

## Abstracts

**Kruschinski, S., & Bene, M. (revise and resubmit). The Use and Challenges of Digital Political Marketing on Facebook. An empirical analysis of posts, sponsored posts and ads across 28 countries in the European Election Campaign 2019. European Union Politics.**

In the wake of an increased politization of EU affairs and accompanied by fundamental changes in the media landscape (see AUTHORS, 2021a) Facebook became one of the most important digital political marketing (DPM) communication channels for political parties participating in the 2019 European Parliament (EP) Election. This is especially due to its platform architecture, which provides strategic marketing affordances for campaigns' electoral goals: it allows for bypassing news media and the direct reach of users who follow a party's Facebook page with *self-curated posts* (owned media), the indirect reach of new audiences through a party's followers who *react to, share, or comment on* their posts (earned media), and the targeting of well-defined audiences with *paid sponsored posts* or *ads* (paid media). In the latter case, political parties draw on Facebook's algorithmic advertising ecosystem which compiles and analyses unprecedented amounts of user and digital trace data (e.g., social demographics, interests, behaviour) to infer receptive audiences for their messages (Andreou et al., 2019; Madsen, 2019).

Political parties use paid media on Facebook as an inherent element of their DPM toolkit. Especially in times of increasing politization in Europe, this data-driven, personalized, and non-transparent paid media can be misused to reinforce political divides and erode trust in democratic processes (European Commission, 2020; Zuiderveen Borgesius et al., 2018). On the one hand, European parties can target manipulative, divisive, and polarizing narratives to susceptible audiences, fueling discontent and distrust (AUTHORS, 2021b, Madsen, 2019). On the other hand, European political parties can "outsource" forbidden marketing practices—such as the improper obtainment, analysis and use of voter data—to Facebook since existing electoral and data legislation are often difficult to enforce or not applicable in regulating algorithmic platforms and their opaque advertising ecosystems (e.g., Bennett, 2016; Dobber et al., 2019). Altogether, parties' paid media activity has major implications for democratic processes, electoral law, and institutions in the EU which makes its study an important endeavor for political science.

Conducting research on Facebook's paid media and its consequences is a major challenge. While campaigns' owned and earned media activity are extensively studied in the research literature at the intersection of politics and communication (e.g., Bene, 2017; Magin et al., 2017), their paid media activity has long been a black box for academic research because

publicly available data was lacking. Scholars have made first efforts to open this black-box over the last years especially after Facebook launched its Ad Library in 2018, in which all sponsored posts and political ads with selected metadata are publicly recorded (Leerssen et al., 2019). However, the few existing studies reveal research gaps due to fact that they mainly focus on single countries with a strong focus on the U.S. (e.g., Anstead et al., 2018; Dobber et al., 2019; Fowler et al., 2020; Ridout et al., 2021). It is difficult to generalize findings from these single case studies and since cross-country differences may exist in parties' DPM strategies, we see an urgent need for comparative research. Furthermore, these studies investigate campaigns' paid media activity separately from their overall communication on Facebook. However, paid media is an inherent element of campaigns' DPM toolkit on Facebook so that its use should be interpreted and understood in relation to the owned and earned media activities on the platform.

To fill these gaps and add to the existing political communications and marketing literature, we introduce a theoretical model of DPM communication on Facebook which guides our explorative comparative analysis on the role and patterns of parties' organic, earned, and paid media activity in the context of the 2019 EP election. We draw upon a unique dataset containing the metadata of all posts (N = 24,938) and ads (N = 66,704) from parties (N = 186) running in the EP election within the 28 EU countries. This enables us to providing novel quantitative and comparative empirical insights on how campaigns in Europe use paid media in comparison to organic and earned media on Facebook.

First, we identify cross-country similarities and differences in parties' strategic use of paid media based on the number of and spending on different types of Facebook advertisements in the context of their owned media activity (RQ1). Second, we focus on the relationships between paid and owned media by looking at their temporal dynamics (RQ2) as well as between paid and earned media by focusing on the engagement-provoking potential of sponsored posts (RQ3). Finally, we will discuss our results against the background of the potential of paid media to reinforce political conflict and societal divides in times of increasing politization in the EU and highlight challenges that need to be addressed in future research to properly understand the role that DPM plays in parties' overall campaign.

