. There were a few disagreements about coding, given the short codebook and clear instructions. Coders focused on the text and did not code images, links, videos, etc. We assessed intercoder reliability by having the students code the same 51 random posts from the sample. Specifically, we tested for Holsti's coefficient of reliability, which varied between 0.90 and 0.98. With all the variables being dichotomous (0–1 for non-presence and presence) and with the majority of instances for all variables heavily skewed towards non-presence (i.e., coded as 0), this approach to reliability was deemed most suitable.

To identify pandemic policy content, coders read the post and searched for keywords including pandemic, Covid-19, coronavirus, vaccin*, vaxx, health crisis (if referring to pandemic), masks, and social distancing (including the French version of these keywords). Coders read the post to identify climate change policy and searched for climat*.

For calls to interact, we borrowed examples from the Digital Election Campaigning Worldwide (DigiWorld) codebook. These examples are as follows:

1. Call to comment on a post;
2. Call to take a vote by using Facebook reactions;
3. Call to address a political actor (via email or social networking sites);
4. Call for other interactions online;
5. Call to build new or strengthen already existing local political relationships;
6. Call to address a political actor personally, by letter, or over the phone;
7. Call for other interactions offline;
8. Call for other interaction.

We instructed coders to identify if any of these ideas (0,1) were included in the posts, in contrast to the DigiWorld codebook, which required identifying which type of call for interaction was used.

For calls to participate, we again borrowed examples from the DigiWorld codebook. These examples are as follows:

1. Call to share a post;
2. Share/forward/embed SNS post of politician/party;
3. Call to like/follow/subscribe to a Facebook page or to unlike/unfollow/unsubscribe it (likely the politician's page);
4. Call to sign an online petition or to participate in an online survey;
5. Call to participate in an online supporter campaign;
6. Call to go to vote or to vote for a party;
7. Call to participate in an offline survey (including TV);
8. Call to do door-to-door canvassing;
9. Call to participate in other offline campaign actions (e.g., voting booth and posting bills);
10. Call to join a party;
11. Call to watch a TV debate or other TV shows;
12. Call to donate to a party;
13. Mobilize/persuade/convince others (for party purposes);
14. Online mobilize/persuade/convince others (for party purposes);
15. Remind someone to vote offline (for example, in face-to-face conversations);
16. Join and participate in an SNS group started by the political actor (politician/party);
17. Equip your own SNS profile image with the party's logo.

Figure 1 contains examples of each of the four types of posts.

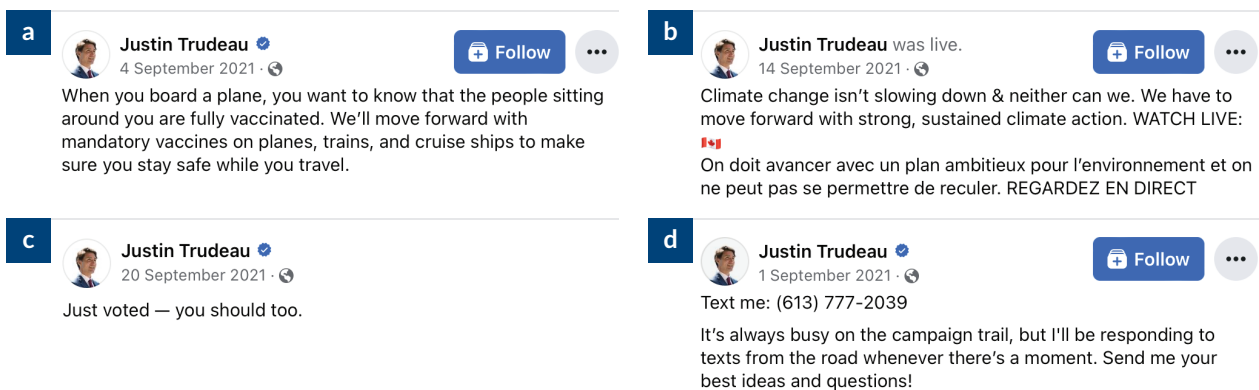


Figure 1. Coding scheme and exemplars: (a) pandemic post; (b) climate change post; (c) call to participate; and (d) call to interact.

6.3. Analysis

Our analysis focuses on two dependent variables: frequency of posts and user engagement. For user engagement on Facebook, we added the likes (and the nuanced reactions, such as “love” and “haha”), shares, and comments. We log-transformed our dependent variable to address the skewed distribution. We begin with an analysis of variance (ANOVA) and then conduct multivariate analysis using ordinary least squares regression. Both the ANOVA and the regression yield similar findings, offering robust results.

7. Findings

Concerning RQ1, the number of posts increased from 2019 to 2021 ($n = 712$ to $n = 979$). This change is largely attributed to Conservative leader O'Toole, who posted 514 messages on Facebook in 2021 (Table 1). Concerning RQ2, user engagement did not change for Liberal Trudeau (Table 1) or the Conservative leaders (Table 1) from 2019 to 2021 (RQ2). In contrast, NDP Singh's user engagement decreased slightly (Table 1). Overall, there were significant differences in user engagement based on the party leader (Table 1). These differences were larger in 2021 compared to 2019.

Concerning RQ3 about the topic of the posts, 8.9% of posts from 2021 mentioned the pandemic—Liberal Trudeau ($n = 56$ of $591 = 9.5\%$) was more likely to post about it than NDP Singh ($n = 14$ of $347 = 4\%$) or Conservative O'Toole ($n = 17$ of $753 = 2.3\%$). In 2021, these posts were more common than posts about climate change. Posts about climate change decreased from 9.4% in 2019 to 3.8% of posts in 2021. In 2021, Trudeau ($n = 23$ of $277 = 8.3\%$) posted more about climate change than Singh ($n = 14$ of $188 = 7.4\%$) or O'Toole ($n = 0$).

In terms of RQ4, we see slightly higher levels of user engagement with pandemic posts than posts that were not about the pandemic (Table 2). In this multivariate model, we did not see higher levels of user engagement for posts about climate change for the four weeks in 2019 or 2021 (whether or not pandemic policies were included in the regression model).

Regarding calls to interact (RQ5), the relative frequency of these posts stayed about the same: 2.8% of posts in 2019 and 4.4% in 2021. In 2019, Conservative Scheer was the only leader to post a call to interact

Table 1. User engagement by candidate (ANOVA).

	Trudeau (Liberal)		Singh (NDP)		O'Toole vs. Scheer (Conservative)	
	F-ratio = 1.11 $p = 0.294$ Welch test = 1.13 $p = 0.289$		F-ratio = 24.14 $p < 0.001$ Welch test = 26.60 $p < 0.001$		F-ratio = 2.30 $p = 0.130$ Welch test = 1.87 $p = 0.172$	
2019 election	Mean = 3.65 $n = 314$	SD = 0.51 $n = 159$	Mean = 3.27 $n = 239$	SD = 0.57	Mean = 3.02	SD = 0.74
	F-ratio = 73.84, $p < 0.001$ Welch test = 71.42 $p < 0.001$					
2021 election	Mean = 3.69 $n = 277$	SD = 0.43 $n = 188$	Mean = 2.99 $n = 514$	SD = 0.49	Mean = 2.94	SD = 0.55
	F-ratio = 202.11, $p < 0.001$ Welch test = 243.64 $p < 0.001$					
Both elections	Mean = 3.67 $n = 591$	SD = 0.47 $n = 347$	Mean = 3.12 $n = 753$	SD = 0.55	Mean = 2.97	SD = 0.62
	F-ratio = 268.30, $p < 0.001$ Welch test = 300.49 $p < 0.001$					

Table 2. User engagement by campaign year.

	2019 Campaign (without interact variable) $n = 712$		2019 Campaign (with interact variable) $n = 712$		2021 Campaign (without pandemic variable) $n = 979$		2021 Campaign (with pandemic variable) $n = 979$	
	b (SE)	p	b (SE)	p	b (SE)	p	b (SE)	p
NDP Singh	0.258 (0.063)	< 0.001	0.233 (0.063)	< 0.001	0.006 (0.047)	0.897	-0.002 (0.047)	0.971
Liberal Trudeau	0.612 (0.054)	< 0.001	0.579 (0.055)	< 0.001	0.737 (0.039)	< 0.001	0.751 (0.040)	< 0.001
Call to participate	0.139 (0.060)	0.020	0.125 (0.060)	0.036	-0.047 (0.040)	0.242	-0.044 (0.040)	0.272
Call to interact			-0.410 (0.141)	0.004	0.264 (0.084)	0.002	0.274 (0.084)	0.001
Climate change	0.024 (0.080)	0.759	0.023 (0.079)	0.773	-0.011 (0.088)	0.901	-0.008 (0.088)	0.924
Pandemic							0.129 (0.059)	0.029
	R-squared	0.179	R-squared	0.188	R-square	0.302	R-squared	0.305

Note: Comparison group is Conservatives, which in 2019 the leader was Scheer and in 2021 was O'Toole.

($n = 20$); neither Liberal Trudeau nor NDP Singh posted any calls to interact in 2019. As such, the observed negative relationship between calls to interact and user engagement in 2019 is attributed to Conservative Scheer (Table 2). In 2021, NDP Singh ($n = 34$ of 188 posts = 18.1%) was more likely to invite people to contact him compared to Liberal Trudeau ($n = 4$ of 277 posts = 1.4%) or Conservative O’Toole ($n = 5$ of 514 posts = 1.0%). These posts have an interesting pattern in terms of user engagement (Table 2). In 2019, these types of posts produced lower engagement (see note above about Scheer) but yielded higher engagement in 2021. In other words, in 2021, citizens “liked” the posts that asked them to contact the candidate.

As for calls to participate (go vote, watch this clip, sign up, and watch the leaders’ debate), these types of posts increased from 18.1% in 2019 to 23% in 2021 (RQ5). Across both years, the Conservative leaders posted 143 (of 753 posts = 19%) calls to participate compared to the Liberal Trudeau’s 120 posts (of 591 posts = 20.3%) and NDP Singh’s 91 posts (of 347 posts = 26.2%). Not all party leaders increased their participation calls from 2019 to 2021. For Trudeau, there were 75 (of 314 posts = 23.9%) calls to participate in 2019 but only 45 calls (of 277 posts = 16.2%) in 2021. Singh increased his participation calls from 12 (of 159 posts = 7.5%) in 2019 to 79 (of 188 posts = 42.0%) in 2021. For the Conservative leaders, there were 42 (of 239 posts = 17.6%) calls to participate in 2019 (Scheer) compared to 101 (of 514 posts = 19.6%) calls in 2021 (O’Toole). These posts did not yield greater user engagement in 2021 (RQ6). Instead, we see slightly higher levels of user engagement with calls to participate in 2019 (Table 2). Most notably, we see different patterns of user engagement for calls to participate versus calls to interact.

Our final set of regression analyses revisits RQ4 and RQ6, considering whether user engagement differs by candidate. User engagement with Liberal Trudeau’s posts did not change from 2019 to 2021, whereas user engagement decreased slightly for NDP Singh (Tables 1 and 3). When any of the three leaders posted calls to interact, these posts produced significant differences in user engagement (Table 3). However, these differences do not move in the same direction. When Liberal Trudeau and NDP Singh post calls to interact with them, user engagement increases; however, when Conservative leaders post calls to interact with them, user engagement decreases. As noted above, the pattern of reduced user engagement on calls to interact is specific to Scheer; in contrast, O’Toole’s posts about calls to interact increased user engagement (albeit the coefficient did not reach statistical significance).

Likewise, we examined the calls to participate and user engagement, which were positively correlated with the pooled analysis of Conservative posts. In this case, calls to participate increased user engagement in

Table 3. User engagement by candidate.

	Trudeau (Liberals) $n = 591$		Singh (NDP) $n = 347$		O’Toole vs. Scheer (Conservative) $n = 753$	
	b (SE)	p	b (SE)	p	b (SE)	p
2021 (vs. 2019)	0.001 (0.021)	0.950	-0.158 (0.034)	< 0.001	-0.048 (0.025)	0.051
Calls to participate	-0.058 (0.048)	0.231	-0.055 (0.071)	0.439	0.114 (0.058)	0.050
Calls to interact	0.513 (0.238)	0.031	0.261 (0.101)	0.011	-0.285 (0.128)	0.027
Climate change	-0.001 (0.059)	0.987	-0.018 (0.104)	0.862	0.582 (0.440)	0.186
Pandemic	0.131 (0.071)	0.064	0.117 (0.148)	0.427	0.140 (0.152)	0.358
	R-squared	0.017	R-squared	0.089	R-squared	0.020

2019 when Scheer posted these messages, whereas O’Toole’s calls to participate in 2021 did not significantly increase user engagement.

User engagement did not increase when Trudeau posted about climate change, despite expectations related to “owned” issues; instead, there was a slight increase in user engagement when Trudeau posted about the pandemic (albeit the coefficient was only significant at the 0.10 level, $n = 591$).

8. Conclusion

Trudeau’s continuing popularity supports the normalization theory of digital campaigning (Bene, 2023; Keller & Kleinen-Von Königslöw, 2018; Margolis & Resnick, 2000; Strandberg, 2008). We explain his continuing popularity in terms of his incumbency (Quinlan et al., 2018; Xenos et al., 2017) and his larger follower network (Brands et al., 2021; Heiss et al., 2019; Keller & Kleinen-Von Königslöw, 2018; Klinger et al., 2023). Indeed, the Canadian election is distinctive in its pattern of the re-election of leaders, which results in an accumulating advantage for Trudeau. Citizens did not punish Trudeau for the snap election (Blais et al., 2004; Turnball-Dugarte, 2023). In addition, his party owned the key election issue (pandemic policy). When any leader posted about the pandemic, user engagement increased, affirming Medeiros and Gravelle’s (2023) claim that this was a hot topic for 2021. When Trudeau posted about the pandemic, these posts produced slightly higher levels of user engagement.

The Conservative Party is an established party challenging Trudeau’s Liberals. They changed leaders from 2019 to 2021. In 2021, they posted more than the other party leaders, reflecting the equalization theory of digital campaigning (Stetka et al., 2019). O’Toole posted more in 2021 than Scheer did in 2019; user engagement depended on which Conservative leader posted. We believe the difference reflects the leaders’ personalities rather than the election cycle. In Canada, voters cast their ballots for local representatives of a party rather than directly for a leader, which suggests that party leaders are less relevant. Yet, the findings suggest that leaders do matter, particularly in relation to social media user engagement.

We studied Trudeau over two elections and changes in the content of these posts. Our research did not, however, consider what is sometimes referred to as the demand side of political communication—the expectations placed on these political actors by their supposed supporters. Relatedly, for the supply side, public demand may influence how the campaigns are branding their candidates, competencies, and personalities. Indeed, how “celebrity politicians” (van Zoonen, 2005) are portrayed and featured in contemporary campaigns leads to questions of whether it is possible for individuals without physical or charismatic advantages to truly thrive on social media platforms—platforms where widespread attention is indeed key for gaining engagement and possibly electoral success. Prime Minister Trudeau has more than 8 million followers on Facebook, whereas 27.5 million Canadians are on the voters’ list (Elections Canada, 2021). In a multi-party system, this is a disproportionate share of the electorate and an exponentially larger social network compared to the other leaders, which creates an enduring advantage. Future research could consider Trudeau alongside other highly popular political leaders across the globe to compare their use of Facebook and their ability to generate user engagement.

In 2021, all party leaders posted messages urging people to interact with them. However, the reception of these messages differed in 2021 compared to 2019. In 2021, users were more likely to engage with these

calls to interact by liking, commenting, and replying to these messages. We explain this finding in terms of the pandemic and people's general sense of loneliness; in this context, people "liked" the calls for interaction as an opportunity to connect online when offline contact was riskier. We explain the motivation for these posts in terms of the FITD technique (Pascual & Guéguen, 2005). While research on pandemic elections is forthcoming, we wonder whether these patterns are observed in other countries running elections during the pandemic.

Voter turnout is a challenge during a pandemic, snap elections, and elections only two years apart. Overall, the calls to participate increased from 2019 to 2021; the NDP and Conservative leaders increased calls to participate, whereas Trudeau's calls decreased. This pattern is notable as incumbent Trudeau did not try to mobilize the electorate more in 2021 compared to 2019. Voter turnout dropped. Calls to participate were more popular in the 2021 Canadian election than reports from elections in other countries (Heiss et al., 2019; Tschla et al., 2023; Wurst et al., 2023), albeit not as popular as in the Czechia and Polish elections (Stetka et al., 2019). While scholarship tends to aggregate calls to interact/participate as "mobilization posts" (Magin et al., 2017; Wurst et al., 2023), this may not be appropriate given our findings about user engagement patterns for calls to interact versus calls to participate. Further research could also explore nuances in the types of reactions to calls to interact versus participate. In particular, Gerbaudo et al. (2023) examine "haha" versus "angry" versus "like" reactions regarding their mobilization potential. This seems like a promising line of new research.

Finally, we considered Facebook to be a platform where supporters could react to party leaders' posts (Boulianne & Larsson, 2023; Kelm et al., 2019; Rossini et al., 2018; Stromer-Galley et al., 2021; Wurst et al., 2023). We outlined a theory about issue ownership (Cruz, 2017; Smith, 2010; Tønnesen et al., 2023), leading to expectations for a greater number of posts and higher user engagement when parties posted on Facebook about issues they owned. We find support that Trudeau posted more about climate change and pandemic policies than other party leaders; these are policy issues that his party owned. We find mixed support for issue ownership and user engagement. While Trudeau's posts about the pandemic produced slightly higher levels of engagement, his posts about climate change did not receive more user engagement. There are several explanations: (a) the assumption about Facebook as a platform for supporters may be over-stated in the literature and, thus, we should not expect a favorable environment for user engagement on posts about "owned policies" and (b) our analysis was limited to only two policy issues and these two issues are both competing with each other for Liberal supporters' attention. Further research could consider a wider variety of policy issues and attempt to code the ideological leanings of those who follow a specific politician and engage with their posts. Furthermore, our findings about user engagement and climate change did not replicate prior findings which considered the six weeks leading up to the 2019 election, capturing major climate strikes (Boulianne & Larsson, 2023).

In addition to the limited number of policy issues, this study is limited by the focus on text instead of images and videos. Other research assesses the importance of images in social media campaigning (e.g., Bossetta & Schmøkel, 2023; Farkas & Bene, 2021). We also focused on a single platform, which is a limitation (vs. Boulianne & Larsson, 2023). We chose Facebook because of its high adoption rates among Canadians (Newman et al., 2023) but also because the affordances (long posts) make it easier to accommodate bilingual posts. Indeed, Facebook and Instagram are better suited for this multi-lingual campaigning than Twitter's short entries which require separate posts for English and French content (Boulianne & Larsson, 2023).

In conclusion, our article offers new insights into the frequency of different types of Facebook posts and user engagement with these posts, examining differences by election cycle and party leader. We highlight the role of the pandemic in changing patterns of digital campaigning and discuss how these changes relate to findings from other Western democracies.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The data and replication files are posted at <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.25555782.v1>

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Evolution of Brazilian Democracy: Unveiling Election Dynamics in Political Issues, Negativity, and Acclaim

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Abstract

In recent years, Brazil, as the world's fourth-largest democracy, witnessed the dominance of polarized and symbolically charged electoral campaigns on social media, culminating in the election of a populist political figure in 2018 and his subsequent defeat in 2022. Extensive research has indicated that political campaigns often sidelined substantive policy proposals in favor of negative and divisive issues. However, a critical gap remains in the absence of temporal investigations contrasting the prevalence of negativity and acclaim campaigns on social media platforms during elections. This study addresses this gap by examining associations between political issues and negative and acclaim campaigns across two Brazilian electoral campaigns. Drawing upon a sample of messages posted on Twitter ($n = 1,191$) during the presidential elections of 2018 and 2022, our study reveals associations between substantive political issues, such as education and health, and acclaim campaign strategies, while the divisive issues of Covid-19 and corruption are associated with negative campaign strategies. Moreover, the results suggest that gender policy is related to both acclaim and negative messages since it is a polarizing issue in Brazilian politics. Our study also shows an increased negativity trend, with the 2022 presidential election campaign more likely to be negative than in 2018. By conducting a temporal analysis of Brazil's political context, our study sheds light on the evolving dynamics of political communication in the age of social media, contributing substantially to the literature on negativity in political campaigns.

