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Keep Them Engaged! Investigating the Effects of Self-centered Social Media Communication Style on User Engagement in 12 European Countries

Márton Bene ^a, Andrea Ceron ^b, Vicente Fenoll ^c, Jörg Haßler ^d,
Simon Kruschinski ^e, Anders Olof Larsson^f, Melanie Magin ^g, Katharina Schlosser ^d,
and Anna-Katharina Wurst ^d

^aCentre for Social Sciences, Hungarian Academy of Sciences Centre of Excellence & Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, Hungary; ^bDepartment of Social and Political Sciences, Università Degli Studi Di Milano, Italy; ^cDepartment of Language Theory and Communication Sciences, University of Valencia, Valencia, Spain; ^dDepartment of Media and Communication, LMU Munich, Germany; ^eDepartment of Communication, Johannes Gutenberg University of Mainz, Mainz, Germany; ^fDepartment of Communication, Kristiania University College, Norway; ^gDepartment of Sociology and Political Science, Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Trondheim, Norway



ABSTRACT


On Facebook, patterns of user engagement largely shape what types of political contents citizens can see on the platform. Higher engagement leads to higher visibility. Therefore, one of the major goals of political actors' Facebook communication is to produce content with the potential to provoke user engagement, and thereby increase their own visibility. This study introduces the concept of self-centered social media communication style which focuses on "salient" and "owned" issues with populist and negative appeals and investigates how user engagement is related to its main elements. We also explore how users' receptivity to these content-related factors is shaped by country context. More specifically, we hypothesize that users are more likely to react, comment on and share posts focusing on salient topics or issues "owned" by parties rather than more permanent policy issues, and posts including populist appeals and negativity. Further, we test how these effects are moderated by geographical regions and the level of party system polarization. We manually coded 9,703 Facebook posts of 68 parties from 12 European countries in the context of the 2019 European elections. Our findings show that users are more likely to engage with immigration-related, domestic, populist and negative posts, but react less to posts dealing with environmental or economic issues. While issue ownership does not play a significant role for user engagement, country context plays a minor role. However, some populist appeals are more effective in more polarized countries.

KEYWORDS

Facebook; viralization; user engagement; topics; immigration; issue ownership; populism; negativity; polarization; campaigning

Over the past few years, political communication has produced a plethora of novel phenomena, and it is widely perceived that the content and style of political communication have changed remarkably: it is enough to think of examples such as Donald Trump's rhetoric, the mainstreaming of populist communication, or the emergence of divisive

CONTACT Márton Bene  bene.marton@tk.hu  Hungarian Academy of Sciences Centre of Excellence & Eötvös Loránd University, Pf. 25, 1097 Budapest, Tóth Kalman u. 4, Budapest, 1453, Hungary

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political topics that used to play a relatively marginal role in the past (e.g., climate change). Even though political communication differs across country contexts, many scholars argue that the contemporary political environment overall has become increasingly fragmented and polarizing as it is dominated by divisive topics, fragmented issue focus, a populist communication style, and heightened negativity (e.g., Bennett & Pfetsch, 2018; Blumler, 2016). These changes are frequently associated with the emergence of social media, which has changed the structure of the political communication ecosystem by, *inter alia*, making ordinary citizens' communicative activities more important in the political information process than ever before (Blumler, 2016).

Social media in general, and Facebook in particular, have become an increasingly important communication channel for political actors. Many of these actors are increasingly experimenting with a self-centered communication style which is focused on building an own narrative rather than fitting it into the narrative structures of news media communication. This is in sharp contrast with the established standards of professionalized campaign communication (Enli, 2017) that is highly attentive to how the respective communication will be presented in the mediatized elite discourse. By focusing only on the party-voter dimension of strategic communication, parties can focus exclusively on specific salient and "owned" issues with a populist and negative style as this is easier on social media since it allows parties to directly deliver their message to citizens without intervention, framing and interpretation of other political actors and journalists. Since this self-centered communication style with its narrow issue focus and populist and negative style seems to be increasingly popular in contemporary political communication, it is important to observe and understand its underlying causes. This study sheds light on the role of social media users' preferences in this process.

The theoretical rationale behind this is that parties' communication strategies on social media are highly attentive to users' preferences and engagement. Although political actors reach only rather narrow and already converted voter segments directly via their Facebook pages, the network effects of the platform enable them to indirectly reach much larger audiences (Bene, 2017). If many users engage with their posts and thereby disseminate party information to their friends, parties can reach an enormous number of voters in a peer-mediated way, which is highly impactful in social media contexts (Anspach, 2017). Research shows that for these reasons user engagement is a crucial performance factor in parties' social media strategy (Kalsnes, 2016; Kreiss et al., 2018). While user engagement is obviously driven by multiple factors, studies show that particularly the content of messages matters. Therefore, political actors make efforts to adapt to users' preferences and produce content that triggers more user reactions (Ennser-Jedenastik et al., 2021; Kalsnes, 2016). Consequently, if users engage more with salient and "owned" issues, populist appeals, and negative content, parties could be motivated to follow a more self-centered communication style on Facebook.

However, it is still largely unclear what content characteristics of parties' posts determine how users engage with the content and what role political contexts play in these processes. In fact, the emerging literature in this field is dominated by single-country investigations (Bene, 2017; Heiss et al., 2019; Jost et al., 2020), which makes it difficult to generalize the often-conflicting findings. Further, one can argue that the effects of particular content types are not uniform across different contexts. First, users from distinct geographical regions with different social and political cultures, challenges, and experiences may have varied

political content expectations and demands. Second, the structure of political competition may also shape users' behavior, as polarizing content may be more attractive in an already highly polarized political context.

The present study addresses these research gaps by conducting a content analysis of parties' ($N = 68$) posts ($N = 9,703$) on Facebook in 12 European countries during the 2019 European Parliament (EP) election campaign. First, we systematically examine how salient and more permanent policy topics, issue ownership, populist appeals, and negativity affect user engagement (Reactions,¹ comments, and shares) on parties' central Facebook pages. Second, we show how some of these effects differ across geographical regions and are moderated by the level of party system polarization.

