Article

Level Playing Field or Politics as Usual? Equalization–Normalization in Direct Democratic Online Campaigns

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Abstract

Are digital technologies leveling the playing field or reinforcing existing power relations and structures? This question lies at the core of the equalization vs. normalization debate. The equalization thesis states that the affordances of digital technologies help less-powerful political actors to compete with their more resource-rich counterparts, thereby overcoming structural disadvantages inherent to the political landscape. The normalization thesis, in contrast, suggests that more powerful and resource-rich political actors outperform their weaker competitors in the digital sphere by establishing a more sophisticated online presence, thus reproducing existing power imbalances. An overwhelming majority of studies on the equalizing vs. normalizing effect of digital technologies focus on electoral campaigns or non-electoral periods. Direct democratic campaigns have not been adequately considered in previous studies. This study exploits the regularly held and institutionalized character of direct democratic votes in Switzerland. Specifically, it investigates political actors' level of activity and generated engagement on Facebook and in newspapers during all direct democratic campaigns from 2010–2020. Applying the equalization vs. normalization lens to Swiss direct democratic campaigns over an 11-year timespan provides new insights into the status-quo preserving or altering effects of digital technologies. We find a tendency toward equalization in terms of Facebook activity and user engagement, and in a comparative perspective: Facebook campaigns are, on average, more balanced than newspaper advertisement campaigns, particularly since 2014.

Keywords

Issue

1. Introduction

Digital technologies have become a central pillar of today's political campaigning across the world (e.g., Lilleker et al., 2015). While most scholars agree that digital technologies are ubiquitous in political campaigns, the extent to which they affect the distribution of power among political actors, if at all, is still a matter of heated debate. Are digital technologies redistributing power from major to minor political actors, thereby equalizing or leveling out the playing field, or are they, on the con-

trary, simply reproducing the offline power structure and thereby normalizing existing imbalances?

While some scholars assert that the internet and social media, with their low entry costs and their affordances for unmediated communication, are powerful means to strengthen the position of traditionally marginalized groups and interests in the political field (e.g., Bene, 2021; Gibson & McAllister, 2015; Gibson et al., 2000; Morris, 2001), others posit that the internet, as it evolves, reproduces the offline political power structure, with major actors asserting their dominant position

(e.g., Margolis et al., 1999). For instance, regularly updating content on social networking sites is more resource-intense than often assumed, and follower numbers often resemble the offline power structure (see Bene, 2021; Spierings & Jacobs, 2019).

Empirical work on the equalizing or normalizing effects of social media draws no unequivocal picture, with some studies finding support for a more level playing field between minor and major political actors (e.g., Bene, 2021; Samuel-Azran et al., 2015) and others pointing towards a normalizing effect (e.g., Strandberg, 2013; Van Aelst et al., 2017). Scholars argue that the ambiguity in the findings stems from methodological heterogeneity (Vanden Eynde & Maddens, 2022), conceptual weaknesses, and the dominance of single-case study designs (Bene, 2021; Gibson, 2020). Most studies on the equalization–normalization debate focus on electoral competitions (e.g., Larsson & Moe, 2014; Samuel-Azran et al., 2015) or non-electoral periods (e.g., Sobaci, 2018) and test their premises over relatively short periods, often covering only one single campaign. Direct democratic campaigns have not been adequately considered in the literature, especially from a long-term perspective, in spite of the steady increase in direct democratic votes across the world (Qvortrup, 2014). The paucity of research on digital technologies and the power distribution among political actors in direct democratic campaigns might be related to the fact that: first, defining the power structure among political actors is more complicated in direct democratic votes than in electoral contexts; and second, referendums and popular initiatives are, compared to elections, relatively rare events in most established democracies. However, even in Switzerland, where citizens are regularly asked to cast their vote on various issues and legislative projects, research on digital technologies and power distribution is limited to electoral competitions (Klinger, 2013), non-electoral periods (Rauchfleisch & Metag, 2020), or both (Rauchfleisch & Metag, 2016). By investigating the effects of digital technologies in the Swiss direct democratic context, this study hopes to add new insights to the equalization–normalization debate as we draw on a large dataset over an 11-year timespan covering a broad range of direct democratic campaigns. In this way, we can explore contextual explanations for the status-quo preserving or altering effects of online communication. Moreover, as one of the first, we study equalization and normalization in a comparative approach by considering both online and offline campaign communication activities of political actors. Specifically, we analyze (a) changes in the activity level and generated engagement of the challenger and the government camp over time, (b) the determinants of equalization or normalization in Swiss direct democratic votes, and (c) the differences between campaign activities in the online and the offline environment. Even though social media performance can be, and has been, conceptualized in various dimensions (adoption, activity, user engagement, follower numbers), we limit