**Kruschinski, S., Haßler, J., Jost, P. & Sülflow, M. (submitted). How “micro” is political microtargeting?! The strategic use of political online advertising on Facebook in Germany; Social Media + Society.**

The social networking platform (SNP) Facebook has become one of the central digital communication channels in recent election campaigns (Gibson, 2020; Jungherr et al., 2020). Most notably, it allows political parties and candidates to engage with broader audiences with

self-curated organic media from their public Facebook pages. Moreover, political actors can identify users beyond their own Facebook pages and target them with paid media. This so-called political online targeting (POT) draws on Facebook's algorithmic advertising ecosystem which infers susceptible users on the platform in dependence of political actors' messages, marketing objectives, and target audiences (Andreou et al., 2018; Ghosh et al., 2019). Thus, POT presents very strategic choices which campaigns try to take advantage of, adapt their communications to and therefore should differ substantially from organic Facebook posts with regards to its use and content.

Although existing research has provided important insights about the organic messaging strategies of Facebook posts in electoral campaigning, there is a notable paucity of empirical studies investigating the use and content of paid messages. Several studies have shown that political parties and candidates use organic posts to campaign in a rather not interactive, information oriented, and mass-centered manner to engage with broader audiences (Evers, 2019; Lilleker et al., 2017; Stromer-Galley, 2000). Further, campaign-related events like the promotion of their activities or election programs, using a rather neutral tone and discussing topics specific to social media are prioritized in Facebook posts (Auter & Fine, 2018; Stier et al., 2018). However, these messaging strategies can vary based on party characteristics, role in parliaments, and political contexts (Ernst et al., 2017; Lilleker et al., 2011; Nai, 2020). With few exceptions (Bennett & Gordon, 2020; Fowler et al., 2020), research on POT to date mainly deal with normative and legal aspects (Dobber et al., 2019; Dommett & Power, 2019; Zuiderveen Borgesius et al., 2018), its relevance in political campaigns based on qualitative data (Anstead, 2017; Dobber et al., 2017; Kruschinski & Haller, 2017) and mainly focus on the U.S. (Baldwin-Philippi, 2017; Kreiss et al., 2018; Kreiss & McGregor, 2018). Therefore, it remains still unknown how and to what extent political actors adapt the use and content of their messaging strategies to Facebook's affordances – especially in European contexts with their different political culture, electoral systems and regulations, and strict data protection laws.

The aim of our article is to reveal and compare organic and paid political messaging strategies on Facebook in terms of their timing, content, audience, and party characteristics using the example of the Hessian state election 2018 in Germany. Since literature for this research objective is scarce, we derive research questions about the use and content of organic and paid messages during electoral campaigns on Facebook by considering cognate literature on political campaign communication and political marketing. We answer our research questions by analyzing data from a manual content analysis of 353 posts, 72 sponsored posts and 177 ads published four weeks prior to election day by all parties participating in the Hessian

state election 2018. Our findings add to the existing literature by providing first quantitative empirical insights on how and with what content parties in Germany use Facebook paid messages in comparison to organic posts. Further, we make a theoretical contribution to the field of political marketing by explaining in what ways parties adopt their messaging strategies on SNPs. Therefore, our case study might be useful for generating comparative theory and hypotheses beyond the scholarly knowledge of these strategies in the U.S. context. The results will be discussed against the background of Facebook advertising's alleged power to influence voters and undermine democratic processes.

**Sülflow, M., Jost, P., Kruschinski, S., & Haßler, J. (ready to submit). Driving voter's attention through targeted Facebook-ads?! Using an eye-tracking-experiment to understand how and why users pay attention to political ads on Facebook. Political Communication.**

One of the most pressing questions in the discussion about political online microtargeting (PMT) on social networking sites (SNS) is to what extent sponsored content drives voters' attention. Drawing on data from an eye-tracking-experiment about Facebook-ads, we contribute to a better understanding of how and why users on SNS pay attention to political ads and discuss the implications for democratic decision-making processes.

Facebook's advertising ecosystem allows parties to target users with tailor-made messages. Besides reaching larger and diverse audiences this could foster reactance or the feeling of being manipulated, because recipients receive attitude-dissonant information by parties they do not sympathize with. This is facilitated by PMT's inherent logic on SNS to disguise as "regular posts" in users' newsfeeds and exploit the vulnerabilities that stem from human's information processing, lack of (persuasion) knowledge and/or cognitive biases.