Theoretical background

Self-centered communication style on social media

While for many political actors social media does not result in substantial change in the way they communicate (Magin et al., 2017), integrating these platforms merely as another element in their overall campaign mix (Stromer-Galley, 2014), some parties and politicians use these platforms in a more distinct way. By allowing them to bypass journalist gatekeepers and to enable direct communication with citizens, a more self-centered style of social media communication seems to arise and become increasingly popular on these platforms. Established standards of professionalized communication strategies are tailored to be powerful vertically toward the voters but also horizontally in the elite discourse as positions, views, and acts are traditionally presented mostly in a news media context (Gurevitch et al., 2009). In other words, parties need to consider not only how their messages are perceived by their voters, but also how they will be presented, challenged, and responded to by journalists, pundits, and their opponents. This is due to the fact that they are conveyed to voters via ongoing mediatised narratives that include journalists' framing activities, commentaries of pundits, and opponents' responses with the aim to place these messages into specific contexts (Lilleker, 2014). While many political actors are still attentive to the news media coverage even when it comes to their social media activities (Kreiss et al., 2018), others embrace a more self-centered social media style, which is more detached from this horizontal elite-dimension of communication and thereby less bound by the reactions of political and media elites. Instead of aiming at being fitted into the narrative structure of the news media, its primary goal is to build an own narrative that is directly addressed to voters. This narrative makes a clearer distinction between the respective actors and other members of the political elite. Unsurprisingly, a prototype of this self-centered communication is Donald Trump's social media activity. It has been demonstrated that his social media communication was strikingly different from the established standards of professionalized campaign communication and focused primarily on building "an air of authenticity" around the candidate (Enli, 2017). Also, this more "amateurish" and authenticity-focused communication style can be found in other countries (Alonso-Muñoz & Casero-Ripollés, 2018). This form of social media use is in sharp contrast with Barack Obama's campaign communication which has long been considered the "prototype" of political social media use (Kreiss, 2016). He followed a highly personalized but professionalized (in terms of the established standards) communication strategy that easily fitted to journalistic and elite narratives (Stromer-Galley, 2014). Based on

this, we define self-centered communication as a communication strategy that focuses on building a unique and authentic narrative around the political actor that specifically addresses voters while being less attentive to its reception at the elite and media levels.

This self-centered narrative can be effectively performed via, *inter alia*, (1) a narrow issue focus on “salient” and “owned” issues, and a heightened use of (2) populist appeals and (3) negativity. These are communication elements that are not specific to social media, and politicians use them in other contexts as well to build their own narrative. However, they can be used more effectively and freely in social media communication as it is undistorted by the interference of journalists and other elite actors.

First, on social media platforms, parties can effectively build their own narrative by highlighting policy issues selectively based on their current popularity and their own strategic considerations while ignoring other issues that are traditionally important in political campaigns. Since on these platforms journalists and opponents cannot directly force them to deal with other areas, they are free to focus predominantly on issues that can easily provoke attention (“salient” issues) or are popular in their own voter base (“owned” issues). Trump’s social media communication was not only characterized by a narrow issue focus (Lee & Xu, 2018), but by selectively highlighting topics, he was also able to divert the media agenda from issues that were harmful for him (Lewandowsky et al., 2020). European political actors also often employ narrow issue foci on their social media communication (Alonso-Muñoz & Casero-Ripollés, 2018). In contrast, the Barack Obama campaigns’ issue focus was more balanced by touching upon several policy topics in its social media communication (Bronstein, 2013).

Second, populist appeals offer a way to present these carefully selected topics and other content in a powerful way that relates negatively to the elites or outgroups or positively to the ordinary people. This way, political actors can depict themselves as being closer to the people and more detached from the political elites. Accordingly, populist communication has been demonstrated to increase the authenticity and “realness” of political actors (Enli & Rosenberg, 2018) and is thereby an effective tool in building own narratives. It is difficult, however, to use populist appeals in the mediatised elite discourse as these claims are often challenged and attacked by opponents and framed critically by journalists. But on social media platforms, they can be communicated freely without elite interference (Engesser et al., 2017). Populist communication was a central feature of Trump’s social media communication that largely contributed to his “authentic” image (Montgomery, 2017), while populist appeals were hardly used by Barack Obama’s campaigns (Zulianello et al., 2018). Populist appeals are often used by both populist and non-populist European political actors as well (Schmuck & Hameleers, 2020).

Third, intense use of negativity can make these contents more conspicuous and catching, and stress the difference between the respective political actors and other members of the political elite. In the narrative structure of political media coverage, negative messages are often contextualized and contrasted with responses of the attacked politicians and factual information or framed as a strategic move which can decrease the effect of these messages (e.g., Pedersen, 2014). On social media platforms, however, negative campaigns can reach voters in an undistorted way which makes it a more powerful tool than in the news media. For Trump, the heightened use of negativity helped to construct him as a unique outsider who strikingly differs from his opponents (Pain & Masullo Chen, 2019), and contributed to the larger

visibility of his messages (Lee & Xu, 2018) – a strategy that is frequently identified in the European context as well (e.g., Ceron & d’Adda, 2016). In contrast, the tone of Barack Obama’s social media communication was predominantly positive (Gerodimos & Justinussen, 2015)

To sum up, it seems that social media offers a more favorable opportunity structure for these elements of self-centered communication than the news media. However, on social media platforms, it is not only the opportunity structure, but also users’ preferences that matter when it comes to political actors’ communication strategies.

The “viralization” of politics

Political actors’ direct reach on Facebook is restricted due to their (relatively) limited number of followers (Nielsen & Vaccari, 2013) and the filtering mechanism of the Facebook algorithm (Bossetta, 2018). However, the virality-based dissemination logic of social media (Klinger & Svensson, 2015) allows them to indirectly spread their messages to much wider segments when users engage with their content. Indeed, such engagement in the form of “Reactions”, “comments” and “shares” can be seen by friends of the followers and thereby make the original content visible to a larger audience (Bene, 2017). Moreover, messages mediated by peers may have stronger effects on the recipients than parties’ direct appeals (Anspach, 2017). Also, the level of user engagement is an important component of the Facebook algorithm, as highly reacted posts are more likely to appear in users’ News Feed (DeVito, 2017).

Consequently, parties’ Facebook communication is largely tailored to provoke user reactions. Undoubtedly, parties use Facebook for several strategic reasons, such as community building, image management or voter mobilization, and these goals cannot be fulfilled if parties’ messages stay invisible. In the context of information abundance (Blumler, 2016), parties are forced to struggle for users’ scarce attention in which provoking user engagement can be one of the silver bullets. While it is obviously not the only factor shaping reach (other factors are, e.g., advertising, news media coverage etc.), user engagement-generated social media visibility may have tangible benefits: research shows that larger levels of user engagement with political actors’ Facebook posts can contribute to both electoral success (Bene, 2018) and news media visibility (Kruikemeier et al., 2018), and its peer-mediated character makes it uniquely effective compared to other strategies to increase visibility (Anspach, 2017).

Indeed, studies show that parties’ strategic communication on Facebook is largely shaped by their perceptions of what voters prefer on these platforms (Kreiss et al., 2018). They intensively analyze what posts are successful in provoking user engagement (Kalsnes, 2016), and they are more likely to publish contents that have previously been found to trigger reactions from users (Ennser-Jedenastik et al., 2021). This practice resembles the process described as the mediatization of politics (Strömbäck, 2008), which refers to the dynamics when parties make efforts to fit their communication to the demands of news media to gain visibility, as it is a prerequisite to realizing their strategic goals. In the social media context, parties’ content needs to conform to user preferences and the networked logic of these platforms. This way, the patterns of user engagement affect parties’ communication strategies, which can be referred to as the “viralization” of political communication (Bene, 2021).