Keywords

acclaim; Brazil; elections; negativity; presidential elections; political communication; social media

1. Introduction

Divisive rhetoric and negativity dominate the political landscape in recent years. This trend of negativity is particularly evident in Brazil, where the election of Jair Bolsonaro in 2018 significantly heightened these tensions (Barros Franco & Pound, 2022). Previous studies show that political campaigns often sidelined substantive policy proposals in favor of divisive issues that thrive on negativity in different contexts (Bene et al., 2022), and the discourse of political actors is more negative on online social media (Ernst et al., 2019). Political leaders' use of these platforms has become a prominent means of engaging voters and influencing the public agenda. Platforms such as Twitter (now X) allow candidates to reach voters directly without the news media filter and are used to gain supporters.

Twitter contributes to a collective negotiation of meaning between political actors, journalists, and citizens (Jungheer, 2016). Twitter users tend to be strongly interested in politics (Jungheer, 2016) and use this channel as a tool for political mobilization during election campaigns (Dutceac Segesten & Bossetta, 2017). Journalists and opinion leaders use Twitter to evaluate the climate of public opinion, and the political discussions on this platform frequently receive attention in the news media (Parmelee, 2014). Thus, political actors' tweet contents go beyond the limits of this platform and are reproduced in other communication arenas in a "hybrid media system" (Chadwick, 2013).

Twitter is used by 18 million people in Brazil (Statista, 2023), which represents a bit less than one-tenth of the Brazilian population. The debate on this platform is relevant and its influence goes beyond the Twittersphere. Thus, analyzing the content posted by political actors on Twitter is especially important because extending the negativity on this platform to the public debate can increase political polarization (Iyengar et al., 2012; Nai & Maier, 2023).

Yet, most of the research on negativity tends to focus on the case study of a specific electoral campaign. In addition, most studies on this topic are centered in North America and Western Europe (Maier & Nai, 2022). Thus, longitudinal research on negativity in Latin America is lacking. This misses the opportunity to establish whether the trend toward negativity is increasing or whether other factors condition it. Brazil, as the fourth largest democracy in the world, is a good case for understanding the role of Twitter in political campaigns in Latin America.

This study addresses this gap by examining the associations between political issues and the tone of the campaigns during the election campaigns of Brazil's presidential elections held in 2018 and 2022 on Twitter. We employ two binary logistic models with acclaim and negative campaigns as dependent variables, incorporating various political issues and the campaign year as independent variables. Candidates posting political messages are treated as fixed effects. Utilizing multivariate models, we address the following research questions:

RQ1: Which political issues are associated with negative and acclaim campaign strategies in Brazil?

RQ2: To what extent does the use of acclaim and negative campaign strategies differ between the elections of 2018 and 2022?

In doing so, this temporal analysis allows us to contrast the prevalence of negativity and acclaim campaigns on social media platforms between two different elections. Moreover, in line with Benoit's (2017) functional theory of campaigning, which distinguishes between attack, acclaim, and defense messages, this study emphasizes the critical role of acclaim campaigns and highlights their prominence alongside negative messages. We choose to focus on acclaim and negative messages because they are prominent forms of communication in the context of political campaigning, while defense messages appear to a lesser extent (Benoit & Sheaffer, 2006). Findings shed light on the evolving dynamics of political communication in the social media era, contributing substantially to the literature on the use of negativity in election campaigns and broadening the focus of Global South studies.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. *In the Realms of Negative Campaigning*

In past years, social media platforms have evolved into powerful arenas of political campaigning (Boulianne & Larsson, 2023; Farkas & Bene, 2021). These digital spaces can target specific electorates with messages likely to resonate with these politicians, contributing to audience segmentation and the pervasive tendency of positive bias (Kruschinski et al., 2022). These platforms are also beneficial to these candidates as they can track their engagement in real time, offering ways for politicians to assess the effectiveness of their messages and adjust their campaigns (Bene et al., 2022; Porten-Che   et al., 2018).

Engagement from social media users plays a significant role in the widespread dissemination of political content, often at a lower cost for politicians than traditional media. Voters frequently organically share political content in their networks. Previous findings have shown that political messages appealing to anger and enthusiasm are more likely to spread on social media platforms (Hasell & Weeks, 2016). In this context, substantive political discussions are overshadowed by emotionally charged and sometimes misleading content in the digital environment (Bene et al., 2022). Consequently, political campaigns have become increasingly negative over time (Haselmayer et al., 2019; K  lz et al., 2023). This trend has been partially attributed to negativity bias, as individuals tend to pay more attention to negative content than positive information (Antypas et al., 2023; Meffert et al., 2006; Sch  ne et al., 2021). Furthermore, negative content is more likely to attract the attention of news media, particularly in the political context (Haselmayer et al., 2019).

One of the main issues in contemporary democracies is the rise of negative campaigning on social media platforms (Maier & Nai, 2022). This practice is known by the intentional dissemination of unfavorable information about an individual or a subject to tarnish their public image (Haselmayer et al., 2019), such as the political experience, the level of professionalism, or their characteristics (e.g., appearance, family history, sexuality, religion). The prevalence of negative political campaigns poses contemporary challenges as it contributes to declining public trust in candidates and democratic institutions (Fridkin & Kenney, 2011; Lau et al., 2007). Some authors have also associated increasing polarization with techniques used in negative campaigning (Iyengar et al., 2012; Nai & Maier, 2023).

The transition towards a more aggressive political discourse is particularly noticeable in an era characterized by the dominance of social media. Previous studies show that spaces where users can have prompt and direct content dissemination and communication are more likely to be associated with negative content like Twitter (Antypas et al., 2023; Schöne et al., 2021). This trend can potentially diminish the quality of democratic discussions by marginalizing substantive debates and citizens' political participation (Klinger et al., 2023; Mubarak, 2022). Simultaneously, the prevailing negativity can intensify animosity among voters and reinforce societal divisions (Hameleers & Schmuck, 2017).

Politicians frequently emphasize negativity by prioritizing emotionally charged content without offering concrete proposals (Kruschinski et al., 2022). These topics are usually symbolic in nature, leading individuals to form extreme viewpoints on them, which in turn fosters polarizing reactions (Lee, 2021). Consequently, instead of focusing on specific political proposals that aim to solve different problems in society, negative campaigning often leads to sensational, divisive and controversial issues (Maier & Nai, 2022), such as criminality, migration, corruption, LGBTQ+ rights, gender policy, and race/ethnicity (Lee, 2021).

Negative campaigning is closely linked to political polarization, and as a result, countries that have recently witnessed polarized elections are more likely to encounter an increase in such campaigns. Previous findings have shown that in competitive and polarized electoral races, political campaigns are more likely to use messages appealing to feelings of anger (Sturm Wilkerson et al., 2021). This has been the case in Brazil, where, in the last general election, results have been decided by a minor difference of voters ("100% das seções totalizadas," 2022). As a result, negative campaigning has been a prevalent political strategy during past general elections in Brazil, surpassing the discussion over concrete political issues (Carothers & Feldmann, 2021; Joathan, 2019). Despite experiencing growth over the past few decades, Brazil is grappling with significant social, economic, and political crises. Negative campaigning in Brazil often amplifies divisive national issues, feeding broader societal polarization (Joathan, 2019), especially after the Lava Jato (Operation Car Wash) corruption investigations (see Damgaard, 2018; Lagunes & Svejnar, 2020).

The Operation Car Wash investigation uncovered politicians in various capacities involved in corruption, a factor that significantly eroded trust in national political institutions and figures (Mantzaris & Pillay, 2017). To regain the public trust, politicians portrayed themselves as outsiders. Such a strategy was prominent in the political messages of the far-right candidate Jair Bolsonaro, who amplified a discourse of being a new political force able to solve the corruption scandals in Brazil—even though he has been in politics for more than a decade (Saad-Filho & Boffo, 2021). Moreover, the coverage of corruption investigations conducted primarily by Brazilian legacy news media has made the theme salient in negative campaigns involving various political figures (Araújo & Prior, 2021; Davis & Straubhaar, 2020). Thus, corruption was a theme deliberately utilized by political figures seeking to gain voters' attention.

The salience of corruption issues in Brazilian political campaigns resonates within a specific context of Latin American politics, wherein crime and corruption frequently emerge as significant concerns in public opinion (Lagunes & Svejnar, 2020). However, as demonstrated by previous studies, this observation underscores a broader trend regarding the associations between political messages focusing on divisive issues and negativity (Maier & Nai, 2022). In recent years, other divisive issues salient in different democracies have been civil rights, gender issues, and Covid-19 (Kohler & Koinig, 2023; Kováts, 2018). Specifically, the attention to such matters has contributed to increased populism and polarization across different contexts

(Carothers & Feldmann, 2021; Clifford, 2019). Populist leaders often feature a conservative agenda against women's and LGBTQ+ rights (Kováts, 2018). In addition, they have also systematically denied scientific evidence during the Covid-19 pandemic, contributing to a decrease in acceptance of vaccination attitudes (Kohler & Koinig, 2023). Such a trend has also been observed in the Brazilian context, where Jair Bolsonaro shared political messages with a populist style during his election campaign and later continued to spread such content during his mandate as president between 2018 and 2022 (Evangelista & Bruno, 2019; Paiero & da Fonseca Bueno, 2022). The focus on divisive issues moves the debate away from substantive political topics, with candidates of different ideologies trying to accommodate such concerns in their political campaigns.

Considering the connections mentioned above between negativity and divisive issues, our first hypothesis is:

H1: Posts about divisive issues (crime, corruption, gender policy, civil rights, and Covid-19) will be associated with negative campaigns.

2.2. Acclaim Campaigning: A Counter Back to Negativity

Acclaim campaigning represents a strategic divergence from the often antagonistic nature of modern political campaigns. Unlike negative campaigns that target political rivals, acclaim strategies highlight a candidate's qualifications, accomplishments, and policy stances (Haselmayer, 2019). This self-promotion rhetoric is designed to craft a favorable public image of the candidate in question (Benoit, 2017). Consequently, political messages often seek to connect with voters by projecting an image of competence, integrity, and alignment with specific values. Previous research has revealed candidates' inclination toward adopting acclaim strategies, primarily due to the absence of a backlash effect—a potent adverse reaction to specific candidates (Benoit, 2017). This phenomenon has been prevalent within the Brazilian context, and acclaim strategies were dominant until recent years, with a shift toward more negative content occurring only during the 2014 elections (Borba, 2019; Joathan, 2019).

Within the realm of social media political campaigning, where candidates frequently resort to negative tactics to garner voter support, acclaim strategies can shift the focus toward constructive politics. Such political campaigns often feature candidates emphasizing their professional qualifications rather than divisive approaches. This approach, especially when emphasizing substantial political topics, can foster a more informed and reasoned public discourse, encouraging voters to choose based on their policy preferences and a candidate's competence in addressing specific political matters (Carmines & Stimson, 1980). Substantial political topics concern essential societal governance and public policy elements, including economic policies, healthcare reform, research funding, educational curricula, environmental regulations, and institutional structures (Lee, 2021). Conversely, acclaim campaigns can be misleading, emphasizing achievements that may not reflect reality. This can also mislead voters and lead to incorrect decisions, similar to the pitfalls associated with negative campaigns (Garrett, 2019).

Misleading acclaim strategies have also been observed in Brazilian political communication (Borba, 2019). In a context marked by corruption scandals leading to accusations and pervasive distrust regarding the honesty of political candidates (Damgaard, 2018; Lagunes & Svejnar, 2020), Brazilian candidates who adopt acclaim strategies often present themselves as trustworthy individuals committed to institutional reform and

reduction of corruption across various institutions and political spheres (Borba, 2019). Consequently, they tend to focus on political messages related to institutional policy issues (Benoit, 2017), including reorganizing governmental structures, constitutional amendments, or measures to enhance government transparency.

Acclaim campaigns have also been used in constructive ways, and candidates may use them to highlight their proposals and political preferences (Carmines & Stimson, 1980). For instance, political candidates often share political messages claiming they are competent in responding to important topics of concern for the general population, such as public health, public education, and economic improvements, mainly related to job security (Haselmayer, 2019). These topics are typically less divisive and are associated with positive evaluations of specific candidates.

We considered the attention towards institutional policy in the Brazilian context for responding to corruption concerns (Lagunes & Svejnar, 2020) and previous findings showing the use of acclaim strategies for substantial political topics in the formulation of our hypothesis (Carmines & Stimson, 1980; Haselmayer, 2019). Hence, we propose the following hypothesis:

H2: Posts about substantial political topics (education, health, economy, and institutional policy) will be associated with acclaim campaigns.

Conversely, studies on negativity suggest that political campaigns, particularly in platforms, have become increasingly negative (Haselmayer et al., 2019; Maier & Nai, 2022). Given the rising trend of negative campaigning on social media, in contrast to acclaim strategies, we assume that political messages will become more negative over time. In this sense, we propose the following hypotheses:

H3: Acclaim campaigns will be less likely in the 2022 electoral campaign compared to the 2018 one.

H4: Negative campaigns will be more likely in the 2022 electoral campaign than the 2018 one.

3. Method

To understand the relationship between negativity, acclaim, and political issues, we conducted a standardized content analysis of posts on official presidential candidate Twitter pages during the Brazilian national election campaigns of 2018 and 2022. We coded 1,191 tweets from the candidates' profiles that reached more than 3% of the votes during the elections. These tweets were collected using Twitonomy before Twitter limited API access.

The sampling period covers the 28 days before the elections, including the election days. A stratified random sample of 1,191 posts drawn from a total of 3,079 is coded. This sample corresponds to 50% of the posts after matching the number of posts of candidate *Ciro Gomes* to the average number of posts of the other candidates since *Gomes* published a disproportionately high number of messages (1,243 tweets), almost half of all publications. For the comparability of statistical tests, we coded a maximum of 150 posts per candidate and election. For some candidates, this figure corresponds to 100% of the publications, while for the most prolific candidates, the sample size is reduced to 20.6% (see Table 1).

Table 1. Published and coded posts per candidate and election.

Candidate (party)	Election year	Published posts	Coded posts (absolute numbers/%)
Geraldo Alckmin (PSB)	2018	317	150 (47.3%)
Jair Bolsonaro (PL)	2018	202	150 (74.3%)
	2022	141	141 (100%)
Ciro Gomes (PDT)	2018	727	150 (20.6%)
	2022	516	150 (29.1%)
Fernando Haddad (PT)	2018	464	150 (32.3%)
Lula da Silva (PT)	2022	553	150 (27.1%)
Simone Tebet (MDB)	2022	159	150 (94.3%)
Total		3,079	1,191 (38.7%)

Note: Percentage of coded posts in brackets.

To test our hypotheses, the variables negativity and acclaim were defined: Negativity includes posts disseminating unfavorable information about political opponents to damage their image; acclaim is coded in self-promotion posts highlighting candidates' own qualifications, accomplishments, and policy stances. To check which topics associated with these communication strategies, we also coded the political issues present in the post: civil rights, corruption, Covid-19, crime, defense and military, economy, education, election race, environment, foreign relations, gender policy, health, and institutional policy. The variable election race focused on messages on the "horse-race" component of politics, such as in posts focusing on media debates, voting procedures, campaigns, and polls. These variables were coded dichotomously, with 2 if they were present in the post and 1 if they were not present. In this sense, multiple political issues and campaign strategies could have been coded in a single post.

The coding scheme is based on the design used to analyze political communication on social media by Haßler et al. (2021) and is available in an online repository (https://bit.ly/CamforS_OSF). A group of political communication researchers designed this comprehensive coding scheme to enable standardization in studying digital political campaigns worldwide. This coding scheme offers systematic operationalization for the political issues tested in this study, such as institutional policy, election race, foreign relations, defense, civil rights, education, environment, criminality, economy, and health. The coding covered all elements of the Twitter posts, including visual elements such as images and the first minute of videos. To ensure the reliability of the manual coding, a test was conducted among the two coders on a random sample of 100 posts. The Krippendorff's alpha coefficient for all categories ($\alpha > 0.70$) proved to be good (Neuendorf, 2016).

Hypotheses were examined through binary logistic regression means. The initial model explores the associations between negativity and various political issues (H1), along with the year 2022 (H4). The second model examines the associations between acclaim and different political topics (H2), as well as the year 2022 (H3). In our models, we included various political issues, the year of the election, and fixed effects for candidates posting political messages.

4. Findings

Figure 1 shows the distribution of the analyzed variables comparing 2018 and 2022, with the absolute quantitative and their respective percentages. Acclaim campaigns correspond to 18.67% of the 2018 sample,

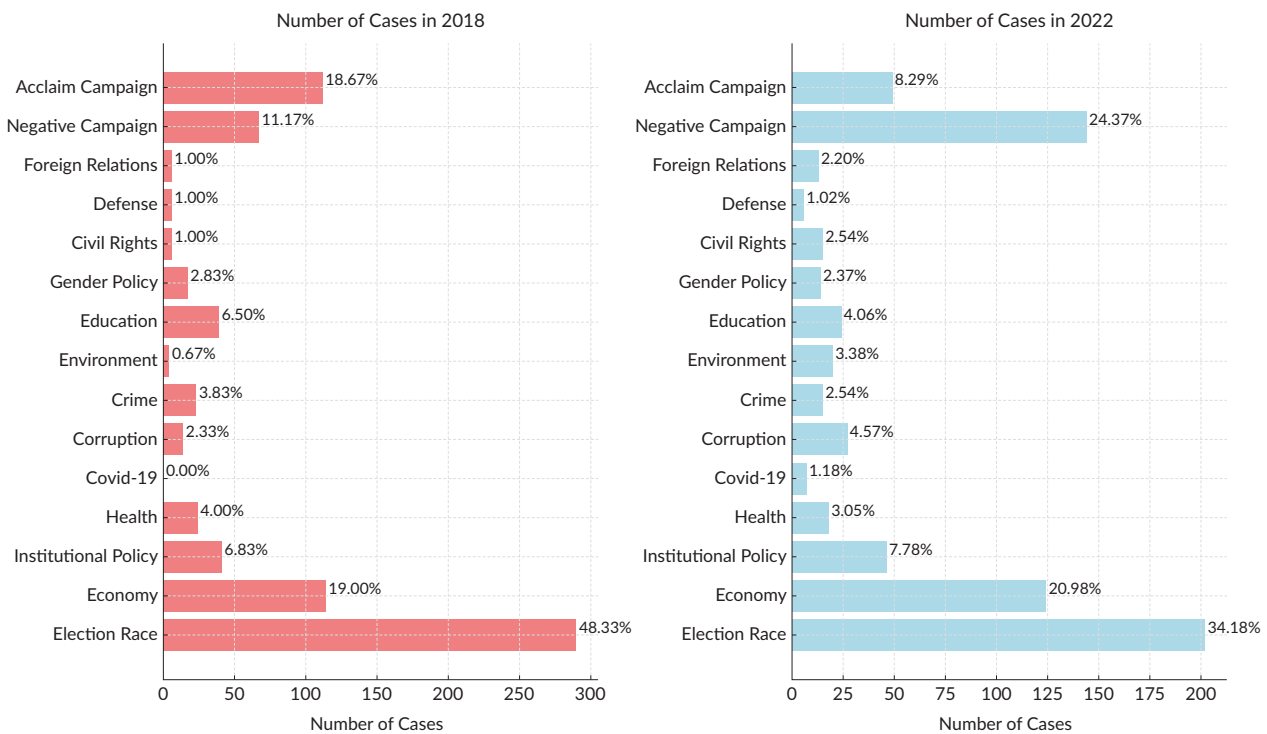


Figure 1. Comparison of the variables' distribution between 2018 and 2022.

compared to 8.29% of the 2022 sample. In contrast, negative campaigns correspond to 11.17% of the posts from 2018, compared to 24.37% from 2022. In this sense, descriptive statistics show significant trends aligned to our H1 and H2, showing that a more positive campaign characterized 2018 and that this tendency reversed in 2022, with campaigns clearly more negative.