Our study investigates how party affiliation as well as topic interest affects attention to Facebook-ads, their acceptance as well as the trust towards the party as a sender. Further, we are interested if the perception of Facebook's ad-label ("Sponsored") affects acceptance and trust. To answer these questions, we conducted a preliminary online-survey to measure recipients' affiliation towards six German parties and interest in two topics (education and pension policy). The topics were selected as being potentially (ir-)relevant for the student sample (N = 103, age M = 22, SD = 2, 70% female). In a laboratory study, participants were exposed to a Facebook-Newsfeed with six real non-political posts and one fictitious party-ad labeled as "Sponsored". The ad either addressed educational or pension policy. The ads' content was held constant independently of the sender (Fig. 1). Visual attention to the ad and the "Sponsored"-label were recorded with a remote Eye-Tracker. Afterwards participants

were asked about their acceptance of the ad (perceived intention of manipulation and obtrusion) and their trust towards the sender (mean indices, Tab. 1).

Results show that the more participants are affiliated with a party the more they pay attention to and accept the ad and show more trust towards the party as sender compared to participants with low party affiliation (Tab. 2). Topic interest did not affect either of the dependent variables. Only one third (36%) of the participants fixated the “Sponsored”- label and its perception did not affect ad’s acceptance and trust towards the party (Tab. 2).

The findings indicate that parties primarily profit from PMT if they target their supporters. PMT does not have advantages for parties if they address recipients that do not sympathize with them even if the ads address topics recipients find relevant. Further, only a minority perceived the „Sponsored“-label and even if the label was fixated it did not decrease trust in the sender. Moreover, only a minority (17%) remembered that the ad was sponsored. This suggests that the “Sponsored”-label poses only low risks for parties and the intended logic of PMT as disguised advertisement is confirmed. This sparks a debate about the transparency of PMT on Facebook and its implications for elections.

**Kruschinski, S. (submitted). Data-Driven Campaigning in Germany: How parties use data and analytics to organize and communicate in a parliamentary democracy with strict data protection laws. Electoral Studies.**

Political parties increasingly use data-based decision making in electoral campaigning since the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This data-driven campaigning (DDC) draws on digital technology, data, and analytics to identify persuadable and mobilizable voters and target them with tailor-made messages via direct online (e.g. via Facebook, Twitter, Instagram Ads) or offline channels (e.g. via direct mailing, door-to-door canvassing). In the public, DDC is often accompanied by unease, distrust, caution or concerns. No matter if it was the George W. Bush campaign combining different sociographical, psychographic, and lifestyle related data in 2004 or the Obama campaign predicting voting behavior and voters’ psychological reactions in 2012 or the Cambridge Analytica/Facebook scandal in 2016 – the use of data by political campaigns sparked public and scholarly debates about its reasons, modes or power, the surveillance of the electorate by political actors or digital companies, implications for democracy and approaches to its regulation.

Since the emergence of data analytics in politics, a great variety of scholarly research deals with DDC and helps to improve the understanding about it. Most of the studies focus on the U.S., where these data-based strategies are extensively observed in political campaigning. But they are gradually evolving in Europe and other societies, where studies on DDC are lacking. This

reveals a research gap on DDC in other countries with their different institutional frameworks, political cultures, party systems and data protection laws.

To gain new insights into DDC beyond the extensively studied U.S. context, our study provides a first empirical examination of DDC in Germany using the example of the Christian Democratic Party's (CDU) mobilization program *connect17*. Being the first German campaign which draws on data analytics and a mobile application for door-to-door and social media voter mobilization, *connect17* lends itself as important case for studying DDC in a parliamentary democracy with strict data protection laws, and also generate more general hypotheses for the study of other German parties, national contexts or normative considerations. Furthermore, Germany offers an interesting contrast to the U.S. in terms of its multi-party system, strict data protection laws, less use of social networking sites (SNS) for political news consumption (24% Facebook; 5% Twitter) and fewer signs of a polarized electorate.

In the first part, we will give an overview on the research literature to define the most relevant concepts of DDC and brighten our understanding about the evolution of data analytics in politics and how campaigns use data for strategic decision making in their organization and direct communication efforts with voters. In the second part, we will derive research questions from this literature and discuss DDC against the backdrop of CDU's mobilization program *connect17* from a political actor's and organizational perspective. Three central research questions structure our study: (1) How did DDC evolve in Germany? (2) What communication strategies are used for DDC in Germany? (3) How is DDC organized in Germany? These questions will be addressed with findings from an analysis of in-depth expert interviews with campaign coordinators of the CDU who were involved in the development of *connect17* since 2014 and using insights into in-house datasets collected with *connect17*'s mobile application. Although, the case-study focuses on one specific example of DDC, it can also provide insights for comparative theory-building beyond the scholarly discussion of the U.S.-practices.