This viralization process may have profound implications for the content of political communication. While there are signs that the elements of the self-centered communication style described above are increasingly popular even among mainstream political actors (e.g., Lee & Xu, 2018; Schmuck & Hameleers, 2020), we only have limited knowledge about whether and how they relate specifically to user engagement so far. Therefore, it is important to uncover if users prefer to engage with these content types, since, based on previous findings, parties are likely to adapt their communication patterns to these user demands to maximize their visibility on social media.

While the study of political user engagement is a growing field, the effects of content-related factors have been mostly investigated in single-country studies (e.g., Bene, 2017; Heiss et al., 2019), which makes it difficult to generalize findings and explain conflicting ones. Multi-country research has been done only with the involvement of a small number of countries (e.g., Jacobs et al., 2020) or for specific subtopics, such as populism (Blassnig et al., 2020) and popularization (Ceccobelli et al., 2020). A further limitation of single-country studies is that they do not provide any knowledge about the role political contexts play in how post content affects user engagement. We expect that these effects are not uniform, but rather moderated by contextual factors shaping people's preferences and interests. This study aims at filling this gap by conducting a multi-country investigation of how the elements of the self-centered communication style discussed above – the focus on “salient” and “owned” issues, populist communication, and negative campaigning – affect user engagement with posts on parties' Facebook pages during the 2019 EP election campaign, and how these effects are moderated by country contexts.

Hypotheses

Issue focus

Campaigns strategically highlight certain issues in order to appeal to voters. While the horizontal elite discourse of mediatized communication forces parties to deal with issues beyond their preferred topics, on social media they can develop a narrower issue focus. Preferred issues are usually selected based on their general popularity (Hillman & Hitt, 1999) and their strategic importance for the respective political actors (issue ownership; Petrocik, 1996). We expect that users' preferences also motivate parties to have a narrower issue focus as they engage more with “salient” and “owned” issues, and a more general policy focus is not rewarded with likes, comments, and shares.

In our context, it makes sense to differentiate between two types of topics. Some issues receive more or less permanent public attention, both in routine phases and in election campaigns, such as the economy, social policy, and domestic policy (i.e., security issues, crime) (see, Green-Pedersen & Walgrave, 2014). Strongly related to people's quality of life, these “routine topics” are established fields where the performance of incumbents and the pledges of challengers are regularly publicly evaluated. Therefore, they are under heightened public scrutiny by the news media and political actors. The second type is “salient” topics that are more context-bound and attract higher media and public attention at the specific campaigns (Bonardi & Keim, 2005; Hare & Monogan, 2020). “Salient” topics do not stay on the agenda permanently on the same level as during the given campaign. Thus, they can dominate some specific campaigns, but may lose their relevance

later (Hillman & Hitt, 1999). These trending topics are typically – but not necessarily – emotional and divisive in their particular context, thus often having a strong mobilization potential that parties can exploit by strategically highlighting them (Klüver & Sagarzazu, 2016).

We argue that social media are an appropriate space for utilizing salient issues, while they are a less proper environment to discuss permanent policy topics. According to van Dijck and Poell (2013), one of the central ingredients of social media logic is popularity. People engage with topics that at this very moment attract their attention and ignore others which are not of central interest at that time. Also, as it has been demonstrated that emotional and moralized contents spread well on social media (Brady et al., 2017), the divisive character of most salient issues can more easily provoke reactions from users than more established, often more complex policy topics, which are frequently framed in a more technocratic way. Due to the popularity bias of social media (Stark et al., 2020), popular content is shown to many users, which further increases its popularity and visibility.

In the 12 countries under investigation, the top 5 topics parties presented on their Facebook pages during the EP election campaign were labor and social issues (14% of all posts), economy and finance (11%), domestic policy (11%), environmental and energy policy (8%), and immigration (7%; Haßler et al., 2021). While the first three can be considered permanent campaign topics, environmental policy and immigration seem to be salient issues that also affected the particular EP campaign. As survey data from the Eurobarometer (European Commission, 2019) shows, immigration and climate change attracted particularly broad public attention in the months preceding the EP election: since the refugee crisis of 2015, immigration has been the most important issue for Europeans; in the spring of 2019, more than a third considered that immigration was the main concern at the EU level (34%). This was followed by environmental issues, which became for the first time ever the second most important topic for Europeans, even above such topics as the economic situation or terrorism (European Commission, 2019). Climate change has become a salient topic after the rise of the Fridays For Future movement, and in only one year, it jumped from being the fifth most important issue facing the EU to the second place. Accordingly, if salience plays a role, we may expect that the high relevance of these two issues has boosted the level of engagement of related posts, while issues that are permanently salient in news media and politicians' campaign communication (labor and social policy, economy, and domestic policy) may be less prominent in social media. This would also mean that user engagement can amplify the visibility of salient topics on social media, even at the expense of other important but permanent issues.

H1a. Posts on the salient topics of immigration and the environment generate significantly more engagement than posts not addressing these issues.

H1b. Posts on permanent policy issues, such as social policy, the economy, and domestic policy, generate significantly less engagement than posts not addressing these issues.

The effects of topics on user engagement, however, might differ depending on whether the specific party's followers are genuinely concerned with the particular issues or not. Indeed, scholars have pointed to the concept of issue ownership, suggesting that parties

emphasize issues favorable for them because they are considered as particularly competent on those issues (e.g., Petrocik, 1996). By doing that, they hope to mobilize their core voters and gain the attention of voters interested only in certain issues “owned” by that party. The effects of issue ownership on user engagement have not been discussed in the literature to a high degree, yet conflicting findings have emerged from single-country studies. While a positive effect of issue ownership on user engagement has been found in Switzerland (Staender et al., 2019), in Hungary reversed issue ownership effects are more dominant (Bene, 2021). However, such studies have so far been very rare. Theoretically, a positive issue ownership effect can be postulated: followers are mostly sympathizers (Fisher et al., 2019) who probably identify with the given parties because of, inter alia, the topics they prioritize. One can argue that sympathizers can be more easily mobilized to engage with posts via topics they are interested in.

H2. Posts on policy issues “owned” by one party trigger more engagement than posts on “non-owned” policy issues.

However, the effects of issue ownership may be shaped by the structure of party competition. In a more heavily polarized party system, “owned” issues may receive stronger attention in voters’ political experiences. When there are large ideological distances across parties, there is probably less agreement on what issues matter the most. The emphasis on specific issues is a suitable vehicle to express differences between parties, and these issues become more important elements of voters’ political identities. In contrast, in a less polarized context, the most important issues are more consensual, and the differences in issue positions gain larger relevance than issue ownership (Han, 2020). Therefore, we expect that the effect of issue ownership on user engagement is stronger in more polarized countries.

H3. The effect of issue ownership is moderated by the level of party system polarization: the more polarized a party system is, the higher the positive effect of issue ownership on user engagement.

