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Agenda setting in social media election campaigns

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Abstract. In modern democracies, elections play a very special role, as they are a guarantee of democratic participation by the electorate. For political parties, elections are the time to get in touch with their voters. With the proliferation of social media sites like Facebook and Twitter, Web 2.0 has become a reality and is increasingly used by parties. Using the example of the 2019 National Council election in Austria, this paper examines how parties use social media and which issues they specifically address in the election campaign on Facebook and Twitter. The following hypotheses are examined in this work: (1) Economic parties tend to focus on popular topics such as environmental protection, society or politicians in general news coverage on the social media sites Facebook and Twitter - compared to nationalist parties.(2) Environmental parties also focus on issues such as environmental protection on the social media sites Facebook and Twitter.(3) Negative campaigning plays a bigger role on Twitter than on Facebook.(4) The top candidates Sebastian Kurz and Pamela Rendi-Wagner also focus on the core topics of the parties (ÖVP = economy, SPÖ = welfare state) on the social media sites Facebook and Twitter.

Keywords. Agenda Settings, Social Media, Facebook, Twitter, Campaigning, Austria, Österreich, Party, Political Parties

Introduction

In modern democracies, elections are always special events, structuring the political debate, allowing voters to choose their representatives, distributing political power and thus influencing future policies. Democratic elections serve various purposes, such as selecting representatives, influencing public policy, giving a mandate to incumbents and legitimising the political and administrative system. (Katz, 1997). Sartori (1997) believes that elections are the moment when voters actually govern. Elections are thus capable of shaping the political history of a country. This is especially true for elections at the national level, such as the National Council elections in Austria. Election advertising on social media sites is not only a special form of communication, but the parties' postings are also relevant actors in the media and information society and in the prevailing competition for communication and attention. The linking of media (photo, video,...) and the postings during the election campaign also make the latter an influencing factor for public communication (Siegert & Brecheis, 2005). If one follows Sarcinelli (2011) this competition for attention is becoming more and more independent of political decision-making, with political communication mutating into "a central strategic game". (Münch, 1995) and thus demands active persuasion work from the parties participating in the elections. This persuasion work - if one follows Praprotnik (Praprotnik et al., 2019) - is

increasingly being shifted to social media: in their essay "Social Media Sites as a Political Information Channel", Praprotnik et al. have shown that it is precisely the users of political information in social networks who tend to have little trust in traditional media. (Praprotnik et al., 2019) If one Follows Fuchs (Fuchs, 2014) then Platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Weibo, Wikipedia, Pinterest, etc. have not revolutionised the internet - compared to pre-Web 2.0 platforms - but have been able to increase popularity with the integration of social aspects (such as creating and sharing information, communication and collaboration).

Case selection

At the latest since the Austrian National Council election campaigns of 2017 (which were marked by a dirty election campaign), social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter have played an important role in Austria's domestic politics (Starzer, 2018). In the so-called "Silberstein Affair". (Köllner, 2018) a foreign campaign consultant helped orchestrate negative campaigns with fake Facebook accounts. Less than two years later, on 17 May 2019, the Ibiza scandal hit Austrian politics (Peninger, 2019; Tóth & Hofer, 2019). While the scandal did not have an immediate impact on the Austrian result in the European elections, the was a profound shake-up of the political landscape. The coalition government between the conservative Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) and the right-wing Freedom Party (FPÖ) broke up. (Stelzer & Radatz, 2020). Chancellor Sebastian Kurz lost a vote of no confidence in the National Council . (Luzi, 2019). Federal President Alexander Van der Bellen has called a caretaker government for the first time in Austria's history and called new elections for the parliamentary elections to be held on 29 September . (FAZ.NET, 2019). If one follows Ecker (2019) social networks and social media sites have been playing an increasingly important role in the election campaigns of political parties for years. Prof. Dr. Filzmaier has stated in this context (in an interview with Ecker) that millions are now spent by the parties on campaigns on Facebook and Twitter (Ecker, 2019). If one follows the statements of Starzer (2018) and Ecker (2019) then one realises that social media sites like Facebook and Twitter are causal for the success in the election campaign. If one combines these statements with the findings of Sartori (1997) who believes that elections are the moment when voters actually govern, or with the statements of Jahn (Bergheim et al.; Jahn, 2013) who found out that social media sites are used by parties especially in times of election campaigns, then the 2019 National Council elections are an ideal case study to examine the use of social media sites (in this essay, one refers to the platforms Facebook and Twitter) by parties.