our focus to the level of activity and the generated user engagement for two main reasons. First, the longitudinal approach of our study and our focus on a variety of different campaigns with changing political actors renders the consideration of Facebook adoption unsuitable. Second, our focus lies on the strategic decisions of political actors to use Facebook as a channel for their campaign communication and to assess their activities in terms of generated user reactions. Given that follower numbers do not reflect direct user reactions to specific content produced by political actors, we focus on user engagement. We find that in the majority of campaigns from 2010–2020, the government camp outperforms the challenger camp in terms of the number of Facebook posts and, to a lesser extent, in terms of generated engagement—where the challenger camp appears to be keeping pace with the government camp. However, our analyses at the disaggregated level of actors and posts show that the challenger camp outperforms the government camp in terms of activity and user engagement. Moreover, we find a tendency toward equalization in terms of the campaign direction: Facebook campaigns seem, on average, more balanced than newspaper ad campaigns—particularly since 2014.

2. Equalization vs. Normalization and Direct Democracy: The Swiss Case

Direct democracy, together with federalism and consociationalism, is a central cornerstone of the Swiss political system (Vatter, 2020). The Swiss constitution provides for different elements of direct citizen participation, allowing for the creation, abolition, or modification of legislative norms: popular initiatives, optional, and mandatory referenda (Jaquet et al., 2022; Serdült, 2010). Since 1848, the Swiss electorate has voted on a total of 676 proposals at the national level (Swissvotes, 2022). The number of proposals submitted to a popular vote has increased considerably over time (Serdült, 2021), partly due to rising party competition (Leeman, 2015). Direct democratic decisions are binary and require voters to choose between accepting or rejecting a particular proposition. This choice can also be framed as a decision between two opposing camps: the government camp and the challenger camp (Bernhard, 2012; Hänggli & Kriesi, 2010). However, voting in favor or against a proposal has different implications for referenda and initiatives due to their institutional logic. For instance, voting "yes" in a referendum means accepting the government's position, whereas voting "yes" in an initiative implies accepting the challenger's stance. The government camp almost always favors a "yes"-vote in the case of a legislative act qualified for a referendum, and it typically opposes proposals submitted to an initiative vote. The opposite applies to the challenger camp (Bernhard, 2012).

Direct democratic processes in Switzerland are strongly shaped by the political elite (Kriesi, 2005). Empirical work on the power distribution among the

challengers and the government camp in direct democratic campaigns shows that the latter is typically more successful in getting its way in popular votes, particularly if the vote pertains to an initiative (Kriesi, 2006). The strength of the government camp depends, however, on the unity of its internal coalition and the institutional type of the vote (Bernhard, 2012; Kriesi, 2006). Depending on the issue-specific context, the government forms an internal coalition. The coalitional configuration represents a grand coalition if all parties of the federal council (Christian Democratic People's Party [CVP], Free Democratic Party [FDP], Social Democratic Party [SP], Swiss People's Party [SVP]) back the proposal in the case of referendums or oppose it in the case of initiatives. If one party deviates from the grand coalition, the government camp forms a center-right coalition (if the left-wing SP deviates) or a center-left coalition (if one of the center-right parties deviates). If two parties propose a different voting recommendation, the government camp forms a divided coalition (Kriesi, 2005).

In international comparison, Switzerland stands out by its laissez-faire approach to campaign regulation (Reidy & Suiter, 2015). Despite the frequency and institutionalization of popular votes, there are very few binding norms settling how political actors should organize and conduct their campaign activities. Political actors are neither bound to the upper limits of financial resources nor obligated to disclose the sources of campaign contributions (Serdült, 2010). Although the federal government is not entitled to invest public resources in political campaigns directly, the parties composing the executive are free to do so (Jaquet et al., 2022, p. 338).