Concerning political issues, the theme with the highest distribution was the election race in both years, followed by economic and institutional policy. The plot shows some changes in the prevalence of themes comparing both elections. For instance, in 2018, education corresponded to 6.50% of the posts, whereas in 2022, there was a decrease to 4.06%. Similarly, crime occupied 3.83% of the posts in the first election, compared to 2.54% in the second. In addition, health decreased from 4% of the posts to 3.05%.

Other topics showed an increasing tendency. For instance, civil rights represented 1% of the distribution in 2018, but they increased to 2.54% of the posts in 2022. Environmental issues corresponded to 0.67% of the posts in the first election, with a noteworthy increase to 3.38% in the second election. Corruption corresponded to 2.33% of the distribution in 2018, whereas in 2022, there was an increase to 4.57% of the posts. Defense and gender policy were relatively stable in both years.

4.1. Hypothesis Testing

Binary logistic regression was performed to test this study's H1: Posts about divisive issues (crime, corruption, gender policy, civil rights, and Covid-19) will be associated with negative campaigns. The first model (see Table 2) is statistically significant, showing the likelihood of different political issues and the 2022 election campaign being more negative than in 2018. Results show that corruption was a relevant indicator

of negative campaigns ($b = 2.13, p < 0.001$), in line with H1. In addition to corruption, we found significant divisive political issues associated with negativity were Covid-19 ($b = 1.91, p < 0.05$) and gender policy ($b = 1.35, p < 0.001$). We did not find significant results for other political issues, such as institutional policy, election race, foreign relations, defense, civil rights, education, environment, criminality, economy, and health. The regression model partially supports H1. It highlights those three divisive issues (corruption, gender policy, and Covid-19) associated with negative campaigns.

Model 1 was also used to test H4, positing that negative campaigns would be more likely in the 2022 electoral campaign than in 2018. The regression model yielded significant results in which the 2022 election campaign ($b = 0.98, p < 0.001$) was more negative than the 2018 one. Consequently, H4 was confirmed. The pseudo- R^2 for the first model was 0.11, suggesting that the model can explain approximately 11% of the variability in negative campaigns. We treated political candidates as fixed effects, including all candidates in the model, and compared them to *Ciro Gomes*, which served as the reference category. The regression model yielded non-significant results for the political candidates.

Table 2. Binary logistic models.

Predictors	Negativity (Model 1)	Acclaim (Model 2)
Year 2022	0.98*** (0.25)	-1.46*** (0.37)
Covid-19	1.91* (0.91)	-13.78 (533.70)
Institutional policy	0.21 (0.29)	0.23 (0.33)
Election pace	-0.09 (0.20)	-0.23 (0.22)
Foreign relations	-0.70 (0.79)	0.83 (0.65)
Defense	0.39 (0.73)	0.33 (0.75)
Civil rights	0.29 (0.54)	-0.26 (0.75)
Gender policy	1.35** (0.43)	1.00** (0.47)
Education	0.01 (0.38)	1.15*** (0.32)
Environment	-1.17 (0.76)	-1.15 (1.05)
Criminality	-0.29 (0.49)	0.53 (0.48)
Corruption	2.13*** (0.37)	0.50 (0.45)
Health	0.31 (0.42)	0.84** (0.38)
Economy	0.31 (0.20)	0.31 (0.22)
Bolsonaro	-0.20 (0.24)	-2.71*** (0.54)
Lula	-0.29 (0.30)	0.73* (0.41)
Alckmin	0.19 (0.34)	-0.29 (0.29)
Haddad	0.07 (0.36)	-0.37 (0.29)
Tebet	0.32 (0.28)	-0.11 (0.45)
Constant	-2.31*** (0.27)	-1.17*** (0.24)
Observations	1,182	1,182
Log likelihood	-492.84	-397.06
Akaike information criterion	1,025.69	834.12
Pseudo R^2	0.11	0.16

Notes: *** Significant at the 1% level, ** significant at the 5% level, * significant at the 10% level.

The second regression model tested H2, stating that posts about substantial political topics (education, health, economy, and institutional policy) will be associated with acclaim campaigns. Results show significant results with positive coefficients for gender policy ($b = 1.00, p < 0.05$), education ($b = 1.15, p < 0.001$), and health ($b = 0.84, p < 0.01$). In contrast, non-significant results were found for economy ($b = 0.31$) and institutional policy ($b = 0.23$). Results partially confirmed H2, highlighting the association between specific substantial political issues and acclaim campaigns. Results also indicate a positive association between such issues and tweets containing acclaim strategy. In the case of acclaim messages, results were also significant for specific candidates, such as Bolsonaro ($b = -2.71, p < 0.001$) and Lula ($b = 0.73, p < 0.01$). The results for the case of Lula indicate that his posts are more likely to be associated with acclaim strategies than those of Ciro Gomes. In contrast, for Bolsonaro, the negative coefficient indicates that his posts are less likely to be associated with acclaim messages compared to Gomes.

Model 2 was also used to test H3, that acclaim campaigns will be less likely in the 2022 electoral campaign than in the 2018 one. In line with this hypothesis, the last binary regression model showed significant results for the 2022 electoral campaign ($b = -1.46, p < 0.001$). In this regard, the negative coefficient suggests that tweets from the 2022 electoral campaign are less likely to be positive. The second model's pseudo- R^2 was 0.16, indicating that the model can explain approximately 16% of the variability in acclaim campaigns. The model is statistically significant and shows that the variables year of the electoral campaign, gender policy, education, health, and Lula are strong predictors of using acclaim strategies in electoral campaigns.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

This study has provided critical insights into the dynamics of negative and acclaim campaigning within the Brazilian elections, focusing on their associations with substantive vs. divisive political issues and the evolution of campaign strategies between the 2018 and 2022 national presidential elections. Our findings resonate with the established theoretical frameworks and reveal contextual patterns and strategic shifts crucial to understanding contemporary electoral processes, particularly in Latin America.

The regression results partially support H1, that a significant association exists between divisive issues (crime, corruption, gender policy, civil rights, and Covid-19) and negative campaigning. Results showed significant associations between corruption-related discourse and negative messages. This finding is consistent with previous literature that highlights the prevalence of corruption as a central theme in negative campaigning in societies recently shaken by scandals related to political corruption, such as Brazil after Operation Car Wash targeting corruption charges (Joathan, 2019; Saad-Filho & Boffo, 2021). We also found results supporting the expansion of negative campaigning related to immediate and symbolic societal concerns such as Covid-19 and gender policies (Kim et al., 2018). Finally, our models showed non-significant associations between negative campaigns and substantive political issues such as economy, institutional policy, education, and health. Such finding is in line with the literature showing that negative campaigns contribute to reducing the quality of the political debate (Klinger et al., 2023; Mubarok, 2022).

The trend towards negativity is in line with the literature in the Global North countries showing associations between negativity and divisive and symbolically charged content, which resonates on a more emotional level and provokes societal apprehensions and sentiments (Kim et al., 2018; Maier & Nai, 2022). However, non-significant associations were found for other divisive issues, such as crime and civil rights. This finding

may suggest that those were not salient divisive themes in the context of Brazilian elections. In this sense, other comparative studies that include more countries could reveal how different divisive issues are salient among different contexts. For example, in Colombia, previous studies have shown that crime is a salient theme because of the criminality issues with Farc organizations (Carothers & Feldmann, 2021).

The study revealed insights into the shifts in the employed political campaign strategies over the years. Results indicating increased negativity in the 2022 campaigns, alongside the predominant focus on divisive issues, confirmed H4. This finding suggests a possible tactical shift in political messaging. The trend toward negativity can be understood as a reflection of the post-Operation-Car-Wash political climate. Politicians could have responded to the feelings of distrust with a strategic move from policy-driven debates towards more sensational, controversy-centric narratives (Saad-Filho & Boffo, 2021). The increase in the theme of corruption in political campaigns aligns with this assumption, and previous findings show that in Latin American countries, corruption is a political issue likely to affect party attachment (Winters & Weitz-Shapiro, 2015). In addition, our results showed a reduction of education themes in 2022, which may suggest the departure from governance-oriented campaigning, potentially influencing the quality of democratic discourse and voter decision-making. Our findings on the expansion of negative campaigns also resonate with the broader literature, showing that political discussions in social media have become increasingly negative (Antypas et al., 2023; Schöne et al., 2021). Thus, our finding supports both contextual and broader explanations.

In contrast to H2, our data analysis partially supported our hypothesis that substantive political issues (education, health, economy, and institutional policy) would be associated with acclaim messages. While we hypothesized that institutional policy issues would be related to acclaim strategies, the analysis defied this assumption. Results showed that issues such as education, health, and gender policy were more influential in acclaim campaigns. Notably, we found surprising that gender policies were both associated with acclaim and negative strategies. A possible explanation could be the sources of such acclaim messages, with politicians from the right wing using gender policy as a topic of negative campaigns. In contrast, politicians from the left wing adopted the opposite strategies. This finding may be connected to gender policy as a divisive issue in Brazil, with competing views from different political parties (Sauandaj, 2023). Yet, the finding calls for a deeper theoretical exploration of the factors associated with thematic choices of both acclaim and negative strategies. Moreover, the observed decline in acclaim campaigns in 2022, as posited in H3, shows a worrying picture of the current political discourse, suggesting a back off from constructive, policy-based campaigning towards an arena dominated by scandal and sensationalism (Carothers & Feldmann, 2021). Yet, it is important to note that such a trend toward negativity may be circumstantial, and follow-up investigations are crucial to examine if the focus on negativity and divisive issues persists in the future.

In our models, we also included candidates to examine if there were specific findings concerning ideology, style, and experience. In our first model examining negativity, non-significant results were found for the candidates. This finding shows that negativity is an overall tendency in the Brazilian landscape and this phenomenon suppresses certain communication styles, party affiliations, and political experiences. However, in our second model examining the acclaim campaign, significant results were found for Lula and Bolsonaro, compared to Ciro, the reference category. In the case of Lula, a positive coefficient suggests that he uses more acclaim messages compared to Ciro. In contrast, Bolsonaro uses fewer acclaim messages than Ciro. Our findings are partially in line with previous studies showing that experienced candidates are less likely to

use negative ads compared to challengers (Ridout & Searles, 2011). Lula was previously president of Brazil, whereas Ciro was a challenger in the previous elections. In this sense, Lula's past experience can explain his preference for acclaim messages. However, even though Bolsonaro was an incumbent in 2022, his negative association with acclaim message suggests that his communication style is less positive, in line with other populist figures (Ernst et al., 2019).

This study presents certain limitations. The use of Twitter data introduces limitations to the generalizability of the findings, given the platform's distinct logic, user demographics, and engagement dynamics. Future research could benefit from a more comprehensive thematic analysis and an expansion into other social media platforms for a deep understanding of online political campaigning, such as Facebook and Instagram. Additionally, comparative studies that include a broader scope of countries and platforms through a longitudinal lens could help to better understand the evolving landscape of negative and acclaim political campaigns. Finally, follow-up investigations are crucial to examine whether the increase in negativity and the political debate on divisive issues persist in the Brazilian landscape, or if the findings in our study are solely associated with the circumstances of corruption scandals in Brazil.

In conclusion, the study highlights a shift in political campaigning from acclaim to negative campaigns, where sensationalism and negativity are increasingly dominating over substantive, policy-oriented discourse. Our findings carry profound implications for both theoretical understanding and practical applications in political campaigning. On a practical level, the increasing negativity in campaigns shows a worrying picture beyond the Global North, with concrete political proposals losing ground for more symbolic-driven content. Moreover, this political communication strategy forecasts an even more polarized scenario, especially on sensitive issues such as gender policies. This trend worries democracies globally, given the increased polarization and distrust over political figures. Theoretically, our study highlights the need for a more nuanced framework capable of accommodating the contextual dynamism of campaign strategies, particularly in countries with high levels of corruption and criminality. In this sense, more research on negativity is lacking in the Global South for more generalized conclusions. The evident shift from substantive debates toward scandal-centric campaigning underscores the need for societal interventions. These should bolster voters' critical political consumption, ensuring the electorate can sift through sensationalism and make informed, policy-driven decisions.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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Patriotism and National Symbols in Russian and Ukrainian Elections

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Abstract

How do political parties leverage patriotic appeals in their online campaigning within the context of autocracies and hybrid regimes? This study delves into the digital campaign strategies deployed by political parties during the most recent legislative elections in Russia (2021) and Ukraine (2019). In light of the armed conflict between Russia-backed separatists and Ukrainian forces in the eastern area of Ukraine, war-related themes and patriotic rhetoric emerged as pivotal concerns for politicians in both countries. The “rally around the flag” phenomenon posits that, in times of crisis, citizens often experience an intensified sense of national identity and patriotic fervor. Consequently, references to patriotism and related topics may evoke positive responses and prove instrumental for politicians during elections, serving to engage, mobilize, and attract voters. Drawing on a manual content analysis of the underlying communication strategies, we assessed whether parties’ reference to patriotic gestures and symbols or their attention to related policy topics (defense, war and military conflicts, and foreign policy and international relations) yielded an increased level of user engagement. Our findings reveal that references to patriotic symbols engendered increased user engagement within the Russian context, albeit without significantly affecting the engagement of Ukrainian voters. The latter tended to exhibit greater engagement with posts addressing defense and foreign policy matters though. Interestingly, Russian parties conspicuously avoided war-related topics, while Ukrainian voters displayed a propensity to penalize such content by generating fewer reactions to it.

Keywords

legislative elections; national symbols; patriotism; political campaigning; Russia; Ukraine

1. Introduction

Patriotism's influence on political discourse and electoral strategies has been pervasive across the globe. It wields the power to sway public sentiment, mobilize citizens, and influence election outcomes. Within the realm of political campaigning, the strategic utilization of patriotic appeals has attracted significant attention for its potential to rally support and secure voters' approval. This article embarks on a comprehensive exploration of patriotic appeals, measured through the usage of national symbols and patriotic gestures of politicians, within online political campaigns, with a particular emphasis on two post-Soviet countries, Russia and Ukraine.

Both states emerged from the dissolution of the Soviet Union, adopting semi-presidential systems with direct parallel voting for members of parliament. However, the political regimes in the countries diverge significantly in the level of competitiveness and general adherence to democratic standards, along with media freedoms. In the political narratives of both nations, patriotism's impact has been notably significant, especially in the aftermath of pivotal geopolitical events. The annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014 and the conflict in Eastern Ukraine have forged an environment where patriotism, in its various forms, has become a dominant fixture of political discourse. These events have triggered what political scientists often call the "rally around the flag" effect, a phenomenon where populations undergoing crises exhibit heightened patriotic sentiments. In Russia, this effect manifested clearly, as evidenced by the substantial surge in President Putin's approval ratings following the Crimea annexation (Kizilova & Norris, 2023; Rogov, 2016). Ukraine, too, witnessed a surge in national self-identification and patriotic sentiment in the wake of the Euromaidan uprising and Russian aggression (Doroshenko et al., 2019; Kulyk, 2016).

While patriotism and the rally around the flag effect are well-studied in democratic states, less attention is given to autocratic and hybrid regimes. Understanding communication strategies in non-democracies is crucial given the global rise of autocratic tendencies and democratic backsliding (Nord et al., 2024), as evidenced by literature on informational authoritarianism, which demonstrates autocratic leaders' concern for public opinion and support (Greene & Robertson, 2022; Guriev & Treisman, 2023).

The outbreak of war against Ukraine emphasizes the need for analysis in this region. Some scholars (Kizilova & Norris, 2023) argue that the Crimea annexation and the 2022 Russian invasion could stem from similar motives, potentially leading to a rally around the flag effect, warranting further study. Existing literature on the post-Crimea rally around the flag effect primarily focuses on Putin, with limited exploration of other political actors (Sirotkina & Zavadskaya, 2020). In contrast, our analysis examines the effects of patriotic appeals and related topics.

Addressing these research gaps, this study delves into the effects of patriotic appeal, along with related policy topics (including defense, international relations, and foreign policy), conducting a content analysis of political parties' Facebook posts during the legislative elections in Ukraine (2019) and Russia (2021). Subsequently, we systematically assess how these thematic appeals impact user engagement and delve into the distinctions across the two countries while exploring the driving forces behind these variations.

2. Online Campaigning and User Engagement

In the social media era, political actors utilize direct mass communication platforms, bypassing traditional media gatekeeping mechanisms (Magin et al., 2017). This digital space expands audience reach (Bene et al., 2022; Papp & Patkós, 2019) and can lead to favorable political outcomes (Bene, 2018).

Recognizing online audiences' reluctance to engage extensively with political content (Nielsen & Vaccari, 2013), political actors strategically tailor messages to user preferences to generate engagement and enhance content virality (Kalsnes, 2016). User engagement, including reactions, comments, and shares, acts as a viral mechanism, extending content visibility (Anspach, 2017; Bene, 2017). It influences Facebook algorithms, with highly reacted posts more likely to appear prominently in users' news feeds (DeVito, 2017).

Within the realm of online political communication, user engagement involves observable activities tied to specific candidate communications (Xenos et al., 2017, p. 5), such as comments, likes, and shares on Facebook posts. Stromer-Galley (2000) defines interaction as the manifestation of responsiveness, where users actively participate in the discourse surrounding political content. Motivations for engagement—commenting linked to social interaction, liking to presentational motivations, and sharing to information-sharing motivations (Macafee, 2013)—vary in cognitive demand. Clicking the Like button may require minimal effort while sharing demands more profound consideration. Commenting, involving responses and evaluations, adds an additional layer of cognitive involvement. Common motives underpin user engagement, with the agreement, alignment with posters' behavior, and emotional attachment driving clicks on the Like button (R. A. Hayes et al., 2016). In essence, user engagement is not merely a metric; it is a dynamic interaction shaping the visibility, impact, and reception of political content in the digital age.

In the pursuit of enhanced online popularity, political actors might adopt a self-centered communication style (Bene et al., 2022; Papp & Patkós, 2019), aiming for an agenda-setting position. Content focusing on salient topics, certain policy issues (Heiss et al., 2019), emotional messages (Brady et al., 2017; Eberl et al., 2020; Soroka, 2014), and populist rhetoric (Bene et al., 2023; Bennett & Pfetsch, 2018; Jost et al., 2022) can increase user reactions, although with heterogeneity across different political contexts.

Within the context of non-fully democratic regimes, wherein opposition forces often occupy an influential agenda-setting stance on social media, the digital sphere takes on a pivotal role for ruling authorities. This is especially true as they endeavor to vie for the attention of a potentially dissenting online audience (Guriev & Treisman, 2023). In this specific context, regime actors strategically concentrate their efforts on specific subjects, thereby exerting influence over or moulding public opinion in a favorable direction (King et al., 2017).

3. The Dynamics of Patriotism: Factors and Effects

Regarding patriotism, definitions converge on deep allegiance to a nation, often expressed through symbolic elements. In its extreme form, patriotism may encompass ideas of national superiority and the nation's vital role in forging bonds with citizens (Hurwitz & Peffley, 1990; Spinner-Halev & Theiss-Morse, 2003; Sullivan et al., 1992). Essentially, patriotism reflects profound love and unwavering loyalty to one's country, rooted in dedication to the political community, institutions, values, and geographical identity (Parker, 2010; Violi, 1995). This attachment often involves emotional and rationalized sentiments through national

symbols (e.g., flag, anthem, coat of arms) invoking feelings of pride, love, and unwavering loyalty (Finell & Zogmaister, 2015).

