

Engaging Users Through Information or Critique? "Likes" and "shares" for parties on Facebook during the 2019 European Election campaign

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Democracy in Flux

Order, Dynamics and Voices in Digital Public Spheres

Engaging Users Through Information or Critique?

“Likes” and “shares” for parties on Facebook during the 2019 European Election campaign

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Even though political communication differs between different country contexts, many scholars argue that the contemporary political environment overall has become increasingly fragmented and polarizing as it is dominated by divisive ‘hot’ topics, fragmented issue focus, a populist communication style, and heightened negativity (see Bennett & Iyengar, 2008; 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; Chadwick, 2017).

Social media in general, and Facebook in particular, have become an increasingly important communication channel for political actors. Although via their Facebook pages political actors directly reach only rather narrow and already converted voter segments, 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 (see Anspach, 2017). For these reasons, research shows that 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 the content of messages matters. Therefore, political actors make efforts to adapt to users’ communication and produce content that triggers user reactions (Ennsner-Jedenastic et al., 2021; Kalsnes, 2016). This way citizens’ communication can affect the dominant patterns of our current political communication: if they prefer certain types of topics and styles, these communication tools will probably be more prominent in parties’ communication, as described by the concept of viralization of politics (Bene, 2021; Ennsner-Jedenastic et al., 2021). Consequently, if users engage more with divisive ‘hot’ topics, parties’ own issues, populist appeals and negative content, this fact could at least partly explain why at present political communication shows tendencies of fragmentation and polarization.

However, it is still largely unclear what content characteristics of parties’ posts determine how users engage with the content, and more importantly, what role political contexts play in these processes. In fact, the emerging literature of 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’ behaviour, 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 Election campaign. First, we systematically examine how divisive ‘hot’ and more permanent policy topics, issue ownership, populist appeals, and negativity affect user engagement (Reactions, comments, and shares) on parties’ central Facebook pages. Second, we show how these effects differ across geographical regions and are moderated by the level of party system polarization.

However, findings only partially support our expectations. Concerning topical aspects of posts, our findings are that ‘hot’ topics are not generally 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 ‘hot’ topic of the campaign, namely immigration, has a strong engagement-provoking potential: immigration-related content is highly engaged on Facebook. The impact of these ‘hot’ topics differs across geographical regions. While immigration is a more commented and shared issue in Southern-Eastern countries, environmental topics are even less engaged with than in Continental-Northern countries. 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 favoured, while labour and social policy-related posts are less commented but more shared. Overall, two issues typically put forward by niche far-right parties, namely immigration and domestic policies (linked with law and order), proved to be very effective in terms of engagement. Further, there is no issue ownership effect on Facebook user engagement, as parties are not more successful when posting about their own issues than in the case of other topics, not even in more polarized countries.

Concerning the effects of stylistic characteristics of posts, our findings are 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 elite 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 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. Thus, it seems that country factors play a minor role in the patterns of user engagement; regional deviations only matter for ‘hot’ topics, and the level of party system polarization only matters for populist appeals.

Overall, it seems that due to the growing strategic importance of triggering user engagement, the increasing presence of populist and negative communication can be at least partly explained by users’ demands on Facebook. 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. Such tendencies do not stay in social media only but influence political communication as a whole. Thus, if parties follow their users’ needs, that could increase the overall degree of populism and negativity in political communication, which in turn might have negative effects on democracy. Immigration seems to have had a similar function during the 2019 EP elections. At the same time, party-based issue fragmentation cannot be explained by users’ demands in lack of any significant issue ownership effect.

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