Finally, regulations on campaign communication appear to privilege the government camp to some extent. Prior to a popular vote, the federal government sends a ballot pamphlet to all eligible citizens. Even though the pamphlet contains arguments for and against a proposal, the government's position is generally presented first and in greater detail (Bernhard, 2012, p. 40). Moreover, the executive is the only actor with the right to outline its official standpoint on radio and TV before each vote. For all other actors, campaigning on electronic media such as TV and radio is forbidden (Serdült, 2010, pp. 170–171). The few campaign regulations in place in Switzerland thus appear to disadvantage the challenger camp. Strandberg (2008) argues that traditionally more marginalized political actors could shift their communication efforts to digital platforms more intensively if confronted with a restrictive offline campaign environment. Our first hypothesis for equalization therefore states that:

H1a: The challenger camp performs better than the government camp in terms of activity and user engagement on Facebook (absolute equalization).

Alternatively, the structural advantages and the greater visibility of the government camp in the offline campaign environment could enable it to build a stronger follower base and provoke more engagement. In their analysis of media attention in direct democratic campaigns, Gerth and Siegert (2012), for instance, show that the government representatives and the government camp, in general, received the most media attention during the campaign for the 2008 naturalization initiative. Therefore, we could argue that:

H1b: The government camp performs better than the challenger camp in terms of activity and user engagement on Facebook (absolute normalization).

An additional, more rigorous test for equalization versus normalization is to adopt a comparative approach by considering both online and offline campaign communication activities. As Margolis et al. (1999) point out, for equalization to hold, the "advantages of major parties over minor parties on the Web would be significantly smaller than their advantages over minor parties in the established news media" (p. 33). The Swiss case provides an ideal setting for investigating this claim. As mentioned before, campaign regulations in Switzerland state that campaigning is not allowed on electronic media, apart from the internet. Newspaper advertisements have, therefore, long been one of the most important communication channels in direct democratic campaigns (Bernhard, 2012) and will here be used as a reference framework to map the (offline) power distribution between the challenger and the government camp in direct-democratic campaigns.

Conceptually, our first two hypotheses pertain to the absolute dimension of equalization and normalization. As Bene (2021) argues, one of the reasons for inconclusive findings in the literature is the theoretical confusion underlying the two concepts. Hence, there are at least two dimensions of equalization and normalization. According to the first—or absolute approach—only the existence or non-existence of differences between political actors matters in determining whether digital technologies have an equalizing or normalizing effect. However, the second—or relative—approach highlights the extent of differences rather than their mere presence (Bene, 2021, p. 8). In this study, we are not only considering the differences between political actors on Facebook but are investigating the relative approach in a cross-channel perspective, thus in the context of the broader campaign environment. For equalization in the Swiss case, this implies that the differences between the challenger and the government camp are expected to be less pronounced on Facebook than in traditional channels. In other words:

H2a: Digital campaigns in Swiss direct democratic votes are more balanced than campaigns in traditional channels (relative equalization).

On the other hand, we would find patterns of normalization if the differences between both camps are

equal to or greater on Facebook than in traditional channels. Hence:

H2b: Digital campaigns in Swiss direct democratic votes are equally or less balanced than campaigns in traditional channels (relative normalization).

Finally, we are interested in the determinants of equalization and normalization. Previous research suggests that equalization and normalization might be influenced by institutional factors such as the electoral system (Hansen & Kosiara-Pedersen, 2014), the media environment (Strandberg, 2008), and the party system (Samuel-Azran et al., 2015). For the Swiss case, we expect that the different institutional logics of direct democratic instruments might affect whether we find an equalizing or normalizing effect of online campaigning. Challengers in an initiative vote are mobilizing for the creation of novel constitutional norms, aiming to modify the status quo. They are thus leading a "status quo modifying campaign." Challengers in referendum votes, on the other hand, are seeking to prevent a legislative proposal from becoming legally binding. They are therefore mobilizing for the preservation of the status quo and leading a "status quo preserving campaign" (Kriesi & Bernhard, 2011, p. 19). According to Gerber (1999), challengers in status quo modifying campaigns have an even harder time imposing their position than in status quo preserving campaigns (see Bernhard, 2012). Empirical evidence from Swiss direct-democratic campaigns seems to confirm this claim (e.g., Kriesi, 2005). The government camp typically heavily outspends its counterparts in initiative votes in terms of newspaper advertisements, especially if the opposition comes from the left (Kriesi, 2006, p. 618). We could argue that the challenger camp in initiative votes is, therefore, more likely to shift its campaign efforts toward the digital sphere. However, as referendum campaigns are generally more balanced than initiative campaigns (Jaquet et al., 2022, p. 345), challengers should have a higher chance of successfully competing with their counterparts in terms of campaign activities in the online campaign environment. Hence:

H3: Equalization is more likely in referendum (status quo preserving) campaigns than in initiative (status quo modifying) campaigns.

As mentioned above, the government camp forms a coalition in the run-up to each direct democratic vote. Kriesi (2006) shows that the coalition formation of the government camp predicts the outcome of a vote. The more united the government camp, the higher the chances of its stance being accepted by voters. We could argue that the coalition formation affects not only the outcome of the vote and the overall intensity of the campaign (Kriesi, 2005) but also the power distribution among the challenger and the government camp in their online campaign activities. The center-right coalition is often backed by resource-rich economic interest associations, which provide the necessary mobilization resources, whereas the center-left coalition is mostly supported by trade unions and non-governmental organizations (Kriesi, 2005). This structural advantage of center-right coalitions in Swiss direct-democratic campaigns is well documented (e.g., Kriesi, 2005) and could incentivize political actors opposing the traditionally more powerful center-right coalition to shift their campaign activities toward less resource-dependent online platforms. We, therefore, expect that:

H4: Equalization is more likely if the government camp forms a center-right coalition than if it forms a center-left coalition.

3. Data and Methods

We draw on Facebook and newspaper advertisement data on all national popular votes in Switzerland from the beginning of 2010 to the end of 2020. Data on newspaper advertisements are provided by Prof. Hanspeter Kriesi and Année Politique Suisse, a monitoring project on Swiss politics and society at the University of Berne. The dataset contains information on the total number and the direction of all newspaper advertisements published in six Swiss newspapers during the four weeks preceding a popular vote. The selected newspapers are divided by language (German-speaking and French-speaking), type (quality and tabloid), and ideological orientation (center-left and center-right).

Our Facebook dataset includes the official pages of national political parties that have run for parliamentary election over the selected period, as well as their youth sections, their cantonal sections, and cantonal youth sections. The women's section of the national and cantonal parties were included if they had been active as initiators, supporters, or opponents of a proposal voted on between 2010 and 2020. Besides political parties, the dataset contains the official pages of associations (e.g., trade associations, employers' associations), organizations (e.g., NPOs, NGOs, foundations), and trade unions that had been identified as initiators, supporters, or opponents in at least one of the popular votes from 2010–2020 based on the *Swissvotes* (2022) dataset. Given the low degree of personalization in most Swiss direct-democratic campaigns, we did not include individual actors' Facebook pages. In total, 473 Facebook pages are included in our dataset. For each actor, we downloaded all Facebook posts, including their engagement metrics, published between 2010 and 2020 from the Crowdtangle platform. For each campaign, we included only posts related to the proposal in question. To ensure that the posts were related to the respective campaign, we filtered the complete dataset by keywords for each campaign. This strategy was selected to obtain the most complete dataset possible by ensuring that actors who were active during a campaign (but not explicitly listed in

the *Swissvotes* 2022 dataset) are included in the dataset. For instance, if organization A had been active in campaign X in 2019, the total number of its posts from 2010 to 2020 was downloaded. However, if it had not posted anything related to previous campaigns, only its posts related to campaign X were included. Yet, if it did post something in favor of, or against, a previously held vote, e.g., campaign Y, all posts related to campaign X and campaign Y were included. Next, we coded the direction of the posts according to the slogans formulated by each actor. Slogans for each popular vote held in Switzerland are published in the *Swissvotes* (2022) database. In the cases where the actor was not listed in the database, we used the posts to identify their position as either in favor or against a ballot proposition. To ensure comparability with the newspaper advertisement data, we limited our data collection on Facebook campaigning to the four weeks preceding each vote. On average, 73 actors (27 from the challenger camp and 46 from the government camp) generated one or more Facebook posts per campaign.