Populism

As discussed above, populist communication can increase the perceived authenticity of political actors by placing them on the side of the ordinary people in confrontation with the establishment and other dangers. Populism is understood here as a style of political communication based on three core elements that can be used by different political actors and are not bound to any parties or political ideologies: criticism of the elite, reference to the people, and reference to dangerous “others” (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007). There are signs that usage of populist communication can benefit both populist and non-populist actors (Blassnig et al., 2020). The essence of this communication is to get closer to ordinary people’s political views and impressions and thereby they can be appealing for ordinary users. Also, Engesser et al. (2017) argue that the “thin” ideology of populism fits well into the logic of “connective action” (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013), which is one of the main drivers of users’ activity on social media platforms. It is easy to align with these contents

from different personal backgrounds, as they can be easily connected to “flexible political identification” (Engesser et al., 2017, p. 1114). Indeed, research has shown that the popularity of a message posted on Facebook can be enhanced if it contains populist elements (Blassnig et al., 2020; Jacobs et al., 2020; Jost et al., 2020). However, in light of these findings it is still unclear what elements of populist communication can increase what engagement type: most studies focus on single countries (Jost et al., 2020), specific forms of user engagement (Jacobs et al., 2020; Jost et al., 2020) or an aggregated “populist communication” variable (Blassnig et al., 2020). Therefore, our study investigates the effects of the three main populist elements on all three types of user engagement.

H4. Populist Facebook posts (with elements of criticism of the elite, reference to the people, reference to dangerous “others”) trigger more user engagement than non-populist posts.

However, the effect of populist appeals on user engagement may also depend on the specific context where they appear, a factor that has not been addressed by previous research. One of these factors is the degree to which a party system is polarized. The interconnectedness of populism and polarization is a widely discussed phenomenon. Research shows that populism can benefit from strong polarization, but at the same time populism also contributes to increasing polarization (Norris & Inglehart, 2019). Therefore, populism is inherently polarizing, and a more polarized context may be a fertile ground for these appeals. When the political sphere is already loaded with intense and harsh antagonisms across parties, a divisive rhetoric that criticizes the elites and draws a definite line between “us” versus “them” may resonate more strongly with users. However, the effect of polarization on voters’ receptivity to populist appeals in social media content has not been explored yet. Therefore, we hypothesize:

H5. The effects of populist appeals are moderated by the level of party system polarization: The more polarized a party system is, the higher the positive effect of populist appeals (with elements of criticism of the elite, reference to the people, reference to dangerous “others”) on user engagement.

Also, regional differences may exist in the effects of populist communication on user engagement. We expect that in Southern and Eastern European countries populist appeals are more attractive for voters. The rise of populism is frequently connected with factors such as economic crisis, corruption level, and deficient democratic experiences (Norris & Inglehart, 2019). Some of these factors can play a role especially in Southern and Eastern European countries due to the following three reasons: First, these countries (excepting Poland) were strongly hit by the global economic crisis, which is often considered one of the major causes of the current populist heydays. Second, while corruption exists everywhere, anti-corruption appeals are a more salient and effective campaign strategy in Southern and Eastern European countries than in Continental and Northern countries (Polk et al., 2017). Third, many of these countries are (relatively) young democracies belonging to the third wave of democratization, and the shortage of democratic experience relative to Continental and Northern countries may make people less resistant to illiberal and intolerant arguments (Norris & Inglehart, 2019). Consequently, although

populism is widespread in several European countries, it could be argued that populist appeals are more able to generate online engagement in Southern and Eastern European countries.

H6. The effects of populist appeals on user engagement are moderated by country type: populist Facebook posts (with elements of criticism of the elite, reference to the people, reference to dangerous “others”) provoke more engagement in Southern and Eastern European than in Continental and Northern countries.

Negativity

Attacking others is a common way to build self-centered narratives by showing that the opponents are not a viable alternative to the respective political actors. Several single-country studies have demonstrated the engagement-triggering effect of negative content, especially in the case of comments and shares (Bene, 2017; Heiss et al., 2019; Xenos et al., 2017). This association could be explained with several reasons. First, negative political content in general elicits stronger and more sustained psychophysiological reactions, and people usually pay more attention to negative information (Soroka, 2014). Despite a few conflicting findings (e.g., Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995), research has predominantly shown that negative campaigning in general has a remarkable mobilizing potential (Lau et al., 2007). Turning to social media, as online activities are performed in front of a large and diverse network of peers, expressive motives are crucial factors behind user engagement (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013), and negative political content may support these goals. Given the widespread skepticism and negativity toward politics (Armingeon & Guthmann, 2014), negative political content may be a popular way for users to express political opinions in their personal networks. Further, due to information abundance on social media platforms, heuristic information processing is more prevalent here (Anspach, 2017), which may favor emotional cues in general (Eberl et al., 2020). To test if the findings of single-country studies can be generalized to a wider context, we examine the effects of negativity in our cross-country sample, and hypothesize:

H7. Negative content will trigger more user engagement than non-negative content.

However, the effect of negativity on user engagement may also vary with context, but this has not been investigated yet. Interestingly, studies have found that parties are more likely to go negative in less polarized contexts; obviously, when parties are ideologically closer to each other, they need to alienate voters from their opponents who have similar political views (Papp & Patkós, 2019). However, unlike party communication, users' engagement with political posts is not usually strategically motivated. We expect that in a polarized context, there are stronger aversions and animosities in the political sphere, which makes people more receptive to negative messages. Ideological distance can increase negative sentiments toward opponents, and therefore people can identify more easily and agree with attacks.

H8. The effect of negativity is moderated by the level of party system polarization: the more polarized a party system is, the higher the positive effects of negative content on user engagement.

Moreover, in Southern and Eastern Europe there is a higher level of political disillusionment, as people are more dissatisfied with democracy (Maciel & de Sousa, 2018) and have less trust in political actors and institutions (Torcal, 2017) than in Continental and Northern countries. This higher disillusionment offers more fertile ground for political negativity: citizens who are dissatisfied with the political elite probably more easily identify and agree with attacking messages.

H9. The effects of negative content on user engagement are moderated by country type: negative Facebook posts provoke more engagement in Southern and Eastern European than in Continental and Northern countries.

Method

Data collection, sample and coding process

To test our hypotheses, we conducted a multi-country content analysis of parties' Facebook posts during the 2019 EP election campaign. EP elections are well-suited for multi-country research as the electoral context is relatively more homogeneous than in national elections: parties rather than politicians are usually at the forefront in each country, and the electoral rules as well as the timing, the gains, and the stakes are similar. We collected posts from parties across 12 European countries (Austria, Denmark, France, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Poland, Romania, Spain, Sweden, and UK). These 12 countries cover 82% of the European population and offer a balanced selection in several dimensions, e.g., concerning their political and media systems, polarization of party systems, social media distribution, influence on the European level, geographic positioning within Europe, as well as different citizens' attitudes toward the European Union (European Commission, 2019). Facebook is selected as it is the most popular social networking site in all the 12 countries (Newman et al., 2020).