Agenda setting in social media election campaigns

What is the role of social media in political agenda setting? If one follows Aldaihani and Shin (2022) then digital platforms such as Twitter and Facebook have reduced the gatekeeping power of traditional media while increasing the ability of different actors to shape the agenda. Influencing the political agenda and political discourse more broadly is one of the most important sources of power (Bachrach & Baratz, 2017): The fundamental question of who gets to set this agenda has already been explored from various angles, including media studies, political science and political communication (Wolfe et al., 2013) a central argument being the agenda-setting function of the mass media. (McCombs & Shaw, 1972) which states that newspapers, television and radio influence what political actors think and worry about - i.e. the content of the political agenda. The literature has long debated the direction of agenda-setting dynamics, without fully clarifying the question of whether the media agenda influences the political agenda or vice versa, and under what conditions (Walgrave & Van Aelst, 2006). If one

follows Boydston (2013) then we even know "very little about the forces that control media attention". (Boydston, 2013, p. 1). Moreover, the Internet and social media sites have created new "hybrid media systems" that have expanded the number and types of actors potentially capable of shaping political discourse and the political agenda (e.g., the media, the media, the media). (Chadwick, 2017; Jungherr et al., 2019)). The rise of digital platforms therefore raises the question of who sets the political agenda in such environments. Despite a large and growing number of studies (Jungherr, 2016) a clear answer to the question of the role of social media in political agenda-setting has yet to be found. Previous work has addressed important questions such as the perception of messages in social media (Chen et al., 2018), the impact of exposure to news media on discussions in social media (King et al., 2017) and the interaction between politicians and the public on social media sites. (Fazekas et al., 2021) examined. Shapiro and Hemphill (2017) explored the congruence between the Republican party platform and agenda setting on Facebook and Twitter and found significant differences in the use of the media: while the party platform focused on the actual programme, social media sites focused on completely different issues. Peeters et al. (2021) compare the issue profile of Green politicians in parliament and on the social media sites Twitter and Facebook and find a high degree of congruence, i.e. it can be concluded that Green politicians stick to the party line also on the social media sites.

Social media and political agenda setting

Following the classical definition of Kingdon (Kingdon & Stano, 1984) the political agenda was understood as the list of issues to which political actors give their attention (Walgrave et al., 2008). Agenda setting is thus the process by which some issues attract political attention while others do not. If one follows Aldaihani (Aldaihani & Shin, 2022) it can be argued that social media has become an important part of this process. Agenda-setting has been studied in different literatures in different subfields of communication and political science, which have not always been closely related to each other (Wolfe et al., 2013). A central, uncontroversial argument in all parts of the literature is that the media are an important part of political agenda-setting (McCombs, 2005). As Wolfe et al. (2013) noted, agenda-setting within the policy process approach is fundamentally about the politics of attention and the dynamics of attention at the level of the political system. As a consequence of this focus on information processing, media dynamics are closely linked to policy setting.

