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EDITORIAL

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Strategic Continuity and Evolving Toolkit: Electoral Competition Revisited

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Abstract

The infrastructures and actor constellations through which election campaign communication unfolds have changed, with platforms, influencers, and artificial intelligence (AI) tools reshaping how campaigns operate. This raises the question of whether contemporary campaign communication differs fundamentally from that of earlier election cycles. Current debates oscillate between two extremes: either contemporary campaigns are fundamentally transformed by these developments, or they largely continue earlier practices, with new technologies merely adding tools to an established strategic repertoire. This thematic issue moves beyond this binary. The contributions examine recent election campaigns in Europe and the United States and show that core campaign strategies are rather stable. Mobilization, personalization, negativity, and emotional appeals continue to structure electoral competition. At the same time, the mechanisms through which these strategies are produced, circulated, and amplified are changing. Campaign communication increasingly unfolds within hybrid actor constellations that include influencers and supporter networks, rely on platform-specific communication styles such as short-form video and memes, and operate within engagement-driven environments in which emotionally charged content is more likely to spread. Taken together, the articles suggest that contemporary election campaigns operate within a communication environment shaped by platforms, influencers, and AI. Established theories remain relevant but they require adjustment to account for changes in production, circulation, and amplification. By integrating research on actors and strategies, this thematic issue clarifies how continuity and change interact in contemporary election campaigns.

Keywords
affect; artificial intelligence; election campaigns; influencers; memes; mimetic content; multimodality; personalization; platformization

1. Campaigning Between Continuity and Change

Election campaign communication is a core area of political communication research for a simple reason: Elections decide who governs. Even in contexts where scholars and practitioners describe a shift toward "permanent campaigning" (Blumenthal, 1980; Larsson, 2016; Tenpas & McCann, 2007), election periods remain distinct phases. They concentrate attention, resources, and strategic coordination; they also accelerate innovation cycles, shortening the time between the emergence of new communication tools, their strategic testing by political actors, and their rapid adoption by competitors during these "hot phases" of politics.

This thematic issue starts from a tension that has shaped campaign scholarship for years. On the one hand, many classic insights—about mobilization, negativity, personalization, and the strategic use of emotions—remain central. On the other hand, the conditions under which campaigns unfold have changed (Magin et al., 2017). Campaign communication is now embedded in platform environments that reward visibility and engagement; it is shaped by hybrid actor constellations that include influencers and supporter networks; and it is increasingly multimodal with images, sound, edits, and affective cues carrying political meaning in ways that many established theories of campaign communication—largely developed in the context of text-centered news coverage and broadcast-era campaigning—only partially capture. These technological transformations unfold in a context marked by declining institutional trust and concerns about democratic backsliding (Arendt, 2024)—developments that are frequently discussed in relation to the rise of social media and, more recently, generative artificial intelligence (AI).

Against the backdrop of a recent sequence of high-salience elections around the world, this thematic issue reassesses election campaigns at a time when social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube—built around short-form video, sound, and editing conventions—are routinely incorporated into campaign communication, intermediary actors assume key roles, and generative AI is increasingly adopted by political actors. It examines campaign content, strategies, and channels, and considers the relative importance of the various tools and actors involved. The contributions collected here assume neither that "everything has changed" nor that "nothing has changed." Instead, they document continuity in core campaign goals and strategic repertoires while specifying transformations in how messages are produced, circulated, and amplified.

2. The Challenges of Contemporary Campaigning

A useful way to understand the current moment is to treat election campaigns as communication occurring under four interwoven constraints: competition for attention, accelerated content production, shifting accountability, and global democratic backsliding.

First, attention competition is not new, but its mechanics have changed. In platform environments, visibility is shaped by engagement. Content that triggers strong reactions—especially anger, fear, or moral outrage—often travels farther and faster (Bene, 2017). Algorithmic curation and recommendation systems can amplify such content across networks, allowing messages to reach large audiences rapidly (von Sikorski & Hameleers, 2025). These dynamics create incentives for emotionalization and negativity, as actors compete for attention in crowded information environments (Klinger et al., 2023; Sabur, 2021).