Facebook posts of all the parties that reached more than 5% at national level in the 2019 EP election were collected during a four-week investigation period (including the election day) prior to the elections (UK: April 25 to May 23; Ireland: April 26 to May 24; all other countries: April 28 to May 26). The posts were centrally collected every day by scraping all available posts from each party's Facebook page, using the crawling tool Facepager.² After data cleaning, the sample comprises a total of 12,887 posts published by 68 parties (see Appendix for the number of posts for each country). In addition to the posts, the number of shares, comments, likes and other Reactions were also saved.

The Facebook posts were manually coded by 29 coders (1–5 coders per country) based on a joint coding scheme. The coders were trained in their respective country. For the reliability test, all of them coded a random sample of 48 posts from European parties or parliamentary groups. These posts were in English, and no country-specific knowledge was required so that each coder was able to code them. The reliability test showed a common understanding of the categories (all Holsti's CR \geq 0.7).³

Corresponding to the coding capacities, an appropriate sample of posts was drawn for each country with full samples for some countries and random samples for others, ensuring a proportional distribution of days and parties (see Appendix). Overall, 10,715 posts were

manually coded. The posts were coded including all visual elements (texts, pictures, and the first minute of videos), whereas when a post was no longer available by its URL, only the corresponding text could be displayed and coded.

A major limitation of existing studies on Facebook campaigns is that they could not filter out sponsored (advertised) posts from their samples. This may remarkably distort the findings on user engagement, as sponsored posts are presented to a much larger and more carefully targeted audience than organic posts. In the 2019 EP election campaign, it happened for the first time in Europe that Facebook made some data about political advertising activity publicly available. This provided us with the opportunity to also collect all ads parties ran during the campaign on Facebook, using the newly launched Ad Library API. As sponsored posts are not explicitly distinguished from other Facebook ads, we identified them by matching our ad dataset with our post dataset. A post was considered sponsored content when we found an ad with the exact same textual content from the same party. These sponsored posts ($N = 1,012$) were removed from our analysis, resulting in a final sample size of 9,703 posts.

Measurement

Each of the following categories was coded binary for each post, indicating whether it was included in the post (=1) or not (=0). Each variable was considered independently from the others. This means that, for example, several topics could be coded for each post.

Regarding the policy *topic* of a post, eleven sub-topics (incl. “others”) were differentiated. Our analysis is limited to the five most widely addressed policy fields: (1) economy/finance, (2) labor/social issues, (3) domestic policy, (4) immigration policy, and (5) environmental/energy policy. These topics cover 81% of all policy mentions in the total sample. As discussed above, immigration policy and environmental/energy policy were defined as *salient topics* of this campaign.

The topic variable was also used to evaluate parties’ *ownership* of policy issues: we built a binary variable equal to 1 if a party retains the ownership on one issue. Focusing on European party families, we ascribed ownership of issues following the suggestion provided by the existing literature (e.g., Schwarzbözl et al., 2020).⁴

Regarding stylistic variables, *populism* was measured as (1) distinguished criticism of the elite (e.g., blaming the elite for problems, and questioning the elite’s legitimacy as decision-maker), (2) reference to the people (representing the political sovereign, that is a homogenous social entity distinct from minorities), and (3) reference to dangerous “others” (ethnic minorities or political opponents).

Negativity indicates whether a post contains negative content of a refusing, hostile, disliking or hating nature.⁵

For the *geographical region*, posts from Southern (Italy, Spain) and Eastern European (Hungary, Poland, and Romania) parties are assigned to the Southern-Eastern group, while party posts from Continental (Austria, France, and Germany) and Northern (Denmark, Ireland, Sweden, and the UK) countries are denoted as the Continental-Northern group.

For *party system polarization*, Dalton’s Polarization Index was calculated for each country individually. This index is based on parties’ position on the traditional left-right scale and parties’ vote share (Dalton, 2008). For determining parties’ position on the traditional left-right scale, we drew upon the 2019 Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES; Bakker et al., 2020).

As the level of user engagement may be shaped by several post-, page – and party-level factors, we used numerous *control variables* to obtain valid findings: on post-level whether the particular post includes an image, video or link, its word count and the day it was published were controlled for. On page level, the number of followers and the number of posts published during the campaign were included. On party level, parties' ideology (far-right, far-left, populist),⁶ governmental position and their vote share were controlled for.

Data analysis

Due to the nested character of our data (page-level) and the overdispersed count nature of the dependent variables, we calculated multilevel negative binomial regression analysis with random intercepts on the page level. First, we calculated two regression models for each engagement type as dependent variables whose results are shown in [Table 1](#), in the two columns below the respective engagement type. *Models 1* contains all direct effect and control variables while *models 2* adds the cross-level interaction terms.

One major concern regarding our dataset is that the Italian Lega party published a disproportionately large number of posts during the campaign ($N = 3,231$). To account for that, beyond testing our hypotheses on the total sample, we further conducted robustness checks with three other samples including 605 randomly selected Lega posts each (to make its sample size equal to the second largest party sample) instead of all Lega posts. We consider a finding robust if its significance level is $p < .05$ in the models for the total sample and significant at least at the level of $p < .1$ in all alternative models with the random samples of Lega posts. Significant robust findings are bold in [Table 1](#). A finding is considered non-robust if it is either significant in at least two of the alternative sampled models but not in the model including the total sample, or if it is non-significant in one of the alternative models. Non-robust findings are in italics in [Table 1](#).

Findings

Considering our hypotheses for topical aspects triggering user engagement, we see rather ambivalent results ([Table 1](#)). H1a postulates that posts on the salient topics of immigration and the environment generate more engagement than posts on other topics. H1a is supported only for the topic of immigration, since our analysis indicates that posts about immigration show positive and robust effects on Reactions and shares though its positive effect is not robust in case of comments. In contrast to H1a, however, posts about environmental issues show robust and significant negative effects for each engagement dimension, that is, this salient topic does not increase user engagement.

When it comes to the more permanent policy issues, findings are highly mixed. H1b is fully supported only in the case of the economy. Posts containing this topic generate significantly fewer Reactions, comments, and shares than posts not dealing with it. We obtain mixed findings for labor and social policy issues: while they are significantly less commented, the negative effect of this topic on Reactions is not robust, and it positively affects sharing behavior. In addition, domestic policy seems to be a rather popular topic in parties' Facebook communication; posts dealing with this issue receive significantly more Reactions (marginally significant in the total model and in one alternative model, but

significant in two alternative models) and shares than posts not dealing with it. To sum up, permanent policy issues obviously work rather differently on Facebook: while the economy is clearly an unpopular topic, domestic policy is fairly popular, and labor and social policy has distinct effects on different engagement types.