While the literature shares this core premise, the empirical results do not paint such a clear picture: Walgrave and Van Aelst (2006) for example, concluded that the fundamental question of whether the mass media set the political agenda or, more specifically, under what specific circumstances the mass media are able to raise political awareness of issues is still unanswerable. Making progress in this regard is one of the aims of this paper, mainly because it will be argued that social media as a communication platform creates new challenges and opportunities for political agenda setting. Social media not only add an additional layer of complexity to the dynamics of agenda setting. They also potentially change its nature. Although these changes have been acknowledged in the literature, their effects have not yet been fully replicated. To examine agenda-setting on social media sites, it is necessary to consider the following three lines of argument: First, social media have become an important channel for political communication (Chen et al., 2018; Feezell, 2018; Harder et al., 2017; King et al., 2017). Candidates and MPs use Twitter to communicate with journalists and the public, and to engage with their political opponents. (Barberá & Zeitzoff, 2018) and to engage with (or even attack) their political opponents. (Russell, 2018). Politicians are less restricted in expressing their opinions on social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter than, for example, in

parliamentary speeches or parliamentary questions. (Proksch & Slapin, 2015) Therefore, social media sites are an ideal tool for politicians to build their own profile and show their expertise in certain areas they are particularly interested in. (Enli & Skogerbø, 2013). For this reason, social media messages can be seen as a suitable proxy for the thematic priorities of politicians during the legislative period and the election campaign. (Barberá et al., 2019). Secondly, social media are not only relevant for political communication in general, but also for agenda setting in particular: Lewandowsky et al. (2020) have noted in this context that the rapid rise of social media sites, including the microblogging platform Twitter, has opened up new avenues for political agenda-setting that are having increasingly discernible effects (Lewandowsky et al., 2020). Langer and Gruber (2021) argue that for a comprehensive understanding of agenda-setting, there needs to be a broadening of focus - from traditional media - to social media sites. Several studies document the agenda-setting effects of social media: King et al. (2017) have shown that the media influence what people tweet about. Feezell (2018) found that people perceive issues as more important when they find them on the social media sites Facebook and Twitter. Shapiro and Hemphill (2017) found in their study that the New York Times responded to Twitter posts by MPs - i.e. the social media sites are able to set the agenda. Barberá et al. (2019) come to the opposite conclusion, namely that the media have a stronger influence on politicians than vice versa! James et al. (2019) argue that social media have not changed the role of traditional media as gatekeepers; Fazekas et al. (2021) finally, have found that politicians use Twitter to broaden issues from the elites to the public.

It is clear that many studies on the same topic provide different results: What seems undisputed, on the other hand, is that social media sites can encompass a larger number and more diverse range of actors and interactions than traditional news systems (Chadwick, 2017). Social media has thus reduced the gatekeeping power of traditional media and led to hybrid media systems (Chadwick, 2017) that have expanded the number of actors potentially able to amplify and sustain issues and thus dominate political discourse. (Jungherr et al., 2019)

Thirdly, through social media, political actors can potentially reach an audience that goes far beyond social media users: if Jungherr is followed, journalists closely monitor social media activities and use them for their reporting. (2015)journalists closely monitor social media activity and use it in their reporting: tweets thus become public records and are integrated into traditional journalistic coverage of political events. (Jungherr, 2015) The fact that journalists rely on Twitter to decide which events and voices are newsworthy is well documented in the literature. McGregor (2019) writes in his essay "Social media as public opinion: How journalists use social media to represent public opinion" that journalists draw on social media sites in a variety of ways when covering political contests, namely from documenting public reaction to media events to evaluating candidates' performances (McGregor, 2019) In one experiment, McGregor and Molyneux (2020) found that journalists rate the newsworthiness of tweets as highly as news agency headlines. Therefore, political actors can realistically hope to influence the traditional media agenda through social media sites. In summary, social media are changing the dynamics of political agenda-setting for three reasons: First, they are a relevant channel for political communication; second, they expand the number of actors who can potentially shape the agenda; third, political actors can potentially reach a wider audience through social media than through traditional media.

Hypotheses

- (1) Economic parties tend to focus on popular topics such as environmental protection, society or politicians in general news coverage on the social media sites Facebook and Twitter - compared to nationalist parties.
- (2) Environmental parties also focus on issues such as environmental protection on the social media sites Facebook and Twitter.
- (3) Negative campaigning plays a bigger role on Twitter than on Facebook
- (4) The top candidates Sebastian Kurz and Pamela Rendi-Wagner also focus on the core topics of the parties (ÖVP = economy, SPÖ = welfare state) on the social media sites Facebook and Twitter.