First, the study analyzes the activity level and user engagement of the challenger and the government camp over time from 2010–2020. Activity level is indicated by the number of posts published by each camp, and user engagement is measured by the sum of the number of likes, comments, shares, and emotional reactions for each post. Second, we use regression analysis to investigate the determinants of equalization or normalization in Swiss direct-democratic campaigns. Our dependent variables for equalization are the number of posts and the overall engagement generated by both camps during the four weeks preceding each vote. Third, campaign activities on Facebook are compared to the offline campaign environment, mapped by the number of newspaper advertisements published by each camp. The goal is to investigate whether Facebook campaigns are more, equally, or less balanced than newspaper campaigns. Kriesi (2005) introduced the term "campaign direction" to measure the balance of a campaign in newspapers. Following his approach, we operationalize the campaign direction by taking the differences between the share of Facebook posts in favor and the share of posts opposing the government's position and comparing them to the differences between the share of newspaper ads in favor of and against the government's position. The values range from –1 to 1, where 0 indicates a completely balanced campaign. Before moving to the empirical findings, we want to address a major limitation of our comparative approach. Despite some important differences, the most suitable equivalent to offline newspaper advertisements are Facebook ads or sponsored Facebook posts rather than cost-free Facebook posts. Hence, Facebook posts are not easily comparable to newspaper ads for two main reasons: first, the costs of buying newspaper ads exceed the costs of producing online posts many times over. For instance, political actors must spend 11,300 Swiss francs to buy a quarter-page ad in the tabloid newspaper *Blick* (Ringier Advertising, n.d.), whereas posting on social media is, apart from personnel expenses, cost-free. Second, while the space to address one's arguments in newspaper ads is often limited to one or two sentences, Facebook posts enable political actors to highlight their positions in multiple ways: through text, visual, and audio-visual content. Despite these differences, we decided to compare newspaper ads and Facebook posts for two main reasons: one being practical and the other conceptual. First, although Facebook provides access to paid Facebook ads and sponsored posts through the Facebook Ad Library, we cannot assume data is complete, as Swiss political actors' disclosure of their online advertising activities is voluntary (Fichter, 2019). Moreover, online advertising is a relatively new campaigning strategy, and the data available on the Facebook Ad Library does not go further back than 2019, which is inconsistent with the longitudinal approach of this study. Second, from a conceptual perspective, our goal was to compare the most important online and offline channels for campaign communication: newspaper ads for the offline sphere; Facebook for the online (Kemp, 2022).

We test our hypotheses with two distinct empirical strategies: first, we evaluate the differences between the challenger camp and the government camp at the aggregate level—the reason, therefore, is twofold. The analysis at the aggregate level allows us to investigate the development of campaign activities by the challenger and the government camp over time. Thereby, we can determine whether the challenger camp or the government camp was more successful in terms of Facebook activity and generated user engagement over the full range of campaigns from 2010–2020. Second, by aggregating our data, we can compare the efforts by both camps on two different channels (Facebook and newspapers), which is necessary to test our hypotheses on relative equalization and normalization. However, while this approach is useful for detecting overall patterns, it does not enable us to evaluate our hypotheses at the actor— and post-level. Therefore, in the second step, we move our analysis from the aggregate level to a regression-based approach to test our expectations considering the control variables we identified as most relevant to our hypotheses.

4. Findings

4.1. Absolute Equalization vs. Normalization

From the beginning of 2010 to the end of 2020, the Swiss electorate voted on 91 policy proposals. Over half of the ballot proposals accounted for popular initiatives (49 votes). In 14 cases, Swiss voters were called to the ballot boxes for a mandatory referendum, and 28 times they voted in an optional referendum. In almost all cases, both challengers and the government camp used Facebook as a communication channel for their campaigns, although the extent of campaign activities

changed significantly over time. In total, the government camp published 10,211 Facebook posts and generated, on average, 39 engagements per post, whereas the challenger camp published 8,047 with an average of 64 engagements (see Figure 1 for distribution).