Regarding posts aligning to issues “owned” by respective parties, our results indicate no robust significant effects for Reactions, comments and shares. While the effects are significant in each dimension in the full models, the relationship is not significant in most alternative models when only considering the subsamples of Lega posts (significant effects only in one Reaction and marginally significant in two share alternative models). Therefore, our data reject H2, as we cannot confirm that parties provoke more engagement with posts dealing with their “owned” topics. Moreover, this effect is hardly moderated by the level of party system polarization (H3). We only find a marginally significant effect in the case of comments in the three alternative models and a robust marginally significant effect in the case of Reactions. However, these marginal effects are even negative, showing that issue ownership plays a slightly more important role in less polarized countries. Therefore, H3 postulating positive effects is also rejected.

Populist elements in the posts generally result in higher numbers of Reactions, comments and shares in line with H4. However, these positive effects are not always robust and significant. Anti-elitist and people-centered messages provoked more Reactions and shares, and people-centrism was also positively significant in the full model and in two alternative models of comments. References to dangerous “others” were more likely to provoke comments, but their positive effects on Reactions and shares were significant only in the full model and two alternative models. Consequently, while our analysis largely supports H4, that populist appeals usually enhance different engagement types, it is important to note that there is one clear exception – the effect of anti-elitist messages on comments – and some non-robust findings.

The effects of anti-elite and people-centrists appeals are moderated slightly by the level of the given country’s party system polarization (H5). For each dimension of user engagement, the more polarized a particular country is, the more effective anti-elitist communication is. In the case of people-centrism, this effect is confirmed only for Reactions, but is marginally significant in the full and two alternative models of comments, and in the full model of sharing and another alternative one (see, [Figure 1](#)). The effects of references to dangerous “others,” however, seem to be independent from both polarization level and country groups (H6). Also, it seems that there is no significant gap between Southern-Eastern and Continental-Northern countries in the effects of either type of populist communication on any dimension of user engagement. To sum up, we completely reject H6. This result sides with a recent study, which showed that the salience of anti-elitism appeals is unrelated to the regional context in which a party operates (Polk et al., 2017). Conversely, H5 is completely confirmed for anti-elitist appeals, partly supported for people-centrism, and rejected for references to dangerous “others.”

Our most consistent and robust finding relates to the role negativity plays in user engagement. Our data clearly support H7, showing that negativity significantly increases the number of Reactions, comments and shares. Moreover, it seems that, out of the factors investigated here, negativity is the most important driver of comments and shares. While the engagement-triggering effect of negativity has already been demonstrated in single country studies (Bene, 2017; Heiss et al., 2019), our research advances our knowledge by showing that this effect seems to be uniform across Europe, as it is not

shaped by the country-level factors under investigation. There is no robust significant difference across nations with different levels of polarization (H8), and among Southern-Eastern and Continental-Northern countries (H9) in the effects of negativity on user engagement.

Discussion

With the ongoing “viralization” of politics, political communication is increasingly adapting to citizens’ social media communication. As political actors strive for producing content that provokes Reactions, comments and shares from followers, in order to increase their visibility on social media, it is crucial to uncover what kind of messages users engage with on parties’ Facebook pages. This study has tested the engagement-triggering effects of the main elements of the self-centered communication style, which is increasingly popular on social media, using an extensive multi-country dataset in the context of the 2019 EP election. Our hypotheses were built on the idea that users prefer to engage with these elements such as salient topics and issues “owned” by the parties rather than more permanent policy issues, and posts with populist appeals and negative valence. However, we also expected that these effects were moderated by country context, assuming that users were more receptive to “owned” topics, populist appeals and negative content in more polarized countries and populist appeals and negative content in Southern/Eastern compared to Northern/Continental European nations.

However, findings only partially support our hypotheses. Concerning topical aspects of posts, our findings show that salient topics are not generally more successful in provoking user engagement. Particularly surprising is the inefficacy of environmental topics, which might be explained by their more specific vocabulary and the fact that problems are often discussed in a less accessible way. In contrast, the other salient topic of the campaign, namely immigration, has a strong engagement-provoking potential: immigration-related content is highly engaged on Facebook. More permanent policy topics, however, are not treated in the same way. While the economy is a highly unpopular topic on Facebook, domestic policy tends to be favored, and labor and social policy-related posts are less commented but more shared. Further, there is no issue ownership effect on Facebook user engagement, as parties are not more successful when posting about their “owned” issues than in the case of other topics, not even in more polarized countries. These findings show that the patterns of user engagement do not encourage parties to develop a narrower issue agenda that focuses exclusively on highly salient and owned issues as users do not engage with these topics more than with others.

Our findings also demonstrate that populist and negative communication is highly effective in increasing the level of user engagement. People are keen to React and share content that criticizes the elites or refers to the people and are ready to comment on posts that are about dangerous “others.” These effects are uniform across geographical regions, however, anti-elitists and (to a lesser degree) people-centric messages are more effective in more polarized party systems. Our findings, moreover, confirm that negativity is the strongest predictor of user engagement, which seems to be a rather general effect, as it is not moderated by geographical regions or the level of polarization. These observations can

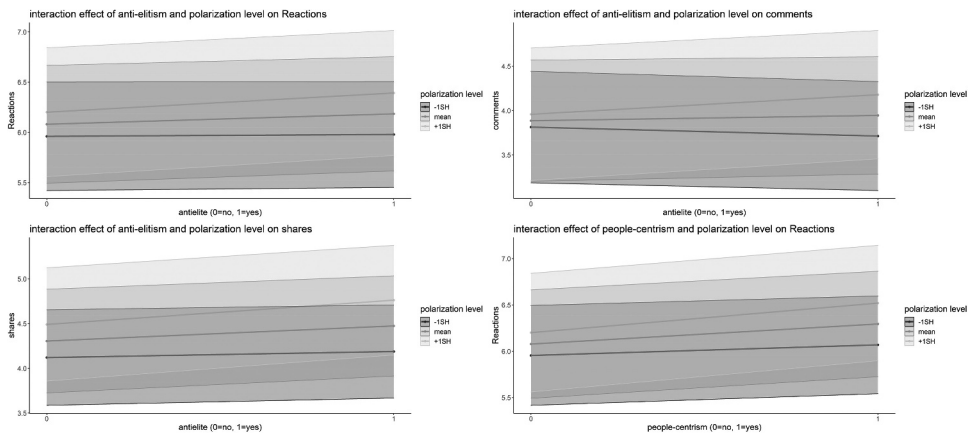


Figure 1. Significant interactions effects.

explain the null effect of issue ownership: people are more interested in an “outrage discourse” (Berry & Sobieraj, 2013) on these platforms, and “owned” issues cannot satisfy this propensity.

Nonetheless, it seems that country factors play a minor role in the patterns of user engagement; contrary to our expectations, regional deviations do not matter at all, and the level of party system polarization only matters for populist appeals. Naturally, our country sample is rather homogeneous because only EU member states are included. Therefore, future studies drawing upon a more diverse set of countries should test the wider generalizability of our findings.