Evaluation

- (1) Economic parties tend to focus on popular topics such as environmental protection, society or politicians in general news coverage on the social media sites Facebook and Twitter - compared to nationalist parties.

H0: Economic parties are not much more likely to focus on popular issues than nationalist parties

H1: Economic parties are much more likely to focus on popular issues than nationalist parties

- (2) **Environmental parties also focus on issues such as environmental protection on the social media sites Facebook and Twitter.**

H0 : Environmental parties do not focus primarily on environmental issues on the social media sites Facebook and Twitter.

H2 : Environmental parties focus on environmental issues on the social media sites Facebook and Twitter.

Category	Party Themes				Total (%)
	ECONOMY (%)	Social (%)	National (%)	ENVIRONMENT (%)	
Economy	121 (5)	196 (12.1)	7 (0.8)	70 (5.4)	394 (6.3)
Welfare state	119 (4.9)	235 (14.5)	19 (2.1)	37 (2.8)	410 (6.6)
Budget	147 (6.1)	31 (1.9)	7 (0.8)	15 (1.2)	200 (3.2)
Education and culture	176 (7.3)	65 (4)	7 (0.8)	32 (2.5)	280 (4.5)
Security	41 (1.7)	19 (1.2)	71 (7.9)	6 (0.5)	137 (2.2)
Austrian Armed Forces	16 (0.7)	5 (0.3)	11 (1.2)	10 (0.8)	42 (0.7)
Foreign policy	8 (0.3)	1 (0.1)	0 (0)	0 (0)	9 (0.1)
Europe	31 (1.3)	1 (0.1)	8 (0.9)	8 (0.6)	48 (0.8)
Infrastructure	32 (1.3)	32 (2)	2 (0.2)	73 (5.6)	139 (2.2)
SOCIETY	61 (2.5)	69 (4.3)	39 (4.3)	26 (2)	195 (3.1)
ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION	159 (6.6)	92 (5.7)	15 (1.7)	499 (38.4)	765 (12.2)
Institutional reform	259 (10.7)	58 (3.6)	38 (4.2)	46 (3.5)	401 (6.4)
Immigration	112 (4.6)	25 (1.5)	207 (22.9)	20 (1.5)	364 (5.8)

Forming a government	96 (4)	30 (1.8)	71 (7.9)	17 (1.3)	214 (3.4)
Ideology	21 (0.9)	14 (0.9)	21 (2.3)	4 (0.3)	60 (1)
Politics	976 (40.3)	731 (45)	350 (38.7)	415 (31.9)	2472 (39.5)
POLITICIANS IN THE GENERAL REPORTING	21 (0.9)	3 (0.2)	21 (2.3)	17 (1.3)	62 (1)
unclassifiable	28 (1.2)	16 (1)	10 (1.1)	6 (0.5)	60 (1)
Total	2424 (100)	1623 (100)	904 (100)	1301 (100)	6252 (100)

Table 1 - Results of the chi-square test and descriptive statistics for category 1 by party topic
Annotation. N=6252, $\chi^2 = 0.00^*$, df = 51. Numbers in parentheses indicate percentages of columns. *p < .05

The above Table 1 shows that most social media posts focused on the issue of environmental protection and were posted more by economic parties compared to nationalist parties. Economic parties also focused more on the topic of society in their social media posts than nationalist parties. The ratio of posts on the topic of politicians in general news coverage was the same for the economic and nationalist parties. The correlation between party line and popular topics (category 1 = main category) was statistically significant, $X^2 = (51, N=6252)$, p = .00. The alternative hypothesis (1) is true that economic parties are more likely to focus on popular topics such as environmental protection, society and politicians in general coverage compared to nationalist parties.

For the *second hypothesis*, the above shows Table 1 also shows that the topic of environmental protection was publicised more in the posts of the environmental parties on social media than in the posts of the other parties. The alternative hypothesis (2) states that the environmental parties focus on environmental protection issues in social media such as Facebook and Twitter. The following Table 2 of symmetric measures explains the strong effect of the relationship between party line and category 1 (= main category) by the values of Phi and the strong effect by the Cramer's V value.