Second, campaign production is accelerating. New tools, especially generative AI, reduce the cost of producing professional-sounding text and professional-looking visuals, enabling rapid and large-scale content output. Furthermore, AI systems facilitate automated dissemination through bots, fake accounts, and synthetic personas (von Sikorski & Hameleers, 2025). These developments lower barriers to participation and may enable smaller or less resource-rich actors to produce sophisticated campaign communication. At the same time, they intensify competition for attention and potentially heighten citizens' sense of being bombarded with persuasive messages.

Third, accountability is increasingly blurred. Campaign communication no longer runs only through channels where responsibilities are clear (e.g., party ads, candidate speeches, and press conferences). Influencers, supporter accounts, and coordinated networks can become major vectors for campaigning. Distinguishing between "official" and "unofficial" campaigning has therefore become more difficult. The growing use of AI further complicates matters. As AI systems increasingly assist in generating or modifying multimodal political messages, they may function as co-authors of messages, complicating accountability (Dimitrova et al., 2025). Political actors may even invoke AI use as a pretext to deflect blame for controversial messages, creating forms of plausible deniability (Dan & Arendt, 2025). Without clarity about who is speaking, on whose behalf, and with what resources, accountability becomes harder to establish.

Fourth, contemporary campaigns unfold against a global backdrop of democratic backsliding and declining institutional trust (Arendt, 2024). Autocratization tendencies have fundamentally altered the stakes and strategies of electoral competition. In many contexts, campaigns are no longer fought solely over policy preferences but increasingly involve deliberate attacks on the integrity of the democratic process itself (Bennett & Kneuer, 2024). As citizens' trust in media, judiciaries, and electoral bodies wanes, political actors may weaponize this cynicism, using campaign communication to further polarize electorates, suppress voter turnout, or delegitimize electoral outcomes before they even occur. Consequently, campaigns are constrained by a pervasive climate of democratic vulnerability where the foundational consensus required for legitimate democratic contestation is continuously challenged.

These dynamics do not imply that campaigns are inevitably becoming more harmful or less democratic. But they do suggest that the democratic implications of election campaign communication increasingly hinge on infrastructure and intermediary human and non-human actors: how visibility is allocated, how accountability is distributed, and how persuasion is produced under the conditions of hybrid media systems (Chadwick, 2017) and democracy under threat (Arendt, 2024; Bennett & Kneuer, 2024).

3. Continuity and Change: Avoiding Two Easy Stories

Public and academic debates about contemporary campaigning often fall into two stories. One story is alarmist: Platform politics is portrayed as a system where elections are dominated by manipulation, disinformation, and emotional contagion. The other story is dismissive: Campaigns are said to be basically unchanged, with new platforms merely providing new "wrappers" for familiar strategies. The research in this thematic issue points in a different direction. It suggests that the most productive question is not whether campaigns have fundamentally changed, but which parts of campaigning have changed and through which mechanisms (see Müller, 2025).

On the continuity side, the contributions show that classic campaign logics remain highly relevant. Mobilization still matters, and it often relies on emotion. Personalization remains a central strategy, especially in visual form. Negative campaigning does not disappear; rather, it may shift across channels, emerging more strongly in low-cost, fast-moving environments where accountability is harder.

At the same time, the contributions underscore that contemporary campaigning is more than just an extension of earlier practices. Three transformations stand out. First, the range of actors involved has become more heterogeneous. Parties and candidates remain central, but they now share the stage with influencers and supporter networks. Second, persuasion no longer follows a purely top-down flow of messages. Instead, campaigns design cues that users adapt and share—remixable elements in platform-specific formats such as TikTok duets or lip-sync videos. As a result, strategic communication becomes more volatile and less predictable. Third, message features are closely tied to online visibility. Emotional intensity and multimodality can drive engagement. At the same time, platform environments invite user response through comment sections, duets, stitches, and reaction videos. These interactive spaces can reinforce group identity and, in turn, amplify polarization.

Taken together, these findings argue for a recalibration of campaign research that is both conservative and ambitious: conservative in preserving useful theories and methods, and ambitious in updating them to account for hybrid actors, multimodality, and platform-specific mechanisms of amplification.

4. Thematic Issue Summary

The contributions to this thematic issue examine campaign communication as it unfolds across different contexts, actor constellations, and platform environments, and they do so with methodological approaches that reflect the complexity outlined above. They were written with a broad analytical lens, generating insights into election campaigning that extend beyond the particular cases examined.