Overall, it seems all else being equal, parties that communicate their main messages in a more populist and negative way can gain larger visibility, and thereby realize the different strategic goals of their Facebook communication. From this viewpoint, a populist and negative style can be the vehicle by which parties can communicate crucial campaign messages to wider segments of potential voters in a highly effective, peer-mediated way. Immigration seems to have had a similar function during the 2019 EP election. Its effect, however, is difficult to separate from the specific context, and based on our findings, we cannot assume that focusing on salient topics is a generally effective strategy to gain engagement-generated visibility. At the same time, party-based issue fragmentation cannot be associated with users’ demands in lack of any significant issue ownership effect. To sum up, politicians are motivated to conduct a more self-centered communication on Facebook by using populist appeals and negative messages that can be presented in a more effective way when being detached from a horizontal elite discourse. At the same time, they are not encouraged to develop a narrower issue focus by limiting their attention on salient and “owned” topics. However, it is noteworthy that the economy, which is a rather integrative topic due to its consensual goal system (e.g., economic growth, low unemployment rate, and increasing wealth), might lose its prominent role for the social media political public that it enjoys in the news media.

Our research has managed to overcome two important limitations of previous work in this field. The multi-country design has produced findings with higher levels of external validity than single-country studies and has enabled us to test the moderator effects of

country-level factors. Further, previous studies were unable to remove sponsored posts from their samples, which may have remarkably biased their results, as higher levels of user engagement with these posts were caused by uncontrollable factors.

Despite these strengths, the present study still has several important limitations. Due to the specific sample and context, the findings cannot be generalized beyond Europe and EP elections. Future studies should conduct similar multi-country investigations in other parts of the globe to highlight the similarities and differences of the patterns of political user engagement, as well as structural influences on them. Further, our study focuses on party communication. While investigating parties is highly appropriate for multi-country research (particularly in Europe where parties are crucial in most political systems and particularly in EP elections when only parties are available for election), in many countries individual politicians play a more important role in Facebook communication due to the personal nature of social media platforms. While most of our findings do not contradict the patterns previous research detected on politicians' pages, the results cannot be directly transferred to the social media communication of individual politicians. Lastly, while the potential bias of sponsored posts is filtered out, there are still other invisible and thereby uncontrolled factors that shape the level of user engagement with posts, such as the algorithm of News Feed, organized party activists, and inauthentic behavior such as automated accounts and coordinated fake accounts. While the algorithm affects the chance of individual posts to be seen by users, organized party activists and inauthentic behavior directly shape the numbers of engagement metrics for posts. While this "extra" engagement cannot be filtered out, it is important to note that Facebook has made serious efforts to delete accounts involved in coordinated inauthentic behavior from the platform during the campaign, reflected by the fact that 2.19 billion fake accounts were disabled in the first quarter of 2019.⁷

To sum up, our findings highlight the role user engagement may play in the current trends in political communication and how it relates to the self-centered communication style that is increasingly popular on Facebook. This self-centered communication style can contribute to the fact that our current political communication context is increasingly fragmented and polarizing (Bennett & Pfetsch, 2018). The populist and negative style that characterizes several parties' communication, especially on social media, can be easily – but not exclusively – connected to users' demands. This way users might ultimately contribute to an increasingly polarizing and fragmented political communication environment by pushing parties to adopt a more self-centered communication style. However, it is important to note that parties' strategic communication is still shaped by several other factors beyond user engagement, and the increasing popularity of populist and negative rhetoric on these platforms cannot be traced back only to user preferences.

Notes

1. "Reactions" refers to the "like", "love", "angry", "sad", "haha" and "wow" buttons. We use the capital letter to differentiate this from "reactions" in terms of general behavior.
2. Jünger, J. & Keyling, T. (2019). Facepager. An application for automated data retrieval on the web. <https://github.com/strohne/Facepager/>. The data sets for Romania and Denmark were accessed via CrowdTangle.

3. Holsti reliability values in detail: polity (0.73), politics (0.74), policy ($M = 0.93$, $Min = 0.86$, $Max = 0.99$), political level ($M = 0.92$, $Min = 0.82$, $Max = 0.99$), blaming the elite (0.91), questioning the elite's legitimacy to take decisions (0.98), calling for resistance against the elite (0.97), accusing the elite of betraying the people (0.95), reference to the people (0.86), reference to ethnic or cultural "other" (0.99), reference to political "others" (0.96), reference to other segments (0.99), privatization (0.99), negative campaigning (0.83), online mobilization calls ($M = 0.95$, $Min = 0.81$, $Max = 1$), offline mobilization calls ($M = 0.97$, $Min = 0.91$, $Max = 1$).
4. Environmental and energy policy – Greens-EFA (green party group); labor/social issues – S&D, GUE/NGL (left-wing party groups); economy/finance – EPP, ECR, RE (right-wing party groups), immigration & domestic policy – ID, ECR (Euroskeptic/far-right party groups), EU exit – Folkebevægelsen mod EU (Denmark), Brexit – The Brexit Party (UK).
5. The detailed conceptualization of our variables can be found here: https://osf.io/5fy48/?view_only=51216ace078640448f38d3adb8aa172c.
6. Based on the categorization of The PopuList (see, Rooduijn et al., 2019).
7. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52019JC0012&from=EN>.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributors

Márton Bene is a senior research fellow at the Centre for Social Sciences, Hungarian Academy of Sciences Centre of Excellence, and an assistant lecturer at the Department of Political Science, Eötvös Loránd University, Hungary. His research interests are in political communication, social media and politics and political behaviour.

Andrea Ceron is an associate professor at the University of Milan, Italy. His research interests include intra-party politics, text analysis and social media.

Vicente Fenoll is Associate Professor of Audiovisual Communication at the Department of Language Theory and Communication Science at the University of Valencia, Spain. His research focuses on online communication, political communication, and empirical methods.

Jörg Hafßler is head of the Junior Research Group 'Digital Democratic Mobilization in Hybrid Media Systems' (DigiDeMo) funded by the Bavarian State Ministry of Science and the Arts and coordinated by the Bavarian Research Institute for Digital Transformation (bidt) at the Department of Media and Communication at LMU Munich, Germany. His research interests include (digital) political communication, campaign communication, mobilization strategies, and computational methods.

Simon Kruschinski is a research associate and PhD candidate at the Department of Communication at the Johannes Gutenberg University of Mainz, Germany. His research focuses on technology-intensive election campaigns and how data and analytics are used to persuade or mobilize voters online and offline.

Table 1. Random-intercept negative binomial regression estimates for Reactions, comments and shares on parties' posts.