Considering this, patriotism and nationalism share common elements: National pride is fundamental to both (Smith & Kim, 2006). Patriotism is characterized by love, attachment, or support for one's own country, differing from nationalism by not advocating superiority over other nations (De Figueiredo & Elkins, 2003). However, we tend to acknowledge the intertwined nature of patriotism and nationalism (Bieber, 2018; Ernst et al., 2019; Howe et al., 2022; Kizilova & Norris, 2023), recognizing that these concepts often overlap. In our study, we operationalize patriotic appeal through national symbols and patriotic gestures of politicians. The emotional valence of these symbols is crucial for our research, attracting user attention and fostering engagement. Users may experience feelings associated with national superiority or pride, enhancing national identification. The significance lies in the emotionally charged nature of these symbols, vital for capturing users' attention and fostering engagement.

In Ukraine, far-right nationalist parties surged during the 2014 elections, using connective action logic through interactive social media (Doroshenko et al., 2019). Non-democratic regimes like Russia also employ nationalism to bolster legitimacy, especially amid economic challenges (Bieber, 2018).

Nationalists combine appeals to the nation with policy promises, addressing political, cultural, and socio-economic concerns (Howe et al., 2022). They strategically shape perceptions of the social order and divert attention from class identities. Successful nationalist mobilization depends on the relative strength of national versus class identities (Solt, 2011). Patriotism shapes citizens' views of related policies and political behavior. In the US, patriotism influences support for military policies and attitudes toward foreign states (Hurwitz & Peffley, 1990).

In non-democratic electoral landscapes, nationalism and patriotism play pivotal roles, often wielded by autocrats to consolidate support and navigate challenges. The concept of nationalism, fostering a sense of community within a polity, is harnessed by autocratic regimes to build broad popular backing (Dukalskis & Patane, 2019). Autocrats strategically employ patriotic and nationalist appeals to create an image of themselves as the defenders and leaders of the nation, equating any opposition to a stand against national unity (Goode & Stroup, 2015). This tactic becomes particularly pronounced during elections and international crises, offering autocrats a means to divert attention from economic troubles and rally their main supporters (Aytaç, 2021; Baturu & Tolstrup, 2024; Solt, 2011).

For post-Soviet countries like Russia and Ukraine, communication strategies vary. Yet, patriotism is consistently emphasized during elections, mobilizing supporters amid crises (Baturu & Tolstrup, 2024). In weak democracies like Ukraine, the "nationalist card" is a common electoral strategy, allowing leaders to avoid substantive issues by relying on patriotic appeals (Mansfield & Snyder, 1995). In Russia, post-2014 sanctions create a powerful mobilization frame, increasing the demand for public displays of support (Hellmeier, 2021). This external challenge not only facilitates the mobilization of regime supporters but also heightens the demand for public displays of support, aligning with the rally around the flag approach (Hellmeier, 2021).

The intensity of patriotic sentiments is strongly correlated with external crises and a country's military involvement (Murray, 2017). Empirical studies consistently highlight the connection between conflicts and

national identification (Gibler et al., 2012). During crises or war, blind patriotism often surges (Parker, 2010). Individuals align closely with the nation for comfort, seeking solace in political authorities. Blind patriotism emerges as a reaction to external threats. By identifying with the state and its policies, individuals satisfy a need for protection, often manifesting as unconditional support. The diversionary theory of war suggests that states may deliberately engage in conflicts to bolster national cohesiveness (Levy, 1989).

Indeed, many politicians strategically incorporate patriotic appeals into their communication strategies and electoral campaigns. Empirical studies have shown that this strategic choice paid off with increased electoral support (Sullivan et al., 1992). By employing national symbols and other overtly patriotic elements, politicians aim to signal their commitment to the nation, eliciting specific positive attitudes associated with these symbolic objects. In some cases, political forces have employed patriotic appeals consistently over time, effectively establishing ownership over the issue of patriotism (D. Hayes, 2005) and related topics, including foreign policy (Petrocik, 1996). As such, we posit the following:

H1: The higher emphasis on patriotic rhetoric and patriotic themes increases user engagement.

However, the impact of national and patriotic symbols on voter attitudes is not always straightforward and universally positive, as it can vary depending on individuals' political predispositions and the appeal source. Some researchers posit that national symbols can influence perceptions of specific policies (Ariely, 2018) or alter the perception of individual candidates' political image.

The rally around the flag effect can also matter, suggesting that patriotism benefits ruling parties. The rally around the flag effect refers to the surge in approval state authorities experience at the onset of a major national security crisis, followed by a subsequent decline. This phenomenon involves threats to collective national security, leading to a patriotic truce and cross-party support for defending the nation. It often includes a heightened sense of national identity and increased support for the governing group (Theiler, 2018). Typically triggered by events like interstate wars, terrorist attacks (e.g., 9/11), or disasters like the Covid-19 pandemic, this concept, introduced by Mueller in the 1970s, outlines criteria for such events to induce the rally effect, including international scope, dramatic focus, and direct involvement of the country and its leadership (Mueller, 1970).

The dynamics of the rally around the flag effect vary based on key factors, influencing its occurrence and duration. Murray (2017) highlights conditions such as the salience of the issue in the media and public agenda, bipartisan consensus on the threat, and the country's war status at home or abroad. Defensive actions are more likely to trigger a rally than offensive ones, though this distinction can be ambiguous (Entman, 2004). The duration of improvements in public support for leaders following foreign affairs and military actions, such as the outbreak of wars, tends to last weeks on average (Kizilova & Norris, 2023).

In non-democratic societies, the rally around the flag effect becomes a tool for political legitimacy. Rulers facing foreign pressures or domestic challenges deploy patriotic rhetoric to rally supporters and legitimize their claim to power (Baturo & Tolstrup, 2024). This strategic use extends to election campaigns, where patriotic discourse aims to depoliticize the vote while making it ideationally salient, disarming ideological opponents (Goode & Stroup, 2015). Some autocrats leverage nationalist sentiments, framing support for the regime as a civic obligation to safeguard the nation from external threats (Frye, 2019). Thus, people in such countries

might express patriotic feelings during a rally around the flag due to perceived majority sentiment and social desirability concerns (Hale, 2022).

The strength and endurance of the rally around the flag effect are notably pronounced in closed authoritarian societies. Tight control over media, especially national TV, enhances its potency, showcasing its heightened impact (Kizilova & Norris, 2023). Evidence from Russia after the Crimea crisis, known as the “Crimean moment,” underscores the lasting positive emotional engagement with the leadership (Greene & Robertson, 2022). Therefore we expect that patriotism, due to the rally around the flag effect, benefits ruling parties:

H2: The higher emphasis on patriotic rhetoric and patriotic themes increases user engagement, only for the incumbent.

4. Legislative Elections in Russia and Ukraine

For the empirical part of the study, we focus on two post-Soviet countries: Russia and Ukraine. Ukraine is typically classified as a regime in transition or a partially free country, while Russia is mostly unanimously categorised as an autocratic country. Thus, according to the classification proposed by Marshall and Gurr (2020) in the 2016 Polity 5, both Ukraine and Russia were categorized as uninstitutionalized/weak democracies. Slipowitz (2021) categorized Russia as a not-free, consolidated authoritarian regime, and Ukraine as a partially free, transitional, or hybrid regime in both 2019 and 2021. The Index of Liberal Democracy (Coppedge et al., 2021) fluctuated around 0.1 points for Russia and was higher for Ukraine, averaging around 0.3 between 2019 and 2021.

Despite their Soviet Union roots and adoption of semi-presidential systems, both nations have distinct political landscapes. Ukraine held its latest legislative election in 2019 (originally scheduled for October but moved to July by President Zelenskyy), while Russia’s was in 2021. Each country had five parties pass the electoral threshold. In Russia, the incumbent United Russia (UR) party saw a slight decline to 50.88% from 55.23% in previous elections but maintained a wide majority. Allegations of fraud arose, particularly regarding electronic voting in opposition strongholds like Moscow. In Ukraine, the incumbent European Solidarity (ES) party suffered a significant decline. The newly formed Servant of the People (SP) party, backed by President Zelensky, won 43.16% of the vote, securing a majority.

Patriotism is a salient topic in the political discourse of both countries, particularly accentuated by events like the annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014 and the escalation of conflict in Eastern Ukraine, which has persisted to a lesser extent until the outbreak of full-scale war in 2022. Consequently, both countries have been embroiled in a prolonged military conflict since 2014. In light of such crises, linked with military conflicts, we can expect to observe heightened patriotic sentiments.

In Russia, the Crimea annexation boosted President Putin’s approval ratings significantly. Polls showed a surge from 65% in January 2014 to an impressive 85% in July 2014, lasting for years thereafter (Hale, 2018; Kizilova & Norris, 2023; Rogov, 2016). Some scholars suggest this move aimed to counter declining domestic support by triggering a rally around the flag effect through patriotism and nationalism. In Ukraine, the Euromaidan uprising saw a notable increase in national self-identification, further strengthened by subsequent conflict (Kulyk, 2016; Sasse & Lackner, 2018).

Following these events, since 2014 the Russian political elite reinforced anti-Western rhetoric by employing “us” versus “them” narratives. Criticizing modern Ukraine for its pro-EU attitudes, supported and incited by an allegedly hostile “collective West” presented as Russia’s main global rival, became the main narrative in state-sponsored Russian media.

Compared to other post-Soviet countries, Ukraine has had a dynamic political landscape, marked by two major uprisings: the Orange Revolution in 2004 and Euromaidan in 2013–2014. A significant cleavage centered on Ukraine’s relationship with the West, including potential EU integration, versus Russia’s dominance aspirations. Pro-Western and pro-Russian forces, backed by the Kremlin, often clashed over these visions. Since 2014, Ukraine has aligned more closely with the West, emphasizing national identity, language, and cultural symbols (Barrington, 2022; Bureiko & Moga, 2019). These became key points in public discourse and political rhetoric.

Ukraine has upheld overall more competitive and transparent elections (with some exceptions), whereas Russia has repeatedly faced allegations of election rigging and widespread government-backed frauds, leading—amongst other things—to the largest protests in modern Russian history (2011–2012). Furthermore, Russia’s political system is based on a personalized autocracy with Vladimir Putin being in power for over two decades. Another crucial distinction lies in the degree of media freedom: Russia’s legacy media is heavily controlled by the government, while Ukraine boasts a significantly more open and free media system (Nord et al., 2024).

Nevertheless, we can argue that patriotic attitudes in both countries have experienced an increase and may be associated with various positive political outcomes, such as greater engagement and political mobilization. Accordingly, we investigate how patriotic narratives were employed during political campaigns in both countries and analyze to what extent users engage more with patriotically related messages. Thus, our analysis evaluates the impact of patriotic appeals as well as that of topics related to war, military conflicts, and defense policies, which are considered in the literature as drivers or significant mediators of patriotic attitudes (Ariely, 2017; Sullivan et al., 1992).

5. Data and Methods

We are focusing on Facebook, the main social platform in Ukraine and the second in Russia (StatCounter, 2021). It is essential to note that VKontakte (VK), the most widely used social network in Russia, is not as prevalent in Ukraine, where it holds the sixth position in popularity. We acknowledge that not incorporating VK in our study is a limitation, but we have chosen Facebook due to its significant audience in Russia, especially for political discussions (White & McAllister, 2014). It is worth mentioning that VK serves broader spare time interests, while Facebook is particularly relevant for political discourse in Russia and this is another reason to focus on it. While the Facebook audience in Russia tends to be more educated and more often located in larger cities, we should notice that these features apply also to social media users in many different countries (such as Twitter/X users in the Western world).

Through CrowdTangle, we gathered all Facebook posts published by the official accounts of parties that passed the 5% threshold in the last four weeks before the election (in Russia the elections lasted three days). Two weeks after the election, we collected data on user engagement, including the number of likes,

comments, and shares. The resulting dataset comprises 1,963 posts. Further details regarding the number of posts, user engagement, and vote share for each party can be found in the Supplementary File.

Subsequently, an expert coder with relevant expertise in the politics of the region conducted manual content classification for all the collected posts using the coding scheme developed by the DigiWorld research group, concerning the textual content as well as visual elements (images and videos) of the posts. After that another trained coder coded a 10% sample of posts to assess intercoder reliability. We computed Brennan and Prediger's kappa as part of our interrater reliability test. This method is well-suited for robust binary and sparse categories (Quarfoot & Levine, 2016). The obtained values indicate a high level of reliability, with Brennan and Prediger's kappa exceeding 0.8 for all categories used in the present analysis. This content analysis provided initial insights into the extent to which politicians from both countries emphasized patriotic appeals and related topics in their campaign communications.

As outlined earlier, our operationalization of patriotic appeal involves identifying references to patriotic symbols or intentional gestures by politicians. Therefore, our primary independent variable, patriotism, is a binary variable, with posts coded as 1 if they contain any of the specified elements. These elements include images featuring patriotic gestures (e.g., intentional hand-on-heart gestures during national references, salutes, or paying tribute to the flag) and posts featuring images with patriotic symbols like coats of arms and the national flag. The choice of symbolic elements may vary depending on the geographical context, incorporating symbols relevant to the specific territory or country region.

To provide examples of the independent variable, patriotism, consider the actions of Sviatoslav Vakarchuk, the leader of the Holos party and a prominent musician in Ukraine. During his campaign, Vakarchuk held numerous concerts across the country, which were extensively documented on Facebook. Posts on his Facebook page often featured photos and videos showing Vakarchuk symbolically placing his hand over his heart while singing the Ukrainian national anthem or appearing on stage wrapped in the national flag. Similarly, in Russia, the UR party frequently features its politicians in videos where the national flag serves as a prominent backdrop, occupying a significant portion of the screen. Additionally, these politicians may be depicted wearing the ribbon of Saint George, a patriotic military symbol in modern Russia commemorating the Second World War. Posts coded as including patriotism follow a similar pattern to the examples provided.

As the literature suggests (Ariely, 2018; Howe et al., 2022; Hurwitz & Peffley, 1990), patriotism is commonly associated with discussions on specific topics and policies, including war, military conflicts, defense, and foreign and international affairs. Therefore, these aspects are included as control variables in our analysis. Each control variable is binary, coded as 1 if the corresponding topic is mentioned in the post:

- War and military conflicts: This variable covers posts that reference wars and military conflicts involving the analyzed country, whether through active participation or involvement;
- Defense: This variable encompasses posts addressing various facets of defense policy, including national security, the military, external security, peace policy, and détente policy;
- Foreign policy and international relations: This variable includes posts that delve into foreign policy issues, covering topics such as relations with other countries, interactions with international organizations (e.g., UN, NATO), development policy, arms trade, sanctions, and more.

Table 1 illustrates the proportion of posts dedicated to specific topics out of all posts published by each party during the campaign. In Ukraine, the Opposition Platform for Life (OP), a pro-Russian and Eurosceptic party, stood out as the party that most prominently used patriotic appeal in its communication, with 18% of OP's posts featuring patriotic symbols. This was double the proportion of the second-largest share (9%), held by the SP and Holos parties. OP also allocated a substantial portion of its posts to other patriotism-related policy topics, particularly foreign and international relations, with over 20% of its posts covering this issue, nearly three times more than the second-highest scorer, SP, which dedicated 8% of its posts to this policy. All Ukrainian parties incorporated patriotic appeals and mentioned other patriotism-related policies, with the lowest emphasis on this rhetoric observed in the campaign of the incumbent party, ES.

In Russia, the incumbent party (UR), devoted huge attention to patriotism, allocating 18% of its posts to this appeal. This proportion was the highest among all parties. The main opposition parties, i.e., the Communists (which are traditionally the second-strongest parliamentary group in recent years, and also received some support from Alexey Navalny's network) and the newly created liberal party New People (NP) completely avoided patriotic rhetoric, as well as other related policy issues. Overall, other patriotism-related policies were not particularly popular among Russian parties, with the second-most "patriotic" party being the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR), which included some messages not only appealing to patriotism but also discussing defense (2%) and foreign and international relations policies (5%). All Russian parties completely avoided referencing war and military topics.

6. Analysis and Results

We now turn to examining user engagement, our dependent variable, which encompasses all types of user interactions: all reactions' emoji (e.g., Like, Love, Sad, Angry, etc.), comments, and shares that were generated by each post. Hence, "engagement" is a count variable that signifies the total sum of reactions, comments, and shares garnered by the post. Given that actions such as commenting, sharing, and reacting with likes or other emojis may be linked to distinct cognitive demands (Xenos et al., 2017), we have included separate models in the Supplementary File that treat reactions, comments, and shares as individual dependent variables.

Table 1. Posts allocated to specific issues out of total posted messages.

Country	Party	Patriotism (%)	War and military (%)	Defense (%)	Foreign and international relations (%)	No. of posts
Ukraine	SP	9	4	7	8	230
	OP	18	4	9	21	380
	Fatherland (Fthl)	8	3	4	2	190
	ES	5	1	2	3	221
	Holos	9	6	14	7	511
Russia	UR	18	0	1	1	191
	Communist	0	0	0	0	72
	A Just Russia—For Truth	1	0	0	0	90
	LDPR	2	0	2	5	64
	NP	0	0	0	0	14

The primary findings remain consistent, with the exception of the non-significant effect of patriotic appeal on shares in the case of Russia.

Our key independent variable, patriotism, identifies posts featuring or mentioning patriotic symbols (e.g., national flags, coats of arms) or showcasing party politicians engaging in patriotic gestures (e.g., paying tribute to the flag). We also examined the impact of three patriotism-related topics: posts referring to war and military, defense, and foreign and international relations policies. To address potential confounding factors, we incorporated a range of control variables pertaining to specific policy topics (e.g., family and social issues, corruption, infrastructure, energy), framing strategies (populism, polity vs. politics, positive/negative tone), post elements (video, photo). These variables are traditionally deemed relevant by the literature (e.g., Bene et al., 2022), given their potential impact on user engagement. The original questions describing each category from the classification codebook are listed in the Supplementary File.

Given the overdispersed count nature of our dependent variable, we employed a negative binomial regression model (as commonly done in the literature) with party-fixed effects and interaction terms to assess the use of patriotism appeals across parties.

Table 2 presents the results of the regression models, separately for Russia and Ukraine (though, as a robustness check, we also ran a single model for both countries with country-fixed effects). Model 1 includes the main independent variables and the controls, while in Model 2 we also add the interaction term between patriotism and the dummy variables for each political party.

In Model 1, we observe that the patriotic rhetoric was linked to a significant increase in audience engagement in Russia. However, this seems associated with a potential decrease in audience engagement in Ukraine, though this result is significant only at the 90% level of confidence.

Table 2. Negative binomial model of campaigning strategies effects on users engagement.

	Model 1		Model 2	
	Ukraine	Russia	Ukraine	Russia
Intercept	5.806*** (0.117)	-31.23 (5.7e+06)	5.802*** (0.119)	-33.27 (7.7e+06)
Patriotism	-0.171† (0.091)	0.399** (0.124)	-0.300 (0.301)	0.239 (0.703)
War and military	-0.375** (0.145)	N/A	-0.366* (0.145)	N/A
Defense	0.459*** (0.105)	0.481 (0.408)	0.455*** (0.105)	0.482 (0.408)
Foreign and international relations	0.223* (0.104)	0.170 (0.333)	0.211* (0.105)	0.172 (0.333)
Populism (anti-elite)	0.062 (0.087)	0.258* (0.101)	0.066 (0.087)	0.258* (0.101)
Populism (pro-people)	0.052 (0.066)	-0.073 (0.161)	0.069 (0.066)	-0.074 (0.160)
Polity	-0.096 (0.118)	0.563* (0.231)	-0.094 (0.118)	0.564* (0.231)

Table 2. (Cont.) Negative binomial model of campaigning strategies effects on users engagement.