Figure 2 shows the average number of Facebook posts published in the four weeks before a popular vote in each year and the generated engagement, disaggregated into challenger, and government camps. At first, the difference between the challenger camp and the government camp in terms of the number of Facebook posts was marginal, but it increased slightly from 2012–2015, with the government camp outperforming the challengers. Between 2015–2016, both camps were on par, before the government camp again took the lead from 2016 onwards. In 2020 the challenger camp considerably surpassed its counterpart. A slightly different picture emerges if we consider the level of engagement.
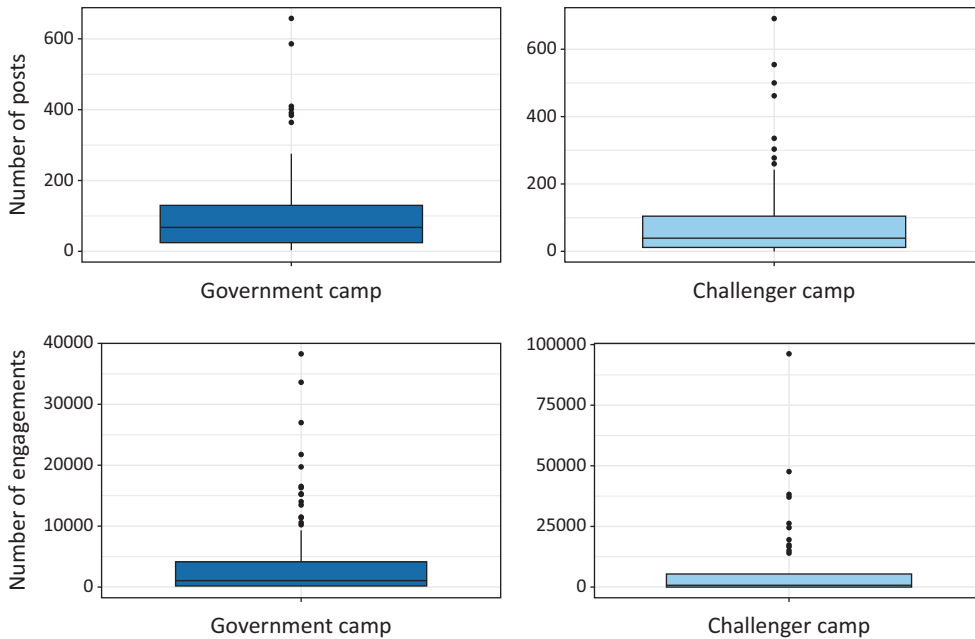

Figure 1. Distribution of number of Facebook posts and user engagements by camp from 2010 to 2020.
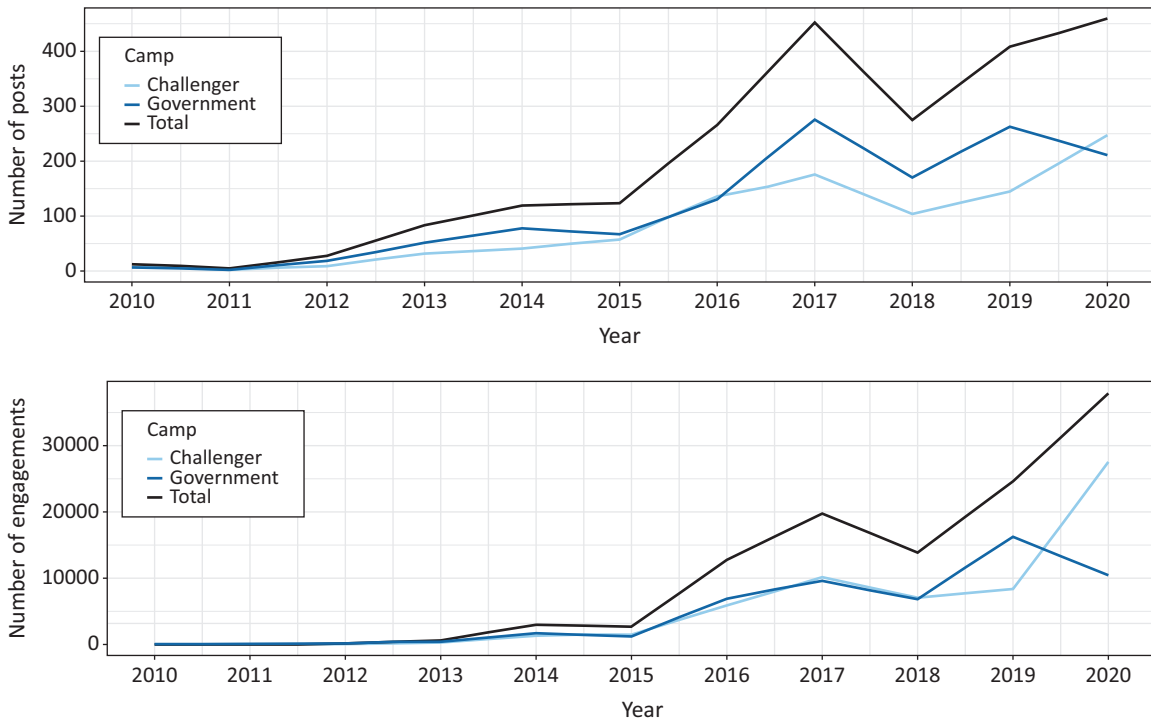