	Reactions 1	Reactions 2	Comments 1	Comments 2	Shares 1	Shares 2
economy	-.19 (.04)***	-.20 (.04)***	-.28 (.05)***	-.29 (.05)***	-.12 (.04)**	-.13 (.04)**
labor&social	-.10 (.04)**	-.10 (.04)*	-.22 (.05)***	-.22 (.05)***	.08 (.04)#	.10 (.04)*
domestic	.06 (.04)	.08 (.04)#	-.03 (.05)	-.02 (.05)	.17 (.05)***	.17 (.05)***
immigration	.25 (.05)***	.26 (.05)***	.38 (.06)***	.38 (.06)***	.54 (.06)***	.50 (.06)***
environmental	-.33 (.05)***	-.32 (.05)***	-.38 (.07)***	-.37 (.07)***	-.34 (.06)***	-.31 (.06)***
issue ownership	.09 (.04)*	.09 (.04)*	.14 (.05)**	.14 (.05)**	.12 (.04)**	.12 (.04)**
pop_elite	.12 (.04)**	.13 (.04)**	.02 (.05)	.03 (.05)	.17 (.04)***	.18 (.05)**
pop_people	.22 (.04)***	.19 (.05)***	.14 (.06)*	.14 (.06)*	.22 (.05)***	.19 (.06)**
pop_danger	.13 (.04)***	.16 (.04)***	.35 (.04)***	.36 (.05)***	.17 (.04)***	.18 (.05)***
negative	.22 (.03)***	.21 (.04)***	.64 (.04)***	.72 (.04)***	.59 (.03)***	.63 (.04)***
polarization	.17 (.10)#	.14 (.10)	.13 (.12)	.06 (.12)	.25 (.10)*	.20 (.10)*
country group	-.18 (.19)	-.18 (.20)	.17 (.23)	.24 (.23)	-.53 (.19)**	-.49 (.19)*
i.ownership * polar.		-.07 (.04)#		-.07 (.05)		.00 (.05)
pop_elite*polar.		.11 (.05)*		.20 (.07)**		.12 (.06)*
pop_people*polar.		.12 (.05)*		.14 (.07)*		.11 (.06)#
pop_danger*polar.		-.04 (.05)		.15 (.07)*		.06 (.06)
pop_elite*country		-.07 (.08)		.17 (.11)		.01 (.10)
pop_people*country		.13 (.11)		-.05 (.14)		.06 (.13)
pop_danger*country		-.17 (.10)		-.22 (.12)*		-.10 (.11)
negativity*polar.		.07 (.05)		.08 (.06)		.06 (.05)
negativity*country		.07 (.07)		-.33 (.08)***		-.11 (.08)
image	.11 (.07)	.10 (.07)	-.18 (.09)*	-.14 (.09)	-.00 (.09)	.01 (.09)
Video	-.05 (.07)	-.07 (.07)	.12 (.09)#	.16 (.09)#	.27 (.09)**	.27 (.09)**
wordcount	-.00 (.00)	-.00 (.00)	-.00 (.00)**	-.00 (.00)**	.00 (.00)***	.00 (.00)***
link	-.08 (.03)**	-.08 (.03)**	.21 (.04)***	.20 (.04)***	.35 (.03)***	.35 (.03)***
day	.00 (.00)**	.00 (.00)***	.01 (.00)***	.00 (.00)**	-.00 (.00)	-.00 (.00)
num_followers	.00 (.00)***	.00 (.00)***	.00 (.00)***	.00 (.00)***	.00 (.00)***	.00 (.00)***
num_posts	-.00 (.00)**	-.00 (.00)**	-.00 (.00)**	-.00 (.00)**	-.00 (.00)***	-.00 (.00)***
far-right	.84 (.38)*	.84 (.38)*	.43 (.44)	.46 (.44)	.20 (.37)	.22 (.37)
far-left	.35 (.33)	.37 (.33)	-.06 (.39)	-.02 (.39)	.14 (.33)	.15 (.33)
populist	.01 (.34)	.01 (.34)	.08 (.40)	.08 (.40)	.53 (.34)	.54 (.34)
governing party	.34 (.21)	.34 (.21)	.94 (.25)***	.95 (.25)***	.18 (.21)	.18 (.21)
electoral support	-.00 (.01)	-.00 (.01)	.00 (.01)	.00 (.01)	.01 (.01)	.01 (.01)
constant	5.68 (.25)***	5.69 (.25)***	3.15 (.30)***	3.12 (.30)***	3.87 (.25)***	3.84 (.25)***
variance of random intercept	.41 (.64)	.41 (.64)	.55 (.75)	.54 (.73)	.39 (.62)	.38 (.62)
Log-likelihood	-68,619.8	-68,594.5	-46,831.7	-46,821.4	-51,347.1	-51,327.3
disp. parameter	.99 (.01)	.99 (.01)	.62 (.01)	.62 (.01)	.73 (.01)	.73 (.01)
AIC	137293.6	137,261	93,717.4	93,714.8	102,748.2	102,726.6
N Level 1/Level 2	9637/67	9637/67	9599/67	9599/67	9608/67	9608/67

Note: Standard errors are in parentheses. # p < .10; * p < .05; ** p < .01; *** p < .001

Anders Olof Larsson is Professor of Communication at the Department of Communication, Kristiania University College, Oslo, Norway. His research mainly deals with organizational use of online media, political communication and computational methods.

Melanie Magin is Associate Professor of Media Sociology at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU) in Trondheim, Norway. Her research interests include political communication, media performance, algorithm-based information intermediaries (particularly social media and search engines) and comparative research.









Katharina Schlosser is a research associate in the Junior Research Group ‘Digital Democratic Mobilization in Hybrid Media Systems’ (DigiDeMo) funded by the Bavarian State Ministry of Science and the Arts and coordinated by the Bavarian Research Institute for Digital Transformation (bidt).

Anna-Katharina Wurst is a research associate in the Junior Research Group ‘Digital Democratic Mobilization in Hybrid Media Systems’ (DigiDeMo) funded by the Bavarian State Ministry of Science and the Arts and coordinated by the Bavarian Research Institute for Digital Transformation (bidt) at the Department of Media and Communication at the Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich, Germany. Her research focuses on the application of computational methods to analyse political communication in social media.

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ORCID

Márton Bene  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0177-9717>
 Andrea Ceron  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6686-5969>
 Vicente Fenoll  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5851-4237>
 Jörg Haßler  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2907-5228>
 Simon Kruschinski  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3185-5656>
 Melanie Magin  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2545-3594>
 Katharina Schlosser  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4172-7121>
 Anna-Katharina Wurst  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1371-7652>

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Appendix

Table 1. Overview of the coded posts per country*.

Country	No of published posts (n)	No of posts coded manually (n)	Random sample (of available posts) (%)
Austria	824	816	100
Denmark	581	306	53
France	1074	692	65
Germany	532	527	100
Hungary	948	940	100
Ireland	311	290	100
Italy	4598	4586	100
Poland	849	166	20
Romania	1060	995	100
Spain	789	770	100
Sweden	751	371	50
UK	570	259	45
Total	12,887	10,715	-

*Only original or shared posts created by the parties under investigation in the resp. national language or in English were coded. Only national parties were coded in Spain. Percent value of the random sample deviating from round values derives from the fact that some posts could not be coded because they contained foreign language content or did not contain text and were deleted or posts were excluded because the number of shares, comments and reactions could not be collected.