	Model 1		Model 2	
	Ukraine	Russia	Ukraine	Russia
Politics	0.158* (0.078)	-0.192† (0.110)	0.165* (0.079)	-0.191† (0.110)
Economic policy	0.271* (0.122)	-0.081 (0.152)	0.293* (0.122)	-0.080 (0.153)
Family and social policy	-0.478*** (0.114)	-0.065 (0.104)	-0.483*** (0.114)	-0.066 (0.104)
Corruption policy	-0.411* (0.201)	-0.123 (0.310)	-0.422* (0.201)	-0.123 (0.309)
Infrastructure and energy policy	-0.225† (0.123)	-0.403* (0.163)	-0.200 (0.123)	-0.403* (0.163)
Other policies	0.280*** (0.076)	-0.181† (0.101)	0.292*** (0.076)	-0.176† (0.101)
Positive/negative tone	-0.106*** (0.031)	0.073† (0.045)	-0.104*** (0.031)	0.075† (0.045)
Personal framing	-0.064 (0.059)	0.111 (0.078)	-0.053 (0.059)	0.112 (0.078)
Video	0.489*** (0.092)	35.22 (5.7e+06)	0.492*** (0.092)	0.373 (7.6e+06)
Photo	0.340*** (0.089)	35.59 (5.7e+06)	0.327*** (0.089)	0.376 (7.6e+06)
ES/LDPR	1.793*** (0.111)	-1.463*** (0.126)	1.731*** (0.113)	-1.467*** (0.127)
Holos/Communists	0.941*** (0.100)	0.904*** (0.117)	0.953*** (0.103)	0.902*** (0.117)
OP/UR	-2.910*** (0.108)	0.471*** (0.095)	-2.916*** (0.112)	0.468*** (0.096)
SP/NP	1.267*** (0.112)	-0.317 (0.221)	1.266*** (0.116)	-0.320 (0.221)
ES/LDPR * patriotism	—	—	0.797† (0.439)	0.261 (1.007)
Holos/Communist * patriotism	—	—	-0.121 (0.341)	N/A
OP/UR * patriotism	—	—	0.162 (0.336)	0.161 (0.716)
SP/NP * patriotism	—	—	0.108 (0.384)	N/A
Log-likelihood	-23,033.87	-4,569.71	-23,026.37	-4,569.64
Dispersion parameter	0.86 (0.03)	2.15 (0.14)	0.86 (0.03)	2.15 (0.14)
AIC	23,080	4,613	23,080	4,617.6
N cases	1,532	431	1,532	431

Notes: † $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$; standard errors in parentheses.

As previously mentioned, Russian political parties avoided discussing the topic of war entirely, while Ukrainian audiences tended to respond less favorably to messages referencing war and conflict. Interestingly, messages that mentioned defense policies garnered more attention from Ukrainian users, generating more engagement compared to other types of posts. However, discussing defense policies by Russian parties did not significantly affect audience engagement. Similarly, messages covering international relations policies had no significant impact on audience engagement in Russia, whereas, in Ukraine, such messages tended to attract more attention and generate more engagement.

In Ukraine, the party that consistently received more engagement was the incumbent European Solidarity, followed by the election winner, SP (with The Fatherland serving as the reference category for the model in Ukraine). Conversely, the pro-Russian OP received lower engagement compared to all other Ukrainian parties. In Russia, the Communists garnered the highest level of user engagement, followed by the main regime party, UR (with A Just Russia as the reference party for the model in Russia). The party that struggled the most in generating audience reactions was NP.

Examining other factors associated with a significant increase in audience engagement, we find that in Ukraine, posts talking about politics and economic policies, and posts featuring visual elements (photos or videos) were positively associated with a higher engagement. Conversely, Ukrainian users interacted significantly less with messages related to family and other social issues, corruption-related policies, and negative messages (negative messages refer to the emotional framing variable, in which higher scores are associated with a greater level of negativity). In Russia, anti-elite rhetoric and posts related to politics generated more attention, whereas messages mentioning infrastructure and energy-related policies were less appealing to Russian users.

In Model 2, which accounts for potential differences in the use of patriotic appeal across political parties, including an interaction term between patriotism and parties, the results indicate no significant variation at the party level regarding the effect of patriotic symbols in Russia (though the incumbent party UR was basically the only one to adopt such rhetoric). In Ukraine, the incumbent European Solidarity party seems to benefit more than its rivals from using patriotic symbols (though this effect is statistically significant only at the 90% level of confidence).

7. Discussion

This study analyzed patriotic appeals and patriotism-related issues in online political campaigns within legislative elections in Russia and Ukraine. Our aim was to understand how political parties employed these issues and how users interacted with such content. The findings reveal significant variations between the two countries, both in the communication strategies of political parties and in user engagement.

One of the most significant disparities we observed pertained to the use of patriotic appeal. In Ukraine, all political parties incorporated patriotic symbols to varying degrees within their campaigns. Notably, the pro-Russian OP allocated a substantial 18% of its campaign messages to this theme. The party's unique positioning, which supported the autonomous status of the Donbas region within Ukraine, led them to frequently employ Ukrainian patriotic symbols in conjunction with domestic symbols from the eastern territories. This emphasis on the reintegration of Donbas and renegotiations with Moscow in this regard, alongside potential collaboration in political, economic, and energy domains with Russia, formed a central

pillar of their electoral pledges. Strikingly, despite the extensive use of patriotic symbols by all Ukrainian parties, our results indicate that such types of posts were associated with lower user engagement in Ukraine.

The reasons behind this might be multifaceted. While certain empirical studies have suggested a strengthening of Ukrainian national self-identification in the aftermath of the 2014 conflict, our results do not concur with increased user reactions to patriotic symbols. Factors such as persisting geographical and political cleavages in Ukraine, with eastern regions differing from central and western areas in their stance on pro-Europeanism, could contribute to this phenomenon. Additionally, it is important to note that the 2014 crisis was primarily concentrated in eastern regions, leaving other parts of the country less exposed to military conflict. It is possible that these factors collectively influenced the relative inattention of the Ukrainian audience to patriotic symbols. Future research might explore how these dynamics evolved after February 2022, in the wake of the Russo-Ukrainian war, as heightened susceptibility to patriotic appeals could emerge after a tougher “rally around the flag.”

Contrastingly, in Russia, patriotism over the last years evolved into one of the central propaganda narratives, mainly framed in an “us” versus “them” dichotomy. The strong emphasis on patriotic appeal in Russian state media and propaganda narratives likely plays a role in pre-establishing and reinforcing the salience and positive perception of patriotic symbols. The incumbent UR party appears to strategically craft campaign messages to leverage the positive effect of such references. Interestingly, Russia’s main opposition parties opted to completely avoid patriotic symbols and related policies, indicating that these topics were not a salient issue for the dissenting audience.

The findings of this study shed light on the distinctive dynamics of patriotic appeals in two different political landscapes. In Russia, an autocratic country, the straightforward patriotic appeal characterized by references to national symbols, appears to be largely monopolized by the regime party and elicits increased audience reactions (in line with H1). On the contrary, in Ukraine, characterized by more competitive and democratic elections, such “blind patriotic” references do not seem to stimulate (overall) any particular engagement from the platform audience. Nevertheless, when focusing on the incumbent (H2), we notice that the positive effect of patriotism in the Russian case (where almost only the incumbent UR resorted to it) partially overlaps with Ukraine, since the incumbent party seemed to benefit from such rhetoric also in the Ukrainian context.

In conclusion, this study fills a substantial gap by analyzing political campaigning in non-fully democratic countries, a context that remains relatively understudied despite its huge relevance amid increasing trends toward autocratization. The cases of Russia and Ukraine, especially in the context of the Russo-Ukrainian war, provide valuable insights into the complex dynamics of patriotism in non-fully democratic settings.

This study has some limitations though. First, we did not filter for bot accounts, which could potentially inflate engagement metrics. Nonetheless, our findings reveal that the party of power in Russia, UR, did not achieve the highest engagement rate, with the main opposition party, the Communists, outperforming it (therefore the usage of bots may not have boosted engagement that much). Furthermore, even if bots had been used, there are no specific reasons to argue that their impact should have focused on some types of posts rather than others, so that their effect may not affect our findings. In Ukraine, the incumbent party, ES, had a popular Facebook page and greater engagement compared to other parties in the sample, while the pro-Russian OP received the smallest number of followers, suggesting that genuine user engagement played a substantial role.

Lastly, as a case study, the generalizability of our findings is inherently constrained. Future research efforts should consider expanding the number of countries and exploring various election types, including presidential campaigns, to deepen our understanding of patriotic rhetoric in contemporary political 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 authors (unedited).

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The Relationship Between Topics, Negativity, and User Engagement in Election Campaigns on Facebook

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Abstract

Negativity is a common feature of current online political communication during elections. Previous studies on negativity and its impact on user engagement focused mainly on Western European countries. Considering the political particularities of the Central and Eastern European countries, the present study focused on Czechia, Hungary, Lithuania, the Republic of Moldova, and Romania, where national election campaigns took place from 2020 to 2022. We aimed to investigate comparatively different topics prevalent in the negative messages and look at users’ engagement with negative communication. We applied manual content analysis of $N = 4,095$ Facebook posts published four weeks before the elections by political parties elected in the national parliament. Results showed significant differences across countries using negative messages and the associated topics. The posts’ highest rate of negative statements was identified in Czechia (52%), while the lowest was in Lithuania (17%). There are topics consistently associated with negative statements across most countries, such as corruption, economy and finance, foreign policy, labor, and social issues. However, given that those elections took place during the Covid-19 pandemic in Czechia, Lithuania, Romania, and the Republic of Moldova and, in Hungary, after Russia invaded Ukraine, we also identified contextual topics such as health, war, and conflicts with other countries and defense that were mainly associated with negative messages. Furthermore, negative posts generate more reactions and comments than posts containing no negative statements. Addressing foreign policy in negative posts generates significantly more reactions and comments.

Keywords

campaign topics; Central Europe; Eastern Europe; Facebook; national elections; negative campaign; user engagement

1. Introduction

Negativity is a prevalent element in contemporary political communication during national elections (Nai, 2020; Nai & Walter, 2015), with documented effects on the erosion of trust in political institutions, exacerbating political polarization and growing disillusionment among voters. Beyond these immediate consequences, research indicates that negativity in election campaigns can have lasting implications for the overall health of a democracy and political communication in terms of political incivility (Rossini, 2021; Rossini et al., 2021). Additionally, negativity contributes to voters' political disinterest, distrust, and cynicism (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Klinger et al., 2022; Nai et al., 2022).

As election campaigns become more competitive (Green-Pedersen, 2019), political parties discovered the advantages of campaigning on social media. Hence, parties can directly communicate with followers, get immediate feedback on the issue strategy (Ceron et al., 2016), and strengthen issue ownership (Sandberg, 2022). Research suggests that social media discussions revolve around current events and political actors are expected to react to them (Reveilhac, 2023). Considering that political landscapes struggle with various challenges and extraordinary events (e.g., the Covid-19 pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine), understanding the dynamics of election campaigning takes on growing relevance for strengthening the resilience of democratic processes. These events changed the political context of the campaigns, requiring parties to react by concentrating on these newly emerging, unexpected issues or keeping their issues at the center of their campaigns (Kreiss et al., 2017). Moreover, delving into the relationship between negativity and the topics addressed during election campaigns on Facebook reflects how political parties frame their national election campaigns by adjusting challenges.

While research on negativity in political communication and campaigning has made significant progress focusing on Western democracies (e.g., Blassnig et al., 2021; Ceron & Curini, 2018; Eberl et al., 2020; Jost et al., 2020; Russmann, 2018; Staender et al., 2019), studies focusing on Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries are scarce. However, there are differences between experienced European democracies and CEE countries that might influence how negativity is used during election campaigns about topics. First, previous research suggests that parties from CEE countries adopt some established campaign methods differently due to differing political cultures (Bērziņa, 2019; Eibl, 2019). Second, in CEE countries, democracy is still young, and party systems are more volatile and fragile than in Western countries (Andrews & Bairrett, 2014). Moreover, several countries in the region are experiencing democratic backsliding (Orhan, 2022). Third, due to geopolitics and different economic developments in the CEE countries, some of the topics prevalent for negative campaigns in traditional European democracies are not pivotal in the CEE countries (Tønnesen et al., 2023). Fourth, CEE citizens trust institutions and political actors less than Western Europeans and tend to score high in affective polarization (Orhan, 2022; Torcal, 2017).

Our study examines how political parties in CEE countries use negativity in topics in election campaigns on Facebook, representing the region's dominant social media platform for political communication (Newman

et al., 2023). Hence, we investigate the relationship between negativity in the posts and topics related to users' reactions and not negative campaigning. We focused on Hungary, Lithuania, Czechia, the Republic of Moldova, and Romania, where national election campaigns took place from 2020 to 2022. Furthermore, we investigate how users respond to negative messages and salient issues by testing the relationship between negativity, topics, and user engagement. By focusing on the relationship between topics and negative statements and delving into the dynamics of user engagement about topics and negative communication in CEE, our article contributes to a nuanced understanding of election campaigns on social media.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Negativity in Political Campaigns on Social Media

Studies on negativity in election campaigns reflected the wide range of the phenomenon encompassing negative statements, emotions, dramatization, and negative tone of communication (Baranowski et al., 2022; Bene et al., 2022; Klinger et al., 2022). The research employed a more nuanced conceptualization of negative communication (e.g., with a focus on the use of uncivil language or sentiment) that goes behind the dualism of negative attack-based campaigning versus positive campaigns (e.g., Haselmayer & Jenny, 2017; Mattes & Redlawsk, 2014; Mutz & Reeves, 2005).

Negativity in election campaigns intensified with the rise of social media, as specific platform affordances foster user responses, and negativity can extend its impact beyond social media platforms (Rossini et al., 2021). In recent years, we have also witnessed increasing interest in the role of emotions and emotionality (Bil-Jaruzelska & Monzer, 2022; Blassnig et al., 2021; Klinger et al., 2022; Martella & Bracciale, 2022) in campaign communication. Emotions have been identified as a mediator of the impact of political messages on users' involvement with the messages (Brader, 2005; Wirz, 2018). Hence, emotional appeals emerged as an effective strategy for eliciting user interactions and reactions (Jost et al., 2020; Martella & Bracciale, 2022).

Bene (2016) addresses political messages' general tonality or valence while researching negativity. Tonality and emotionality are distinct but closely related phenomena (Heiss et al., 2019). While tonality refers to portraying negative content elements, emotionality describes how messages are conveyed and framed, including the explicit expression of emotions (Klinger et al., 2022). In the present research, the conceptualization of negativity aligned with previous research (Bene et al., 2022) by including both the tonality and negative emotions of the political communicator.

The prevalence of negative communication depends on the context, country, and election type. Only a few studies have investigated negativity in election campaigns in CEE countries. Thus, comparative studies focusing on the elections for the European Parliament included some countries from the region (Baranowski et al., 2022; Bene et al., 2022; Ceron & Curini, 2018; Klinger et al., 2022). Nai (2020) included some CEE countries (e.g., Belarus, Bulgaria, the Republic of Moldova, and Romania) in the sample. Few studies looked at negative campaigning in Hungary (Bene, 2016, 2021) and Czechia and Poland (Stetka et al., 2019), mainly focusing on the relationship between topics and user engagement. Thus, Stetka et al. (2019) researched Facebook campaigning during the 2013 and 2015 parliamentary elections, focusing on the negativity in user engagement and pointing out that specific topics generate more negativity and females tend to be less

hostile towards home parties. However, this study does not investigate how political parties associate negativity with specific topics and does not reflect current Facebook usage patterns for parties and voters. An investigation of the 2014 parliamentary election campaign in Hungary revealed that negativity in the topics is associated with more user reactions on Facebook (Bene, 2016). In a follow-up study, Bene (2021) delved into the issue of ownership during the Facebook campaign for the 2018 Hungarian parliamentary election. According to this study, corruption and developmental policies were the prevalent topics.

Moreover, salient issues such as immigration and corruption generate more user reactions (Bene, 2021; Bene et al., 2022). Even though previous studies contributed to a better understanding of the national election campaigns on Facebook and developed robust methodological frameworks for future research, including the present research, these studies focused on a single country from the CEE region. Hence, none of the studies systematically compared CEE countries, considering topics addressed in negative campaigns and user engagement.

Previous studies address diverse aspects of negativity, focusing on the narrower area of negative campaigning, most often defined as a campaign strategy for attacking opponents, criticizing their behavior, ideologies, political positions, values, or personal qualities (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995; Baranowski et al., 2022; Geer, 2006; Samuel-Azran et al., 2017; Xenos et al., 2017). Hence, negativity in election campaigning is a concept related to negative campaigning. However, there are relevant differences, such as in negative campaigns: The focus is on highlighting perceived weaknesses or controversial aspects of political opponents rather than engaging in substantive political discussion (Klinger et al., 2022). This strategy aims to influence the voters' attitudes toward the targeted political opponent and evoke negative emotions toward political opponents (Baranowski et al., 2022; Klinger et al., 2022).

Nai (2020) examined the individual predictors of negative campaigning and found that while context matters, its influence is indirect and primarily alters the effects of individual candidate characteristics when engaging in negative campaigning. However, in an investigation of party communication during the 2019 election for the European Parliament, Bene et al. (2022) stressed that in polarized contexts characterized by heightened aversions and animosities in the political sphere, such as in the CEE countries, people would be more receptive to negativity. Similarly, we aim to investigate the role of context on negativity in national election campaigns on Facebook and ask the following research question:

RQ1: How prevalent is negativity in campaign messages on Facebook across examined CEE countries during national elections?

2.2. Campaign Topics and Engagement With Negative Messages

While negative campaigning often focuses on opponents rather than specific political issues, negative tonality and emotionality can be strategically linked to specific topics to attract attention and evoke emotions. Prior research indicates that more salient issues are often linked to negative emotions and higher user engagement, resulting in greater visibility (Bene, 2021). Negative tonality and emotionality are specifically more employed by populist and far-right parties (Baranowski et al., 2022; Bil-Jaruzelska & Monzer, 2022; Blassnig et al., 2021; Eberl et al., 2020; Klinger et al., 2022) that often employ salient and polarizing issues in communication. Negative framing is thus characteristic of topics and policy issues

perceived as salient and significant, compared to more routine topics such as the economy or domestic policy (Bene et al., 2022).

In Western European democracies, studies found evidence that immigration, terrorism, extremism, and social policy issues are salient topics addressed by negative messages (Blassnig et al., 2021; Eberl et al., 2020). Considering the specificity of the CEE region, revolving around differences in political cultures reflected in campaigning strategies (Bērziņa, 2019; Eibl, 2019), geopolitics and economic development influence relevant campaign topics other than in Western Europe (Toennes et al., 2023). Moreover, we assume that national elections occur in more polarized environments, possibly exacerbated by crises, which could lead to increased negativity in political communication. Therefore, we asked the following research question:

RQ2: What political topics are associated with negativity in campaign communication on Facebook across the examined CEE countries?

The visibility of political posts depends on reactions and user engagement, prompting parties and candidates to adapt to get higher visibility (Blassnig et al., 2021). Viral algorithms favor posts with high engagement, influencing a broader audience (Bil-Jaruzelska & Monzer, 2022). Political actors aim to attract new voters through their existing supporters by making user engagement a critical strategic goal in political communication on Facebook (Bene, 2016). Previous studies argued that negative tone and emotions enhance user engagement as individuals tend to pay greater attention to and exhibit stronger reactions toward negative information than positive information (Heiss et al., 2019; Rozin & Royzman, 2001). The frequent explanation of the effects of negativity on engagement is that negativity triggers stronger emotional reactions and garners more attention, potentially leading to increased cognitive involvement and subsequent action (Heiss et al., 2019; Soroka, 2014).

Previous research linked different aspects of negativity in political posts on Facebook with user engagement in the form of reactions (such as likes), comments, and shares (Baranowski et al., 2022; Bene, 2016; Blassnig et al., 2021; Klinger et al., 2022; Lappas et al., 2021; Staender et al., 2019; Xenos et al., 2017). Comments are the prevalent response to negativity, engaging both those in agreement and those with differing views. Many social media users respond to negative messages by commenting and sharing rather than simply using the Like button (Bene, 2016; Eberl et al., 2020). Therefore, investigating comments and reactions will provide a more detailed and accurate picture of users' engagement with negative posts.