Figure 2. Developments of the number of Facebook posts and generated engagements by camp over time.

While both camps displayed similar levels of engagement until 2018, the challenger camp outperformed the government camp by a considerable extent in 2020. The challenger camp's predominance in terms of activity and engagement in 2020 could be linked to the intensive campaigns around the "responsible business initiative" and the "moderate immigration initiative."

Based on Bene's (2021) conceptualization and our hypotheses, absolute equalization is indicated when the challenger camp performs better on Facebook in terms of activity and engagement than the government camp. In contrast, absolute normalization is present if the government camp performs better. Figure 3 shows the number of campaigns in which each camp outperforms its counterpart in terms of Facebook activity and engagement. As for Facebook activity, the government camp prevails in the majority of campaigns between 2010–2020. In 59.2% of all initiatives, 57.1% of all optional, and 92.9% of all mandatory referendums, the government camp published more Facebook posts than the challengers (Figure 3[a]). As outlined before, a slightly different picture emerges for the engagement generated by each camp. The government camp seems less likely to prevail in terms of resonance. Put in substantive terms, the government camp outperforms the challenger camp in 51% of all initiatives, 53.6% of all optional, and 64.3% of all mandatory referendums (Figure 3[b]). A majority of votes (around 80%) in which the challenger camp outperforms the government camp was initiated and/or supported by left-wing political actors (see Figures A and B in the Supplementary File) and most frequently addressed social, environmental, or economic policy proposals. In absolute terms, our data appear to support the normalization thesis for the level of activity and, to a lesser extent, the level of engagement. Hence, the government camp seems to assert its position of structural advantage vis-à-vis the challenger camp online, particularly regarding the number of posts. However, moving the analysis from the aggregate level to a regression-based approach at the actor and post level sheds a different light on the equalizing or normalizing effect of Facebook communication.