Nominal for nominal	Value	Ca. Sig.
Phi	.647	.000
Cramer's V	.374	.000
N of valid cases	6252	

Table 2 - Symmetrical dimensions

(3) *Hypothesis: Negative campaigning plays a greater role on Twitter than on Facebook.*

H0: negative campaigning plays no greater role on Twitter than on Facebook.

H3: Negative campaigns play a bigger role on Twitter than on Facebook.

Type N	Medium P		Total (%)
	Facebook (%)	Twitter (%)	
General	2905 (84.7)	2251 (79.8)	5156 (82.5)
Negative campaigning	525 (15.3)	571 (20.2)	1096 (17.5)
Total	3430 (100)	2822 (100)	6252 (100)

Table 3 - Results of the chi-square test and descriptive statistics for negative campaigning by social media page

Annotation. N=6252, $\chi^2 = 0.00^*$, df = 1. Numbers in parentheses indicate percentages of columns. *p < .05

The above Table 3 shows that most posts were published on Facebook as a medium for campaigning compared to Twitter. The number of posts containing negative campaigns was higher on Twitter than on Facebook. Similarly, the number of posts for general campaigns was higher on Facebook than on Twitter. The alternative hypothesis is therefore correct, which states that negative campaigning plays a greater role on Twitter than on Facebook. The following Table 4 of symmetric measures explains the small effect of the relationship between social media page and negative campaigning by the values of Phi and Cramer's V.

Nominal for nominal	Value	Ca. Sig.
Phi	.064	.000
Cramer's V	.064	.000
N of valid cases	6252	

Table 4 - Symmetrical dimensions

(4) *Hypothesis: The top candidates Sebastian Kurz and Pamela Rendi-Wagner) also focus on the core issues of the parties (ÖVP = economy, SPÖ = welfare state) on the social media sites Facebook and Twitter.*

H0: The top candidates Sebastian Kurz and Wagner do not focus on the core issues of the parties on the media pages Facebook and Twitter.

H4: Top candidates Sebastian Kurz and Wagner focus on the parties' core issues on the media sites Facebook and Twitter.

SEBASTIAN KURZ	Party themes	PAMELA RENDI-WAGNER	Party_Themes
Level_1	Party_p Economy (%)	Party_p	Social (%)
ECONOMY	OVP 15 (3.8)	SPO	149 (16.9)
WELFARE STATE	OVP 19 (4.8)	SPO	177 (20.1)
Budget	OVP 16 (4)	SPO	21 (2.4)
Education and culture	OVP 8 (2)	SPO	47 (5.3)
Security	OVP 8 (2)	SPO	0 (0)
Austrian Armed Forces	OVP 5 (1.3)	SPO	1 (0.1)
Foreign policy	OVP 1 (0.3)	SPO	0 (0)
Europe	OVP 7 (1.8)	SPO	23 (2.6)
Infrastructure	OVP 9 (2.3)	SPO	42 (4.8)
Society	OVP 7 (1.8)	SPO	60 (6.8)
Environmental protection	OVP 14 (3.5)	SPO	9 (1)
Institutional reform	OVP 14 (3.5)	SPO	6 (0.7)
Immigration	OVP 24 (6)	SPO	10 (1.1)
Forming a government	OVP 20 (5)	SPO	5 (0.6)
Politics	OVP 220 (55.3)	SPO	324 (36.8)

Politicians in general reporting	OVP	8 (2)	SPO	2 (0.2)
unclassifiable	OVP	3 (0.8)	SPO	4 (0.5)
Total		398 (100)		880 (100)

Table 5 - Results of the cross-tabulations and descriptive statistics for author_p =1 and 2 with party_p, in level_1 and party_topics

The above Table 5 shows the comparison of the top candidates with their focus on the parties' issues, with Sebastian Kurz as the top candidate publishing almost 398 posts out of 6252. Kurz represented the economy as the top candidate of the ÖVP and published only fifteen posts focusing on the economy on the social media sites Facebook and Twitter. Kurz preferred to publish content in the politics section. This section includes subcategories such as election campaign, campaign events and the like. The right-hand side of the table shows almost 880 posts by Pamela Rendi-Wagner as the front-runner out of 6252. Rendi-Wagner was completely toeing the party line of the SPÖ, as more than 20% of the contributions focused on the welfare state. We can therefore conclude that the alternative hypothesis is confirmed by this analysis.