Furthermore, Blassnig et al. (2021) argue that specific campaign issues are more likely to attract attention and elicit user engagement. Few studies comparing engagement in political campaigns on Facebook in Western democracies with countries from the CEE region showed different focal points of the topics (e.g., Tønnesen et al., 2023). Hence, considering the high scores in affective polarization in the CEE countries (Guasti & Bustikova, 2023; Orhan, 2022; Torcal, 2017), we hypothesized and asked the related research question:

H1: Posts incorporating negativity elicit more engagement in the form of (a) reactions and (b) comments than posts without negativity.

RQ3: What political topics addressed with negativity elicit more reactions and comments?

2.3. Context and Outcomes of National Elections

Our research focused on five CEE countries where national elections were conducted in 2020–2022. The countries we selected represent diverse political environments within the region. Hence, we investigated Czechia, Hungary, and Lithuania, which joined the EU in 2004; Romania, which became a member in 2007; and the Republic of Moldova, which became a candidate for EU membership in 2022. While Czechia and Romania showcased relative democratic stability, previous literature expressed concerns regarding Hungary over democratic backsliding (Orhan, 2022). Lithuania offered insights as a Baltic state, and the Republic of Moldova provided valuable perspectives on the challenges of democratization in a post-Soviet country.

Elections to the Chamber of Deputies of the Parliament of the Czech Republic took place on October 8 and 9, 2021 (turnout of 65%). After a long negative campaign (including the issue of migration and strategic use of misinformation) and a tough fight between the former government led by the Action of Dissatisfied Citizens (ANO) and two opposing democratic coalitions, the coalitions—Together (SPOLU) encompassing the right-wing Civic Democratic Party (ODU), Tradition Responsibility Prosperity (TOP 09), and Christian Democrats (KDS) together with Pirates and Mayors as a coalition of the Czech Pirate Party and Mayors and Independents, defeated the Action of Dissatisfied Citizens (Czech Statistical Office, 2021).

In Hungary, the parliamentary election took place on April 3, 2022 (turnout of 70%). Three coalitions or parties gained seats in the parliament: the governing Hungarian Civic Alliance (Fidesz)—Christian Democratic People's Party (KDNP) coalition, opposition parties running together under the name United for Hungary, and the far-right Our Homeland Movement (Nemzeti Választási Iroda, 2022). The platform blocked the latter's Facebook page on the week of the election and was not included in our sample. The campaign was strongly affected by Russia's invasion of Ukraine (Farkas et al., 2024).

In Lithuania, parliamentary elections took place over two rounds on October 11 and 25, 2020. Most Seimas members (71 seats) were elected in single-member constituencies through a two-round system. In comparison, the remaining 70 seats are allocated based on proportional representation derived from the results of the initial round. These elections occurred during the Covid-19 pandemic, contributing to the second-lowest turnout (47% in the first round and 39% in the second round) in modern Lithuanian history. Following the election, the winner Homeland Union formed a coalition with two other center-right political forces: the Freedom Party and the Liberal Movements (The Central Electoral Commission of the Republic of Lithuania, 2020).

In the Republic of Moldova, an early election for the national parliament took place on July 11, 2021 (turnout 48%). The Party of Action and Solidarity gained an absolute majority of 52% and subsequently built the new government. The coalition between the Party of the Socialists of the Republic of Moldova and the Party of Communists of the Republic of Moldova won 27% of the votes and the SOR party 5.8% (Central Electoral Commission of the Republic of Moldova, 2021).

Parliamentary elections were held in Romania on December 6, 2020, amid the Covid-19 pandemic. Therefore, voter absenteeism was noted as the turnout (33%) was among the lowest in the country's recent history (Gherghina et al., 2023). The Social Democratic Party gained most of the votes (29%), followed by the National Liberal Party (25%), the Union Save Romania Plus (15%), the new far-right party Alliance for the Union of

Romanians (9%), and the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania (6%). A coalition led by the National Liberal Party, including the Union Save Romania Plus and the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania, built the government (Biroul Electoral Central, 2020). Additional information about political parties and their Facebook posts included in our sample is shown in the Supplementary Material.

3. Method

We applied manual content analysis of the Facebook posts ($N = 4,095$) of the political parties that are represented in the national Parliaments in Czechia ($n = 695$), Hungary ($n = 1,107$), Lithuania ($n = 401$), the Republic of Moldova ($n = 700$), and Romania ($n = 1,191$). Posts published on the official Facebook pages of the parties ($n = 31$) four weeks before the national election were considered for the analysis. We opt for Facebook, considering it is the prevalent social media platform in the analyzed countries (Newman et al., 2023). We used CrowdTangle to extract the links of the posts considered analysis units and automatically collect the number of reactions and comments for each post considered dependent variables in our study.

We recruited 15 coders (two Czechs, four Hungarians, two Lithuanians, three Moldavians, and four Romanians). To ensure the same understanding of the coding instructions for variables across countries, all coders participated in similar training sessions regarding our coding scheme. Given that the posts were in the official languages of each country and, in some cases, in the language of ethnic minorities (in Hungarian all posts of the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania and in Russian some of the posts of political parties in Lithuania and the Republic of Moldova), interrater reliability was performed for each country individually. Like previous research investigating several countries (Tønnesen et al., 2023), we calculated Brennan and Prediger's kappa for our interrater reliability test, suitable for robust binary and sparse categories (Quarfoot & Levine, 2016). Values suggest good reliability (Brennan and Prediger's kappa ≥ 0.8). Reliability scores per item for each country are shown in the Supplementary Material.

Considering that negativity was the focus of our research, similar to the research of Bene et al. (2022), we coded the *presence* (1) or the *absence* (0) of negative statements, disapproval, criticism, and attack messages (Klinger et al., 2022) in the text but also negative emotions (faces, gestures) in images and videos which are hostile or of a hating nature (Baranowski et al., 2022). Apart from the number of reactions and posts that were automatically collected, all variables were binary-coded. During the coding process, we considered the overall impression of the statements and images given that we looked at both text and the corresponding picture or video of the Facebook post. Hence, facial expressions and gestures reflecting hostility were coded as negative statements. We also coded the topics of the posts (economy and finance, health, policy for families and children, labor and social issues, criminality, political radicalism/religious fanaticism, corruption, domestic policy, immigration and integration, transport and infrastructure policy, environmental policy, energy policy, cultural policy, defense, war and military conflicts between countries, foreign policy, international relations, media policy and digitalization, agriculture, development, gender policy, and LGBTQ+ policy). The coding instructions for variables are shown in the Supplementary Material.

4. Findings

Our first research question focused on negative statements at the country level. Negative statements posts represented 36% ($n = 1,492$) of the overall sample. There are significant differences between countries in

terms of the prevalence of negative statements ($\chi^2(4) = 238.64, p < 0.001, \text{Cramer's } V = 0.24$). With 52% ($n = 358$ posts) of negative posts, Czechia is the country with the most significant percentage, followed by Hungary with 47% ($n = 515$ posts), Romania with 32% ($n = 383$ posts), the Republic of Moldova with 24% ($n = 168$ posts), and Lithuania with 17% ($n = 68$ posts). Several parties from Czechia, Hungary, the Republic of Moldova, and Romania had posts containing negative statements representing over half of their content (see Supplementary Material).

Our second research question focused on the relationship between topics and negative statements in the analyzed CEE countries. The first step was to see the prevalent topics in the national election campaigns on Facebook and present an overall picture of the foci of each national campaign. The next step was to look at the prevalence of negative statements within posts addressing each topic. Hence, the prevalence of topics differed in the national campaigns. Economy and finance are among the salient topics across the analyzed CEE countries. The context of the elections was reflected in the prevalence of some of the topics. Thus, health was a salient topic in Romania (26%) and Lithuania (8%), where national elections were held in 2020 during the Covid-19 pandemic. Foreign policy was among the first topics in Czechia (8%) and Hungary (8%).

Given that the national election took place in Hungary several weeks after Russia invaded Ukraine, war and military conflicts with other countries (19%) and defense (5%) were among the prevalent topics. Prevalent topics in each country are also prevalent topics of negative communication. Figure 1 shows the prevalent topics in the negative posts for each country.

We observed a significant relation between negativity and economy and finance ($\chi^2(1) = 43.14, p < 0.001, \text{Cramer's } V = 0.10$), health ($\chi^2(1) = 43.14, p < 0.001, \text{Cramer's } V = 0.10$), corruption ($\chi^2(4) = 161.7, p < 0.001,$

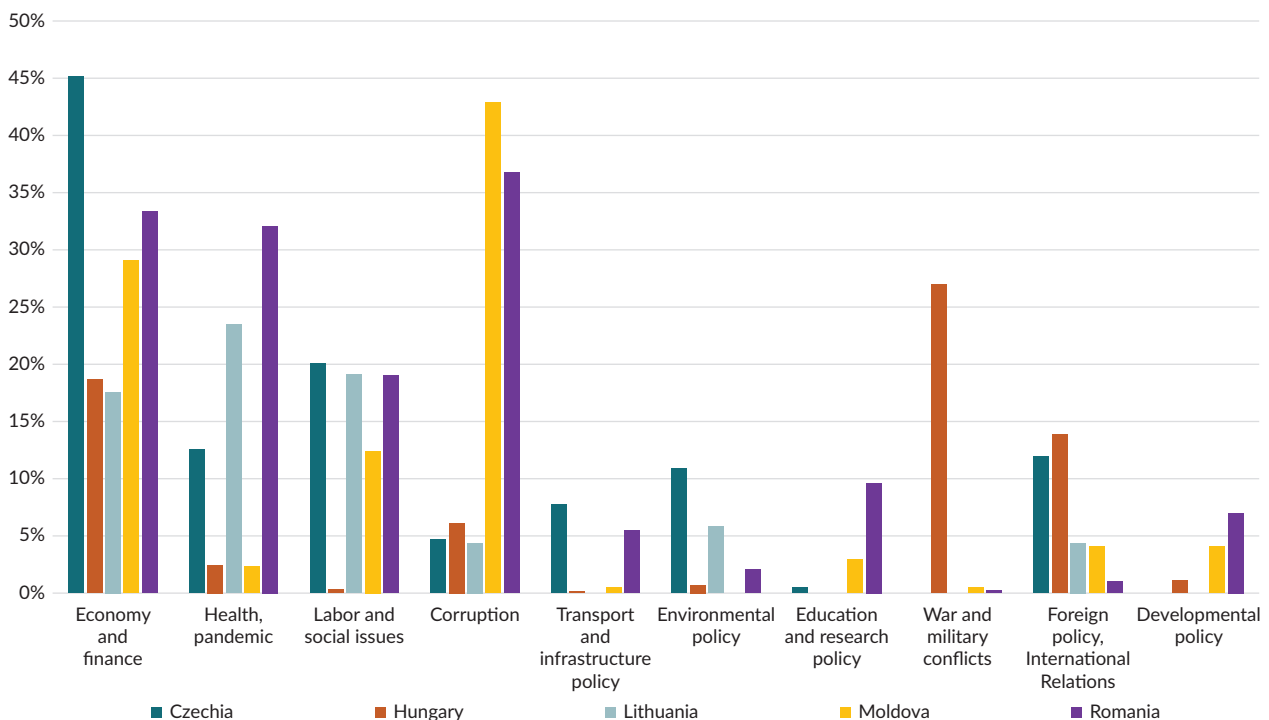


Figure 1. Prevalent topics in negative campaign posts per country. Note: $N = 1,492$ posts containing negativity.

Cramer's $V = 0.20$), war and military conflict between countries ($\chi^2(1) = 88.65, p < 0.001$, Cramer's $V = 0.15$), energy policy ($\chi^2(1) = 27.26, p < 0.001$, Cramer's $V = 0.08$), and foreign policy and international relations ($\chi^2(1) = 45.75, p < 0.001$, Cramer's $V = 0.11$). However, labor and social issues showed only a tendency toward significance ($\chi^2(1) = 3.7, p = 0.054$, Cramer's $V = 0.03$), transportation and infrastructure policy ($\chi^2(1) = 1.36, p = 0.24$, Cramer's $V = 0.02$), education policy ($\chi^2(1) = 0.57, p = 0.45$, Cramer's $V = 0.01$), and environmental policy ($\chi^2(1) = 1.27, p = 0.26$, Cramer's $V = 0.02$) were not significant.

Further, we looked at the frequency of posts containing negative statements within the posts addressing specific topics. Thus, we observed that negative statements were prevalent in posts addressing development policy (83%), cultural policy (73%), gender policy (68%), transportation and infrastructure policy (68%), education and research policy (67%), labor and social issues policy (59%), and domestic policy (50%). Table 1 shows the frequency of negative statements among posts addressing specific topics.

Table 1. Frequency of negative statements among posts addressing specific topics.

Topic	Number of posts	Number of posts containing negative statements	Percentage of posts containing negative statements
Developmental policy	238	198	83%
Cultural policy	45	33	73%
Transportation and infrastructure	159	108	68%
Gender policy	38	26	68%
Education and research policy	132	88	67%
Agricultural policy	117	76	65%
Environmental policy	134	79	59%
Labor and social issues	446	265	59%
Media policy and digitalization	74	38	51%
Domestic policy in general	102	51	50%
Economy and finance	989	447	45%
Health	448	201	45%
Foreign policy and international relations	224	95	42%
Immigration and integration policy	50	21	42%
Policies for families with children	153	65	42%
Energy policy	114	46	40%
Corruption	406	141	35%
War and military conflicts between countries	211	70	33%
Defense policy	63	21	33%
Criminality/crime rates in general	39	11	28%
LGBTQ+ policy	18	3	17%
Political radicalization and religious fanaticism	45	2	4%

Note: $N = 1,492$ posts containing negativity.

The analysis showed that there are topics significantly addressed with negative statements across most of the five CEE countries, such as economy and finance, labor and social issues, corruption, and foreign policy. However, the distribution of posts containing negative statements addressing specific topics differed among countries. Regarding the posts addressing economy and finance, Romania had a significant ($\chi^2(1) = 7.12$, $p = 0.007$, Cramer's $V = 0.08$) number of negative posts within the posts addressing economy and finance (60%, 106 out of 176 posts). The other countries in the sample had approximately half of their posts on economy and finance containing negative statements. However, only in the case of Czechia, with 14 out of 43 posts on economy and finance containing negative statements ($\chi^2(1) = 0.04$, $p = 0.04$, Cramer's $V = 0.08$), and the Republic of Moldova, with 24 out of 51 posts ($\chi^2(1) = 16.04$, $p = 0.001$, Cramer's $V = 0.15$), the association between polity and negative statements was statistically significant. Hence, economy and finance are topics associated with negative statements during the national election campaigns in the analyzed CEE countries.

Labor and social issues are also topics predominantly associated with negative statements in the CEE countries except for Hungary (with two out of three posts). Hence, in Czechia ($\chi^2(1) = 28.86$, $p < 0.001$, Cramer's $V = 0.20$) with 77% (72 out of 93 posts addressing labor and social issues), Romania ($\chi^2(1) = 18.23$, $p < 0.001$, Cramer's $V = 0.12$) with 47% (73 out of 155 posts), Lithuania ($\chi^2(1) = 4.33$, $p = 0.04$, Cramer's $V = 0.10$) with 28% (13 out of 47 posts), and Republic of Moldova ($\chi^2(1) = 9.9$, $p = 0.002$, Cramer's $V = 0.20$) with 14% (21 out of 148 posts) our findings showed significant association between the topic and negative statements.

Corruption is a topic significantly associated with negative statements across all countries. Czechia ($\chi^2(1) = 6.66$, $p = 0.01$, Cramer's $V = 0.13$) with 89% (17 out of 19 posts), Hungary ($\chi^2(1) = 24.57$, $p < 0.001$, Cramer's $V = 0.15$) with 86% (32 out of 37 posts), Romania ($\chi^2(1) = 131.02$, $p < 0.001$, Cramer's $V = 0.33$) with 64% (141 out of 217 posts), Lithuania ($\chi^2(1) = 6.66$, $p = 0.01$, Cramer's $V = 0.13$) with 60% (three out of five posts), and Republic of Moldova ($\chi^2(1) = 89.32$, $p < 0.001$, Cramer's $V = 0.08$) with 56% (72 out of 128 posts).

Foreign policy was significantly associated with negative statements in Hungary ($\chi^2(1) = 42.35$, $p = 0.001$, Cramer's $V = 0.20$) with 79% (72 out of 91 posts), Czechia ($\chi^2(1) = 12.97$, $p < 0.001$, Cramer's $V = 0.14$) with 74% (17 out of 19 posts), and Romania ($\chi^2(1) = 5.83$, $p = 0.03$, Cramer's $V = 0.07$) with 13% (four out of 32 posts).

The LGBTQ+ topic was not central to the election campaigns in the CEE countries we analyzed; therefore, the overall number of posts was very low. However, in Czechia, Lithuania, Republic of Moldova, and Romania, all posts addressed the topic, and in Hungary, 57% of the posts (four out of seven) contained negative statements.

Our findings suggest that disruptive events such as the Covid-19 pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine determined a focus of the national election campaigns toward addressing health, defense, war, and military conflicts between countries and energy policy.

The association between health and negative statements is significant in Czechia ($\chi^2(1) = 15.83$, $p < 0.001$, Cramer's $V = 0.15$) with 76% of the posts on health having a negative statement (45 out of 59 posts), and Lithuania ($\chi^2(1) = 25.38$, $p = 0.007$, Cramer's $V = 0.25$) with 48% (16 out of 33 posts), and Romania

($\chi^2(1) = 9.19, p = 0.002, \text{Cramer's } V = 0.09$) with 39%(123 out of 313 posts). Our findings suggest that health was associated with negative statements in the CEE countries where national elections occurred during the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021, such as Czechia, Lithuania, and Romania. In Hungary, where national elections took place in 2022, health was a marginal topic covered by 17 posts. Among them, 13 were posts containing negative messages. However, the association between the topic and negative statements was significant ($\chi^2(1) = 6.22, p = 0.01, \text{Cramer's } V = 0.08$). Surprisingly, in Moldova, where elections took place in 2021, health was barely addressed, and the topic is not significantly associated with negative statements.

Within our sample, Hungary was the only country where elections took place soon after Russia invaded Ukraine. Therefore, defense, war, and military conflicts between countries and energy policy were substantially addressed during the election campaign. In contrast, in all other CEE countries, those topics were marginal or not addressed at all. Moreover, the defense was significantly associated with negative statements only in Hungary ($\chi^2(1) = 14.56, p < 0.001, \text{Cramer's } V = 0.12$), the country where 73% of the posts (37 out of 51 posts) addressing the topic contained negative statements. On the same note, war and military conflicts between countries was a crucial topic in the Hungarian national elections and significantly associated with negative statements ($\chi^2(1) = 42.24, p < 0.001, \text{Cramer's } V = 0.20$) in 67% of the posts addressing the topic (139 out of 208). Moreover, regarding energy policy, our findings suggest that only in Hungary, 75% of the posts (46 out of 61) addressing the topic were significantly associated with negative statements ($\chi^2(1) = 21.65, p < 0.001, \text{Cramer's } V = 0.14$). The association between negativity and energy policy in the Hungarian national election was probably related to the issue of energy supply in the region caused by the war in Ukraine.