The following section groups the articles thematically to highlight how each advances our understanding of contemporary campaign communication—whether by focusing on actors, platforms, strategies, technological innovation, or engagement.

4.1. Influencers as Campaign Actors

Several contributions examine how the constellation of campaign actors has widened beyond parties and journalists. Borchers (2026) analyzes how German political parties involve social media influencers in their campaigns. Rather than serving merely as message carriers, influencers act as semi-autonomous intermediaries whose cooperation parties seek to coordinate without undermining influencers' authenticity.

Farkas (2026) examines astroturf political influencers in Hungary and shows how the Megafon network deploys visual and textual disinformation to attack political opponents and encourage supporters to engage politically. Decontextualized visuals and concealed affiliations create the appearance of grassroots engagement while masking coordinated campaign communication.

Extending this perspective to the United States, Zeng et al. (2026) analyze partisan YouTube influencers during the 2024 presidential election. By linking influencers' framing strategies to patterns in comment sections, the study shows how influencer content can intensify affective polarization as audiences express support, attack opponents, and reinforce partisan identities in these discussions.

4.2. Platforms: TikTok and Instagram Reels

A second group of articles highlights how platform-specific affordances reshape campaign communication. Bösch (2026) conceptualizes "participatory propaganda" on TikTok during the 2025 German federal election as a form of persuasion that emerges through collaboration between official campaigns and platform users. Through platform vernaculars such as edits, vibes, and audio memes, political messages become remixable and circulate through networks of supporters and fan accounts.

Southern et al. (2026) show that parties used TikTok for platform-native experimentation—humor, memes, and informal aesthetics—while Instagram Reels primarily functioned as a channel for recycled traditional campaign material during the 2024 UK general election.

Meza et al. (2026) examine how pop-cultural audio memes—ranging from hip-hop tracks to religious chants—become templates for participatory campaigning on TikTok. In the 2024 Romanian presidential election, a surprise candidate leveraged these remixable sounds to mobilize supporters at scale, earning the nickname "TikTok Messiah."

4.3. Strategies: Negativity, Authenticity, and Personalization

Other contributions revisit classical campaign strategies and situate them within broader contexts. Hayek (2026) traces negative appeals on Austrian election posters over eight decades and finds a long-term decline in such messaging. This pattern suggests that attacks may have shifted to less visible or more targeted digital channels, or are increasingly carried by supportive actors.

Luebke and Engelmann (2026) examine how German chancellor candidates performed authenticity during the 2021 federal election. On social media, candidates offered staged glimpses of everyday life, used informal language, and told personal stories that presented them as relatable. These performances differed by gender:

while male candidates relied on casualness and humor, female candidates engaged in controlled personal disclosure—sharing selected elements of their private lives while simultaneously signaling competence.

Magin et al. (2026) present a large-scale cross-national study of visual personalization during the 2024 European Parliament elections. They find that party characteristics—such as populist status and government participation—are associated with higher levels of individualization (meaning that individual politicians receive greater prominence than parties in campaign visuals) and privatization, referring to the display of candidates' personal lives, traits, or non-political roles. These party-level characteristics predict personalization more strongly than national contexts.

4.4. AI and the Equalization–Normalization Debate

Emerging technologies form a final thematic strand. Kruschinski and Votta (2026) investigate the adoption of visual generative AI in the 2025 German federal election. They show that generative AI lowers production barriers, enabling smaller parties to create polished campaign visuals with fewer resources. However, these advantages do not translate into equal visibility: engagement patterns remain skewed toward established parties. This suggests that AI expands production capacity without altering attention hierarchies.

5. Conclusion

Taken together, the studies in this thematic issue suggest that contemporary election campaigning is best understood as a process of adaptation rather than rupture. Core strategic goals—mobilization, personalization, emotional appeal, and competition for attention—remain intact. What is changing are the infrastructures and actor constellations through which these strategies are enacted. Platforms, influencers, participatory audiences, and increasingly AI tools shape how campaign messages are produced, circulated, and amplified. For campaign research, this implies a dual task. Established theories and methods remain valuable, but they need to be recalibrated to account for the changes documented here.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

LLMs Disclosure

ChatGPT (OpenAI) was used to assist with language editing and phrasing during the preparation of this manuscript. The authors reviewed and revised all outputs and take full responsibility for the final text.

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