Conclusion

Shapiro and Hemphill (2017) examined the congruence between the Republican party platform and agenda setting on Facebook and Twitter and found significant differences in the use of the media: while the party platform focused on the actual programme, the social media sites set completely different themes. This work has asked the question whether conservative parties occupy different topics, on the social media pages Facebook and Twitter, than nationalist parties - more specifically, whether economic parties, compared to nationalist parties, focus more on "general" and "popular" topics on Facebook and Twitter. This thesis could be confirmed, as the evaluation clearly showed that economic parties, compared to nationalist parties, tend to focus on popular topics such as environmental protection, society and politicians in general reporting.

Peeters et al. (2021) examined the topic profile of Green politicians in parliament and on the social media sites Twitter and Facebook and found a high degree of congruence. Here, too, the evaluation of the 2019 National Council election on Facebook and Twitter shows a very clear picture, because not only was the topic of "environmental protection" the most popular topic for all parties, but "the Greens" also consistently publicised this topic. What about "negative campaigning" in the general topic overview? If one follows Barberá & Zeitzoff (2018) candidates and MPs use Twitter to communicate with journalists and the public and to engage with their political opponents. (Barberá & Zeitzoff, 2018) and to engage with (or even attack) their political opponents. (Russell, 2018).

Thesis 3 therefore addressed the question of whether negative campaigning plays a greater role on Twitter than on Facebook. It became clear that, firstly, Facebook plays a greater role than Twitter for the top candidates in the election campaign (Herbert Kickl, for example, has no Twitter account at all) and, secondly, negative campaigning is used more often on Twitter than on Facebook.

Enli & Skogerbø (2013) have found that social media sites are an ideal tool for politicians to build their own profile and show their expertise in certain areas in which they are particularly interested. (Enli & Skogerbø, 2013). For this reason, social media messages can be seen as a suitable proxy for the thematic focus of politicians during the legislative period and the election campaign. (Barberá et al., 2019). This paper has now examined the postings of the

top candidates and found that there are major differences in the postings between the top candidates of the economic party ÖVP and the social party SPÖ. Sebastian Kurz, representing the economic party ÖVP, made a total of 15 postings on the topic "economy" on the social media sites Facebook and Twitter, while Rendi-Wagner made 177 postings on the topic "welfare state". Rendi-Wagner completely toed the party line of the SPÖ, as more than 20% of the posts focused on the welfare state. We can therefore conclude that the alternative hypothesis is confirmed by this analysis.

If one follows Fujiwara et al. (2021) then the effect of social media sites on election campaigns is undisputed - especially because the influence of "alternative media" is becoming more and more prominent (Kenski & Conway, 2016) and also because more and more people inform themselves about news exclusively on social media sites. (Schillinger et al., 2020). The 2019 National Council election has shown that parties - at least on social media sites - do not necessarily stick to their own party programme: The Austrian People's Party (ÖVP), as the "economic party", only made 31 postings on this topic. In contrast, the Greens made almost 500 postings on the topic of "the environment". The NEOS also remained true to their party programme and made 222 postings on the topic of "institutional reform". The SPÖ tried to address many topics on the social media pages and was present in the area of environment, welfare state, education, election campaign events. The ÖVP's issue line-up has shown that the best strategy is to focus on a few key issues. This ensures that voters remain in their own "filter bubble" and thus increases the efficiency of the election campaign. (Strauß et al., 2020) and thus the efficiency of the election campaign can be increased.

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