Some of the topics such as criminality and crime rate in general (Czechia: $\chi^2(1) = 11.49, p < 0.001, \text{Cramer's } V = 0.13$, with 12 out of 12 posts), domestic policy in general (Hungary: $\chi^2(1) = 12.24, p < 0.001, \text{Cramer's } V = 0.11$, with 13 out of 14 posts), immigration (Czechia: $\chi^2(1) = 13.16, p < 0.001, \text{Cramer's } V = 0.14$, with 19 out of 21 posts), environmental policy (Czechia: $\chi^2(1) = 5.6, p = 0.02, \text{Cramer's } V = 0.10$, with 39 out of 58 posts; Hungary: $\chi^2(1) = 5.76, p = 0.02, \text{Cramer's } V = 0.07$, with four out of 20 posts), developmental policy (Republic of Moldova: $\chi^2(1) = 11.19, p < 0.001, \text{Cramer's } V = 0.13$, with seven out of 79 posts), political radicalism, and religious fanaticism (Czechia: $\chi^2(1) = 9.26, p = 0.002, \text{Cramer's } V = 0.09$, with 33 out of 33 posts; Republic of Moldova: $\chi^2(1) = 32.61, p < 0.001, \text{Cramer's } V = 0.22$, with four out of five posts).

Furthermore, several topics are not significantly associated with negative statements in any of the countries, such as cultural, agricultural, gender, family, and children policies, as well as education and research policies. Moreover, the overall number of posts addressing those topics was low. Figure 2 shows the frequency of posts containing negative statements within topics the topics that are related to negativity in most of the countries regardless of disruptive events (economy and finance, labor and social issues, corruption, foreign policy, and international relations) and those related to disruptive events (e.g., health, energy policy, defense policy, war, and military conflicts between countries). Figure 2 shows the frequency of negative posts addressing specific topics related or not to exceptional events.

We posited that posts containing negativity elicit more engagement in reactions (H1a) and comments (H1b) than posts without negativity. To test our hypotheses, we run a multi-level random intercept negative

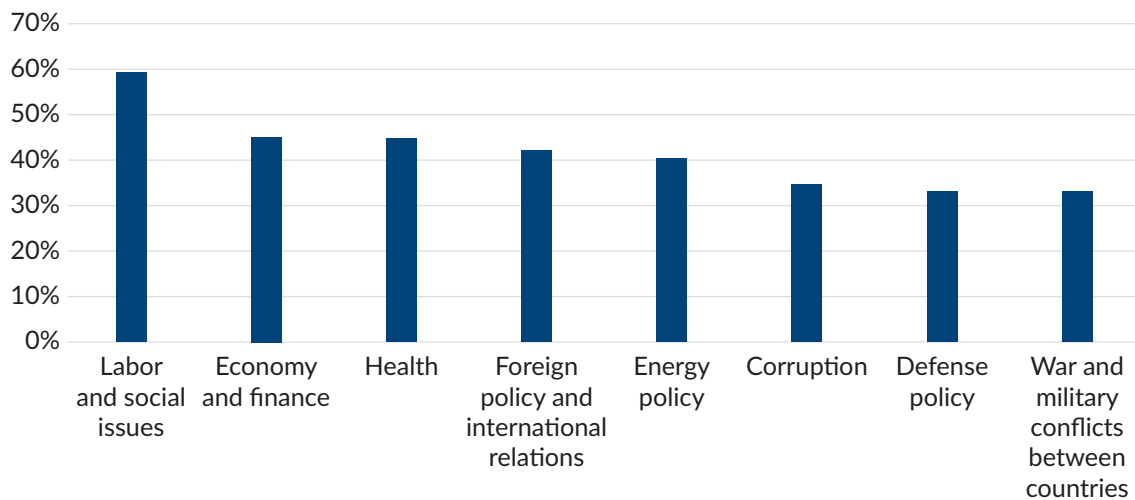


Figure 2. The frequency of negative posts addressing specific topics related or not to exceptional events. Note: $N = 2,901$ posts.

binominal regression on the level of party fixed effects. Considering the results of previous research (Nai, 2020) showing that opposition parties engage more in negative campaigning and, therefore, use more negative statements than governmental parties, we looked at opposition versus governmental parties at the party level. At the post level, we considered posts containing negative statements and topics significantly associated with negative statements, as the results of our first research question showed. We controlled the number of posts for each party. Results showed that negative statements in the posts elicited significant reactions ($b = 0.19$, $SE = 0.06$, $p < 0.001$) and comments ($b = 0.31$, $SE = 0.07$, $p < 0.001$). Hence, H1a and H1b were supported. Some topics have fewer reactions and comments (e.g., economy, finance, and health). Other topics elicited significantly more reactions and comments (e.g., labor and social issues and corruption). However, only posts containing negative statements addressing foreign policy generated significantly more reactions ($b = 0.42$, $SE = 0.18$, $p < 0.05$) and comments ($b = 0.78$, $SE = 0.23$, $p < 0.001$), while the interaction between other topics, reactions, and comments was not significant. The number of posts per party has no significant impact on the number of reactions but a significant positive impact on the number of comments. Table 2 shows the results of the negative binomial regression. To analyze predictors of reactions and comments as dependent variables, we added the type of party (opposition versus governmental) to the second model.

5. Discussion

Our research shows that, like Western countries (e.g., Rossini et al., 2023; Xenos et al., 2017), negativity in the five CEE countries we investigate is a common strategy in political parties' election campaigns on Facebook. However, we identified significant differences in the prevalence of negativity in Czechia, where the ruling populist party and two opposition coalitions run a negative campaign against each other, with Lithuania having the highest percentage and Lithuania the lowest. The results show that negativity makes up significant political communication on Facebook during national elections, like findings from previous studies on negative campaigning during previous national and European Parliament elections (Baranowski et al., 2022; Bene, 2016, 2021).

Table 2. Results of the negative binomial regression.

	Reactions		Comments	
	Model 1 Coeff. (SE)	Model 2 Coeff. (SE)	Model 1 Coeff. (SE)	Model 2 Coeff. (SE)
Intercept	5.46 (1.09)**	5.82 (0.36)***	2.87 (1.27)*	3.19 (0.40)***
Negative statements	0.20 (0.05)***	0.19 (0.06)***	0.33 (0.07)***	0.31 (0.07)***
Economy and finance	-0.13 (0.05)*	-0.19 (0.07)*	-0.15 (0.09)#	-0.15 (0.09)#
Labor and social issues	0.22 (0.09)*	0.20 (0.09)*	0.31 (0.11)**	0.31 (0.11)**
Corruption	0.28 (0.12)*	0.29 (0.12)*	0.27 (0.15)#	0.27 (0.15)#
Health	-0.28 (0.09)**	-0.29 (0.09)**	-0.16 (0.12)	-0.16 (0.12)
Foreign policy	-0.27 (0.14)*	-0.31 (0.14)*	-0.50 (0.18)**	-0.50 (0.18)**
Negative tendency + Economy and finance	0.10 (0.10)	0.13 (0.10)	0.21 (0.13)	0.21 (0.13)
Negative tendency + Labor and social issues	0.05 (0.14)	0.08 (0.14)	-0.19 (0.17)	-0.19 (0.17)
Negative tendency + Corruption	-0.21 (0.14)	-0.22 (0.15)	-0.25 (0.18)	-0.25 (0.18)
Negative tendency + Health	-0.002 (0.13)	-0.002 (0.13)	0.02 (0.18)	0.02 (0.18)
Negative tendency + Foreign policy	0.45 (0.18)*	0.42 (0.18)*	0.78 (0.23)***	0.78 (0.23)***
Opposition party		1.07 (0.34)*		1.34 (0.36)***
Number of posts	0.003 (0.002)	0.003 (0.002)	0.007 (0.003)*	0.005 (0.00026)#
N Level 1/Level 2	4,094/31	4,094/31	4,094/31	4,094/31
R ² marginal/R ² conditional	0.043/0.427	0.02/0.334	0.049/0.317	0.020/0.208
ICCs Adj.	0.40	0.32	0.28	0.19
-2loglikelihood	15,344.12	15,319.06	18,822.37	18,836.4
Negative binomial (disp. parameter)	1.64	1.64	2.67	2.67

Notes: $N = 4,095$ posts; # $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Furthermore, our research sheds light on the interplay of topics and negative posts. Analyzing election campaigns in different contexts, including disrupting events such as the Covid-19 pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine, allowed us to identify topics that are addressed with negative statements. Some topics, such as economy and finance, labor and social issues, corruption, foreign policy, and LGBTQ+ policy, were significantly associated with negativity. However, health was addressed in negative posts in Czechia, Lithuania, and Romania, where national elections occurred in 2020 and 2021 (surprisingly, not in the case of the Republic of Moldova). War and conflicts with other countries, defense, and energy policy were prevalent topics of the negative posts in Hungary, where national elections were held in 2022, weeks after Russia invaded Ukraine.

The national election campaign in Hungary was shaped by the exceptional event of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and therefore, in this case, negative statements were found in posts addressing war and conflicts with other

countries and defense policy. We also found that the economy remained an important topic due to current economic issues, such as high inflation, which are often discussed negatively. Meanwhile, topics previously associated with opposition parties, such as health (Dobos et al., 2018) or corruption (Bene, 2021), became less relevant than war and foreign policy in negative posts. Energy policy has been a pivotal topic for years as the governing parties were campaigning with utility cost reduction (Böcskei, 2016); however, in this campaign, it was discussed in a different, more negative context given the implication of the military conflict having Russia involved which was at that time a relevant energy supplier in the region.

Our findings differ from studies on negativity in Western European countries. Hence, economy and finance are relevant topics for negative campaigning in the five CEE countries. However, they are not the focus of negative communication in Western European countries, as previous studies suggested (Blassnig et al., 2021; Eberl et al., 2020). Furthermore, we observed a minor emphasis on immigration policy, environmental policy, political radicalism, and religious fanaticism during the election campaigns we analyzed in the CEE countries. However, patterns of negativity in certain CEE countries, particularly in Czechia, and to some extent in Hungary and the Republic of Moldova, resemble those of Western countries regarding issues such as immigration (Czechia), environmental policy (Czechia and Hungary), political radicalism, and religious fanaticism (Czechia, Republic of Moldova).

Conversely, corruption emerged as a central theme in negative statements across all analyzed countries, reflecting the region's fragility. Notably, addressing foreign policy in negative posts is a distinct characteristic of CEE countries compared to Western European nations. The salience of negativity in posts addressing foreign policy highlighted the topic's sensitivity for the region, which is still divided between the European Union and Russia's influence.

Aligning previous research on negativity and users' engagement on social media (e.g., Baranowski et al., 2022; Bene, 2016; Blassnig et al., 2021; Klinger et al., 2022), we found evidence that even in CEE countries, negativity in Facebook communication generates more reactions and comments. At the same time, this finding follows a common pattern across countries and contexts (e.g., election type). However, our results showed that only foreign policy as a topic, in combination with negativity, stands out as particularly impactful in generating both reactions and comments. Therefore, in addition to the salience of this issue negatively addressed in the CEE countries, it reflects that foreign policy based on pro-Western (pro-EU) as opposed to anti-Western is polarizing.

6. Conclusion

While negativity in election campaigning has long been a subject of scholarly inquiry, the current changes in society, such as the decline in trust and growth of polarization, as well as the widespread adoption of social media, reshaped the context of election campaigning. Moreover, exceptional events such as Covid-19 and Russia's invasion of Ukraine influenced the way negativity associated with specific campaign topics in the CEE countries we investigated.

Our study has limitations. We omitted the frontrunners in our sample and considered only one national election campaign on Facebook for each country. Furthermore, the negativity of the posts was measured with a single item. Due to the personal nature of social media platforms, individual politicians are relevant

actors for social media communication in many countries. Future research on negativity during the national elections must look at additional platforms (e.g., Instagram and TikTok) with different affordances.

Furthermore, even though we consistently trained all coders across the CEE countries involved in our sample, differences in understanding of negativity, primarily based on non-verbal cues, might have occurred. The results of integrated reliability tests conducted in each country do not reflect such differences. Moreover, future studies could expand upon these findings, exploring the longitudinal effects of negativity and tracking campaign strategies over multiple election cycles.

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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 authors (unedited).

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Divisive Issues, Polarization, and Users' Reactions on Facebook: Comparing Campaigning in Latin America

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Abstract

Economic, social, and health crises have shaken and polarized contemporary politics. An element fueling this polarization is the dissemination of divisive topics on social media platforms. While these polarizing social media tendencies are increasingly studied, research exploring digital political communication in South America remains scarce. This study aims to analyze the electoral campaigns in Brazil, Colombia, Chile, and Peru to define the features that trigger polarized emotional reactions on Facebook. The corpus comprises a sample of 2,930 posts published by candidates and political parties during the first round of the presidential elections held in these countries between 2021 and 2022. We hypothesize that users are more likely to react in a polarized way to content focused on divisive issues. In addition, we examine how these patterns differ across countries and the influence of the level of political polarization. Finally, the role played by party-level characteristics in the emotional reactions of users is also analyzed. By means of quantitative content analysis, these questions are addressed using multilevel negative binomial regressions to identify what predicts Love and Angry reactions. The bandwagon effect seems to work positively on users' moods since the most popular political actors receive significantly more Love reactions, irrespective of the post's subject. In more polarized countries, there is a tendency to react more negatively to certain divisive issues, generating greater visibility of these issues on social networks and thus promoting more polarization. These findings expand knowledge about the dynamics of digital political communication in the Global South.

Keywords

electoral campaign; Facebook; Latin America; polarization; political communication; users' reactions

1. Introduction

Latin America is a culturally diverse region with multiple country-related similarities in its political history. First, as exemplified by its history of colonization, it has experienced increased external interventionism. Second, periods of military dictatorships have contributed to the weakening of democratic institutions in several countries (Frantz, 2019). As a result of external interventionism, military dictatorships and weak institutions, the region is considered one of the most violent in the world, with criminal, political, domestic, and youth violence being a target of concern for politicians and citizens (Imbusch et al., 2011; Visconti, 2020).

The region is characterized by a multi-party system and by the volatility of the electorate (Cohen et al., 2018; Pereira & Melo, 2012). A factor contributing to a shift in votes is the existence of constant political crises in the region, such as corruption scandals (Araújo & Prior, 2021; Mesquita Ceia, 2022). In moments of instability, political outsiders are more likely to gain public support, and one strategy adopted to attract attention is to promote ideological polarization (Corrales, 2005; Freidenberg, 2006; Moraes & Béjar, 2022). In this regard, divisive topics, such as corruption and crime, have been highly instrumentalized by the region's political leaders in order to attract more voters (Araújo & Prior, 2021; Rousseau, 2022).

This article provides valuable insights into a region that has been relatively underexplored in the field of political communication. Latin American countries, characterized by their presidential systems, present a compelling case for understanding these dynamics. Previous research has indicated that countries with presidential systems are more likely to experience higher levels of polarization compared to those with parliamentary systems (Maier & Nai, 2022). This context makes Latin America an interesting and significant region to investigate these associations, especially considering the lack of research focusing on polarizing reactions on social media in this region, while similar studies have been conducted in Europe (see Jost et al., 2020).

Divisive issues are symbolic, emotional, appealing, and more likely to predict extreme attitudes (Lee, 2021; Wojcieszak et al., 2018). The mobilization of divisive topics is particularly instrumentalized on social media since online platforms have become a key instrument in implementing power practices and gaining popular support (Araújo & Prior, 2021; Bernardi & Costa, 2020; Novoselova, 2020). Social media echo chambers contribute to the radicalization of the electorate, further increasing polarization and the weakening of democratic institutions (Boulianne et al., 2020; Hameleers, 2020).

Taking into account the increased polarization and political discourses on divisive issues in Latin America, the purpose of this article is twofold. First, it examines the impact of national polarization on the emotional reaction of social media users to posts published by candidates and political parties during the electoral campaign of the first round of the presidential elections held in Brazil, Colombia, Chile, and Peru between 2021 and 2022. Second, it investigates to which extent are divisive topics more likely to account for higher Love and Angry reactions compared to non-divisive issues. This adds to the literature by examining a region that is under-researched in terms of political communication and providing further insights into the associations between divisive issues, polarization, and emotional reactions.

1.1. Social Media and Polarization

In the network media logic (Klinger & Svensson, 2015), social media users' interactions can have considerable influence on the reach of the content (Porten-Cheé et al., 2018) and transcend the boundaries of the pages where they are published (Vaccari & Valeriani, 2015). Thus, political actors adapt their publications on these channels in order to go viral and become more visible online (Kelm, 2020). In this strategy, Facebook plays a key role, since it is still the most used social platform worldwide (Kemp, 2022). In the Latin American countries analyzed, Facebook is also the most popular social network, for any purpose and for news (Newman et al., 2021, 2022), ranking ahead of YouTube, Instagram, X (formally Twitter), and TikTok.

Most research on Facebook user engagement tends to focus on the number of likes, comments, and shares, without analyzing the different types of reactions. Since 2020, Facebook has offered an extension of the Like button with seven reactions (Like, Love, Care, Wow, Haha, Sad, Angry), to give users more ways to share their reaction to a post in a quick and easy manner (Meta Careers, 2020). These "affective affordances" make it possible for users to engage with posts in a way that mimics their emotional response (Sturm Wilkerson et al., 2021). In the realm of political communication on Facebook, the Love and Angry buttons are the most often used reactions (Hughes & van Kessel, 2018; Mancosu, 2018) and they can be categorized as positive and negative one-click reactions of users' emotions (Jost et al., 2020).

The study of emotional reactions on Facebook is particularly interesting because this platform has a high potential to elicit political polarization (Barberá, 2020; Settle, 2018). The dynamics by which Facebook users relate to content and to other users reinforce selective exposure and group polarization (Quattrociocchi et al., 2016). The Angry and Love reactions can show Facebook users' issues and affective polarization by expressing the extent to which people feel sympathy or dislike. While issue polarization describes divergent policy positions, affective polarization reflects how partisan identity triggers both positive feelings for the in-party and dislike of the out-party (Iyengar et al., 2019). If we order all reactions emotionally, Love and Angry are the most polarized reactions: Love is used when Facebook users feel a very strong positive emotion and Angry represents the strongest negative emotion (Sandoval-Almazan & Valle-Cruz, 2020).

The presence of positive or negative emotions in political actors' posts on Facebook seems to influence the type of emotional reaction of users, who react with Love to positive emotions and with Anger to negative ones (Zerback & Wirz, 2021). When individuals become aware of emotional reactions within their group, they tend to ascribe to them and converge toward this perceived emotion (Versteegen, 2024). However, the content of the post is not always able to predict users' reactions and situational factors are vital in understanding them (Tønnesen et al., 2023). Differences in the political context in which elections are held in the four Latin American countries will therefore influence how users in Brazil, Colombia, Chile, and Peru react emotionally on Facebook. We can assume that Facebook users' reactions of Love and Anger will be higher in countries with greater polarization. According to the results of an expert survey (Coppedge et al., 2022, 2023), Brazil is the country with the highest polarization index of those analyzed (0.97), followed by Peru (0.77), Chile (0.73), and Colombia (0.72). Therefore, we expect the percentage of Angry and Love reactions to reflect these national differences:

H1: Angry and Love reactions will be higher in Brazil and lower in Chile and Colombia.

Furthermore, the extent to which citizens feel about a certain topic will be conditioned by the nature of party conflict. The group context plays an important role in the reactions of Facebook users (Zerback & Wirz, 2021). The audience of extreme parties is more prone to strong emotions (Mancosu, 2018). Ideologically extreme parties tend to elicit relatively greater emotional reactions on Facebook (Muraoka et al., 2021), especially Angry and Love reactions (Eberl et al., 2020; Jost et al., 2020). In this way, we expect extremism to moderate Angry and Love reactions (H2a). Additionally, the electoral expectations of the users of the most voted-for parties may influence the type of reaction. Supporters of the losing side tend to show substantially more dissatisfaction (Iyengar et al., 2012). They are more aggressive and polarized when they have poor electoral forecasts (Valera-Ordaz et al., 2017). As a result, we expect users of the most voted-for parties to be more positive and have a higher number of Love reactions, while the pessimism of the least voted-for parties may lead their followers to react more negatively with more Angry reactions (H2b):

H2: Angry and Love reactions are moderated by party-level features, such as extremism (H2a) and electoral popularity (H2b).

