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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; Ennsler-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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