1.2. Political Issues and Divisive Topics

The topic addressed by political actors' social media posts and the engagement they generate in users is another key aspect from the perspective of political communication (Bene, 2021). During electoral campaigns, politicians may choose between focusing on divisive issues or consensual issues (Ash et al., 2017). Usually, voters are more likely to react less to consensual issues, such as quality education, accessible health care, and efficient public infrastructure (Simons & Green, 2018). On the contrary, divisive issues are likely to create ideological divides, since they encompass topics that are controversial and discussed with a more emotional rhetoric (Lee, 2021). Examples are moral values, immigration, LGBTQ+ policy, gun control, race and ethnicity, terrorism, abortion, and nationalism (Elliott-Dorans, 2022; Kim et al., 2018; Wenzel & Żerkowska-Balas, 2019).

Divisive issues are often symbolic, and they are more likely to cause social divisions and be a source of threat perception (Simons & Green, 2018). Anger plays an important role in explaining the link between threat and affective polarization (Renström et al., 2023). Therefore, individuals are likely to develop extreme opinions toward divisive issues, and such emotionally charged policy fields are considered to have a polarizing characteristic (Lee, 2021; Nguyen et al., 2022; Wojcieszak et al., 2018) and trigger users' reactions (Bene et al., 2022; Heidenreich et al., 2022). Nevertheless, these topics may change depending on the context. While immigration is considered a prominent divisive issue in Europe (Wenzel & Żerkowska-Balas, 2019), previous studies consider it is less salient in the US because of the novelty of the topic (Elliott-Dorans, 2022; Lee, 2021).

In Latin America, corruption and crime receive increased attention given the high salience of both issues in the media and rising public concern over security (Stein & Kellam, 2014). Beginning in 2010, massive protests erupted in various countries in Latin America, demonstrating growing popular dissatisfaction with various issues, including economic inequality, corruption, and crime (Carothers & Feldmann, 2021). In other countries, a common factor was the benefits enjoyed by the political and economic elite, while citizens lacked access to basic public services and economic conditions (Carothers & Feldmann, 2021; Luna, 2021; Muñoz, 2021; Stuenkel, 2021). The lack of conditions experienced by the middle and poor classes contributed to a decline in trust in public institutions, leading to massive demonstrations with an anti-establishment agenda (Luna, 2021; Stuenkel, 2021).

In Brazil, for example, protests erupted in 2013 following an increase in bus fares, and the protests soon included dissatisfaction with systemic corruption among all political actors (Stuenkel, 2021). A major driver of these protests was *Operação Lava Jato* (Operation Car Wash), which exposed widespread corruption involving the state-owned oil company Petrobras, construction companies, and politicians (Mesquita Ceia, 2022; Muñoz, 2021). One of the companies involved was Odebrecht, a construction company involved in bribery and corruption in several Latin American countries, including Peru and Mexico (Martinez Encarnación, 2019; Muñoz, 2021).

Similarly, the economic insecurity faced by younger and older generations contributed to the anti-establishment movement in Chile, while a series of corruption scandals in the 2000s damaged the reputation of institutions (Luna, 2021). Corruption is also a major source of concern in Colombia, and previous findings indicated that the majority of Colombians believe that corruption is widespread among public sector actors, with such growing concern culminating in an anti-corruption referendum in 2018 (Haman, 2019). The similarity in increased concern related to corruption in different Latin American countries was also shown in the last *Global Corruption Barometer* focusing on Latin America and the Caribbean (Pring & Vrushi, 2019). The report shows that 53% of people think that corruption increased compared to the previous year (Pring & Vrushi, 2019). Looking specifically at government corruption, 85% believe that it is a major problem, and such a belief is supported by 96% of interviewees in Peru, 94% in Colombia, 90% in Brazil, and 85% in Chile (Pring & Vrushi, 2019). This survey's findings are in line with previous studies showing that populism was boosted by corruption scandals in different Latin American countries (Araújo & Prior, 2021; Mesquita Ceia, 2022).

Crime is a pressing concern in Latin American countries, underscored by the pervasive levels of violence (Imbusch et al., 2011; Visconti, 2020). Compounding this challenge is the prevalence of impunity, fueled by systemic corruption within law enforcement agencies (Crocì, 2023). The involvement of the police in corruption and criminal activities contributes to the increased sensation of insecurity and distrust among citizens (Crocì, 2023). For example, fear of crime is high in many Latin American countries, and such fears have reduced trust in criminal justice institutions, such as the police and the courts (Singer et al., 2020). In many cases, political actors are also involved in criminal activities, showing the association between crime, corruption, and actors of public institutions in different countries (Crocì, 2023). For instance, findings from the *Global Corruption Barometer* reveal staggering levels of distrust, with 45% of respondents believing that most or all members of the police force are corrupt, while 49% hold similar perceptions about government officials (Pring & Vrushi, 2019).

Drawing on such contextual particularities, we consider corruption and crime as highly politically divisive in the region, and we look carefully into them. Given the polarizing nature of divisive issues and their emotional appeal, we hypothesize on the divisive issues (corruption and crime) in Latin America as follows:

H3: Angry and Love reactions will be higher on salient divisive issues.

Considering the different levels of polarization in Latin America, we hypothesize that there are links between country-level polarization and the emotional responses to divisive issues. In this regard, we believe that the country with the highest level of polarization (Brazil) will be more likely to have more emotionally polarized reactions to posts about corruption and crime compared to those countries with the lowest levels of polarization (Chile and Colombia). We therefore hypothesize as follows:

H4: Angry and Love reactions to divisive issues will be higher in Brazil and lower in Chile and Colombia.

2. Method

To understand the relationship between the emotional reaction of Facebook users with features at the national, party, and post levels, we analyzed the posts published by parties/coalitions and presidential candidates in Brazil, Colombia, Chile, and Peru who surpassed the threshold of 3% of the vote in the first round of elections held in the four countries between 2021 and 2022 (see Table A1 in the Supplementary File). Using the CrowdTangle application (2022), all posts published in the four weeks prior to election day in each country were downloaded: Brazil (10/02/2022), Colombia (05/09/2022), Chile (11/21/2021), and Peru (04/14/2021). A random sample of 50% of the posts in each country were coded ($N = 2,930$).

The study follows a quantitative content analysis methodology, where the post is the unit of analysis. The manual coding of content categories covered all elements of the Facebook posts, including visual elements such as the first image (when several) and the first minute of videos. These categories such as the independent variables of crime and corruption topics were binary coded for each post, indicating whether the post directly refers to corruption/crime issues ($= 1$) or not ($= 0$). To ensure the reliability of the coding, a test was conducted among the coders of each country on a random sample of 100 posts. A cross-country reliability test was not performed, since the coding of the elections took place at different times in the four countries. The results of the Brennan and Prediger kappa test (see Table A2 in the Supplementary File) show a common understanding of the coded categories in each country (all $\kappa > 0.9$), giving the study good reliability scores (Lacy et al., 2015).

Regarding H1 and H4, we calculated the polarization index to know the situation in each country. This index is an average of political polarization and societal polarization scores in these countries (Coppedge et al., 2022, 2023). The categories have a range between 0 (*no polarization*) and 1 (*serious polarization*). Political polarization refers to the extent to which political differences affect social relationships beyond political discussions: "Societies are highly polarized if supporters of opposing political camps are reluctant to engage in friendly interactions, for example, in family functions, civic associations, their free time activities and workplaces" (Coppedge et al., 2023, p. 226). In turn, societal polarization focuses on "the extent to which these differences in opinions result in major clashes of views and polarization or, alternatively, whether there is general agreement on the general direction this society should develop" (Coppedge et al., 2023, p. 333). Based on this index, Brazil (0.97) can be considered the most polarized country followed by Peru (0.77) while Chile (0.73) and Colombia (0.72) are the least polarized.

The "extremist" category (H2a) classifies political actors located in the first and last quintile of ideological positioning (see the Supplementary File). The values for Brazil, Chile, and Colombia come from the database by Wiesehomeier et al. (2021), while the ideological classification of the Peruvian parties comes from the 2020 Chapel Hill Expert Survey Latin America values (Martínez-Gallardo et al., 2022). The most voted-for parties (H2b) are the two parties with the most votes in the first electoral round in each country.

We also controlled for several factors that can shape the number of emotional reactions based on the literature regarding political user engagement (e.g., Bene et al., 2022; Eberl et al., 2020; Jost et al., 2020). At a post-level, it is obvious that the emotional tone of the post can affect the number of Love or Angry

reactions, therefore we controlled for whether the post included any negative statement or gesture or an acclaiming tone (portraying the supported candidate, party, topic, or issue in a favorable light). Also, the visual character of posts may also matter; thus, we controlled for whether the post was (a) a post with (edited) video (reference category), (b) a post with a photo(s), (c) a post with live video, or (d) a status or link-based update without visual material. We can also expect that posts that are directly authored by the page are more popular than shared content; thus, we controlled for whether the post is with or without shared content (shared content is the reference category). Last, we considered the general popularity of the posts by controlling for the number of likes, which is the most common way to engage with posts. At a page level, we used random intercepts to filter out across-page differences, but also control for two factors. First, we considered whether the page was run by a political leader or a party, and second, if it was a left-wing or right-wing party (see the Supplementary File). We can expect that leaders can more effectively generate emotions on the personalized interface of social media platforms than political organizations. Also, there is evidence that there are ideological differences in emotional communication (e.g., Brady et al., 2019) which makes political actors' ideological leaning an important factor to control for.

Due to the nested character of our data (page level) and the overly dispersed count nature of Love and Angry, we applied multilevel negative binomial regression with a random intercept at the page level. Countries are added as a fixed effect.

3. Results

In order to test our hypotheses and establish the elements behind users' emotional reactions on Facebook, we calculated two regression models for Love and Angry reactions as dependent variables (see Table 1). Model 1 contains all direct effect and control variables while Model 2 adds the cross-level interaction terms. When it comes to the country variable, we ran several models with different reference categories (see the Supplementary File), but in Table 1 we present only one where the most polarized country (Brazil) is the reference category. Nonetheless, findings on country differences mentioned in the analysis are frequently based on models with different reference categories.

Considering our first hypothesis, a country's level of polarization alone does not appear to influence the emotional reaction of users. Based on the regression coefficients—with all else being equal—there are no statistically significant differences in the number of Angry and Love reactions when comparing the results of the country with the highest level of polarization (Brazil) with the least polarized countries (Chile and Colombia). The only significant difference exists between Peru as well as Colombia and Chile with political actors in the former countries generating more Love reactions than in the latter, and Peruvian actors triggering more Angry reactions than their Colombian and Chilean counterparts.

When it comes to party-level features, findings are mixed. Our data reject H2a, as we cannot confirm that extremist political actors generate more Angry and Love reactions. Nevertheless, H2b is partially fulfilled. The most voted-for parties generate significantly more Love reactions than the less voted-for parties. In contrast, there are no differences in Angry reactions.

H3 posits that Angry and Love reactions will be higher on salient divisive issues, such as corruption and crime. The results show that these divisive issues do not increase the number of Love reactions. As for Angry

Table 1. Random-intercept negative binomial regression estimates for Love and Angry reactions on parties' posts.

Predictors	Love 1	Love 2	Angry 1	Angry 2
(Intercept)	0.75	0.74	0.08 **	0.08 **
Country: Colombia	1.83	1.78	0.47	0.47 *
Country: Chile	0.65	0.65	0.50	0.54
Country: Peru	1.80	1.83	1.90	1.89
Extremist	1.22	1.23	1.32	1.39
Most voted	2.37 **	2.37 *	1.40	1.35
Crime	0.95	1.06	1.26	4.55 **
Corruption	0.93	0.93	0.68 *	0.48
Crime*Colombia		1.06		0.21 *
Crime*Chile		0.87		0.15 ***
Crime*Peru		0.75		0.49
Corruption*Colombia		1.09		1.72
Corruption*Chile		1.13		1.42
Corruption*Peru		0.79		1.16
Negativity	0.89	0.88	2.72 ***	2.81 ***
Acclaim	1.40 ***	1.42 ***	0.96	0.96
No. of likes	1.00 ***	1.00 ***	1.00 ***	1.00 ***
Candidate's page	12.36 ***	12.44 ***	11.04 ***	11.05 ***
Type: Live video	1.57 ***	1.57 ***	1.94 ***	2.02***
Type: Photo	1.10 *	1.10 *	0.66 ***	0.68 ***
Type: Link or status	1.10	1.11	1.43 *	1.44 *
Original post	1.68 ***	1.70 ***	0.83	0.82
Left-wing	0.77	0.77	0.71	0.72
Random Effects				
σ^2	0.61	0.61	1.20	1.20
τ_{00}	0.80 _{page}	0.80 _{page}	1.86 _{page}	1.90 _{page}
ICC	0.57	0.57	0.61	0.61
N	41 _{page}	41 _{page}	41 _{page}	41 _{page}
Observations	2890	2890	2890	2890
Marginal R ² / Conditional R ²	0.740 / 0.887	0.739 / 0.8887	0.563 / 0.828	0.561 / 0.830

Notes: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$; Reference categories: Brazil (country); (type) post with photo (s).

reactions, in the case of corruption, the opposite effect is observed. The presence of corruption in posts decreases the number of negative reactions in a statistically significant way, while the issue of crime alone has no impact at all on users' negative reactions. Therefore, H3 is also rejected.

Our most important finding relates to the role of country polarization on users' negative reactions to certain divisive issues. H4 postulates that posts on corruption and crime generate more Love and Angry reactions in Brazil and fewer in Chile and Colombia. This hypothesis is partly supported only for the topic of crime and

negative reactions since our data indicate that users' reactions are more angry on posts about crime in Brazil (and Peru) than in Chile and Colombia. The level of polarization does not seem to change the influence of the issue of corruption on users' negative (Angry) reactions. The results also indicate that the effects of crime and corruption on Love reactions are not moderated by country context. Thus, the data rule out the effect of divisive topics on users' positive (Love) reactions being conditioned by the polarization level of the countries.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

This study explores the associations between country-level polarization, party-level features, and divisive issues with users' emotional reactions on Facebook during electoral campaigns in four Latin American countries (Brazil, Chile, Colombia, and Peru). Specifically, the study aimed to understand whether countries with higher levels of polarization were associated with more polarizing reactions on Facebook—using Angry and Love reactions—compared to countries with lower levels of polarization. Additionally, it investigated how political leaning extremism and party popularity moderate polarization. Finally, the study explored the associations between divisive issues, such as crime and corruption, and emotional reactions.

The findings revealed a complex political communication context, where our hypotheses were not fully confirmed. For instance, we hypothesized that country-level polarization would be associated with polarizing reactions. We expected that Brazil—the country with the highest level of polarization—would have a greater number of Angry reactions compared to Chile and Colombia, the countries with the lowest level (H1). Yet, in line with other findings (Muraoka et al., 2021), we did not find evidence corroborating our expectations. This finding suggests that the country level alone is insufficient in explaining users' reactions. Our models suggest that other factors are a better fit in explaining user reactions, such as vote share, the divisive issue analyzed, communication strategy (acclaim vs. negative campaign), type of content (video, photo, or status), and post originality.

In an additional model examining the associations between divisive issues and country-level polarization (H4), we found evidence that posts about crime led to more Angry reactions in Brazil, a highly polarized country, while posts about corruption did not show a similar pattern. We attribute our findings to the characteristics of Latin America. Although the level of polarization differs when comparing the analyzed countries, they share similarities impacting how users react to online political campaigns. For instance, countries share similar challenges when dealing with corruption scandals, as exemplified in Operation Car Wash involving multiple Latin American countries (Martínez Encarnación, 2019; Mesquita Ceia, 2022; Muñoz, 2021). In reaction to such corruption scandals, mass protests took place in various Latin American countries after 2010, and corruption was a common driver among them, with citizens supporting an anti-establishment agenda (Luna, 2021; Stuenkel, 2021). Concerns over corruption have been growing for multiple years, and the level of distrust in public institutions, such as in the police and in government, is high among citizens from Latin America (Pring & Vrushi, 2019). Our findings showing non-significant differences in the salient issue of corruption highlight the contextual similarity in the region.

Although rates of violence are high in Latin America, there are key differences among the countries analyzed. For example, Colombia faced criminality issues due to the guerrilla actions driven by the FARC group (Haman, 2019). In 2016, a new peace agreement was established in the country and there have been institutional efforts to increase public acceptance of this peace agreement (Piccolino & Ruetter-Orihuela,

2021). Such differences among Latin American countries are also exemplified in the Chilean case because violence in the country is lower relative to the region (Singer et al., 2020). Such contextual differences are mirrored in our findings showing that posts about crime led to more Angry reactions in Brazil compared to Chile and Colombia. In Brazil, crime is often explored by populist leaders to boost fear and divisions between us vs. them (Rennó, 2020). One prevalent narrative advocates for tougher measures against crime and violence, often at the expense of human rights considerations (Rennó, 2020). For instance, during his campaign, Bolsonaro advocated loosening regulations on gun control and arming citizens as a means to combat crime (Rennó, 2020).

At a party level, the results reject H2a and reveal that extremist political actors do not generate a greater emotional reaction. This is inconsistent with previous findings (Muraoka et al., 2021) and implies a less belligerent strategy on the extremes since the negativity of the messages is usually conveyed to users' reactions (Eberl et al., 2020; Jost et al., 2020; Martella & Bracciale, 2022). However, our results showing associations between acclaim messages and Love reactions and between negative messages and Angry reactions are in line with previous studies on emotional responses to positive and negative content on Facebook (Eberl et al., 2020; Jost et al., 2020; Sturm Wilkerson et al., 2021). Still, at a party level, our results show that parties with higher popularity rates during the electoral process foster a more positive mood among Facebook users of political actors' pages, and our hypothesis that the most voted-for parties trigger more Love reactions was confirmed. This finding is in line with previous results showing the winner effect, that winners are more likely to receive more positive evaluations compared to defeated candidates (Levy, 2021).

We also found no evidence for our assumption that divisive issues would evoke more emotional reactions (H3). Contrary to the findings of other studies (Bene, 2021), we found the opposite effect in posts focusing on corruption, with a significant decrease in Angry reactions. This finding may be associated with the type of campaign strategy adopted by political candidates when discussing corruption. Users' reactions may be less negative if messages about corruption are framed in a positive tone, such as when candidates use an acclaim strategy. Future studies should examine interactions between the political issues and the style of the message for better conclusions.

Our article contributes to the literature by showing associations between polarization, divisive issues, and user reactions through a comparative lens in an as-yet unexplored region. More polarized countries (H1), extremist political actors (H2a), and divisive topics (H3) do not per se generate a greater number of negative reactions. Furthermore, the bandwagon effect seems to work positively on users' moods since most popular political actors receive more Love reactions irrespective of the post's subject (H2b). Finally, in more polarized countries, there is a tendency to react more negatively to certain divisive issues (H4), generating greater visibility of these issues on social networks and thereby promoting a polarizing vicious circle.

This study has some limitations. For instance, polarizing reactions offer an avenue for understanding users' reactions, but deeper analysis including other reactions (Wow, Haha, and Sad) could reveal further insights into emotional and affective responses. From a methodological point of view, the results of the comparative study have to be interpreted with caution because only an intra-country reliability test was conducted (not cross-country). However, one of the authors participated in the coding process of the four countries, which helped homogenize the coding of the variables analyzed. Furthermore, this study compares Latin American

countries, and future studies including other regions could help better explain the associations between polarization and political campaigns across different contexts. Finally, future studies could explore interactions between divisive political issues and the communication strategy (such as acclaim vs. negative campaigns) to better understand the associations with users' reactions.

By examining the context of Latin America, this study not only adds to the existing literature but also highlights the importance of considering regional specificities in political communication research. The findings emphasize the need for more comparative studies examining under-researched countries to gain a better understanding of how polarization, political issues, and social media dynamics interact. This research opens possibilities for further exploration into the mechanisms through which polarization manifests in digital political communication, especially in regions characterized by presidential systems and a history of political instability and polarization. Moreover, our study also provides compelling reasons for further comparisons between countries with different political systems considering how polarization differs between them.

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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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