Table 1 displays the results of our regression analyses. First, columns 1 and 5 show that the challenger camp outperforms the government camp in terms of the number of Facebook posts and the generated engagement, confirming our first hypothesis (H1a). The expected number of Facebook posts is 32% higher for the challenger camp than for the government camp. The number of engagements is 35% higher for the challenger camp than for the government camp. Disaggregated into reactions (likes, emotional reactions, and comments) and shares, we find that the challenger camp's posts are expected to generate 26% more reactions and 90% more shares than posts published by the government camp (Table A in the Supplementary File). Second, the differences between both activity and overall engagement generated by the challenger and the government camp
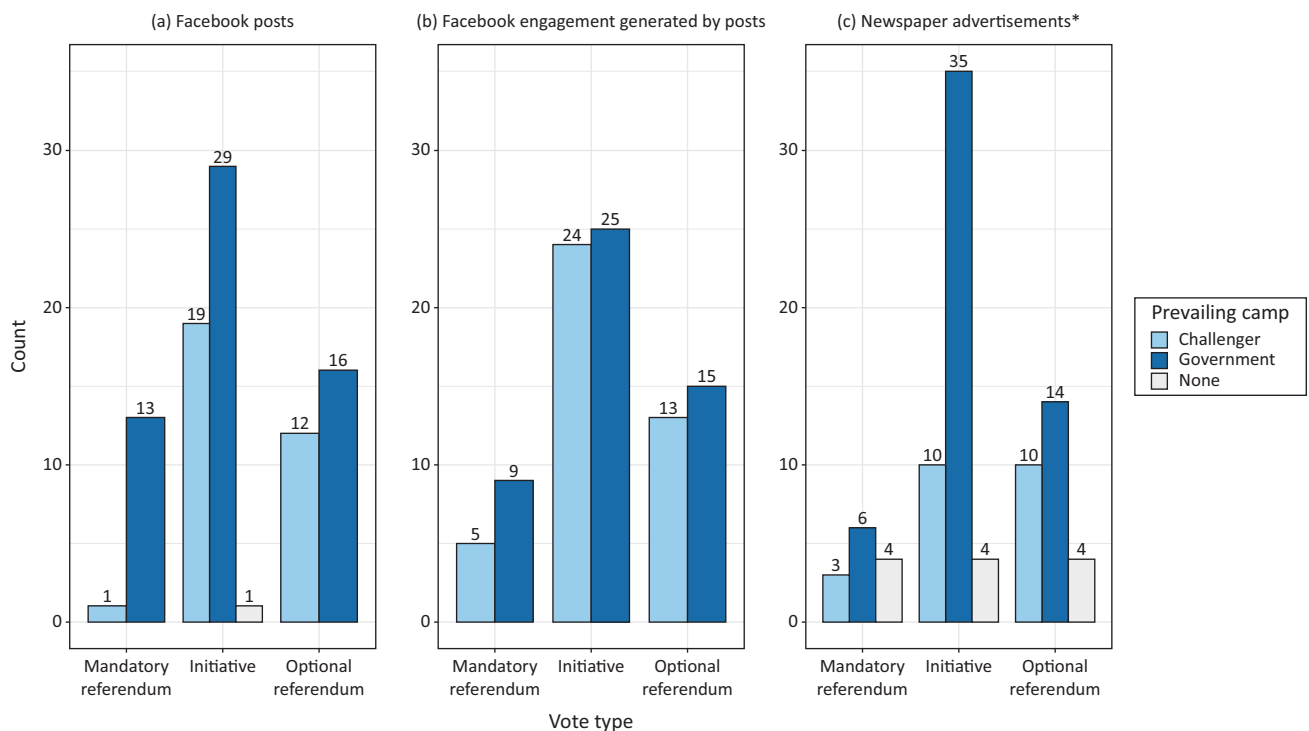

Figure 3. Number of direct democratic votes in which the government camp or the challenger camp prevailed in terms of Facebook activity, Facebook engagement generated by the posts, and offline campaign activity. Note: * = Removed one mandatory referendum ("additional financing of the old-age pension through an increase in value-added tax") due to missing data.

Table 1. *Quasi-poisson* regression analysis of predictors for Facebook activity and user engagement (standard errors clustered on vote date).

	Activity				Engagement			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Challenger camp	0.28***	0.15	0.31**	0.18	0.30**	0.17	0.23	0.08
	(0.06)	(0.12)	(0.12)	(0.13)	(0.14)	(0.14)	(0.21)	(0.28)
Initiative	0.79***	0.70***	0.78***	0.69***	0.21**	0.17	0.20**	0.15
	(0.21)	(0.19)	(0.21)	(0.19)	(0.06)	(0.14)	(0.08)	(0.14)
Optional referendum	0.65***	0.69***	0.65***	0.68***	0.30***	0.25**	0.31***	0.24*
	(0.23)	(0.20)	(0.23)	(0.20)	(0.09)	(0.12)	(0.09)	(0.13)
Center-right coalition	−0.30***	−0.30***	−0.28***	−0.26***	0.10	0.10	0.20	0.20
	(0.10)	(0.10)	(0.09)	(0.09)	(0.18)	(0.18)	(0.24)	(0.23)
Center-left coalition					0.46***	0.45***	0.34*	0.33*
					(0.14)	(0.14)	(0.18)	(0.18)
Divided coalition	−0.17	−0.19	−0.17	−0.19	0.06	0.06	0.03	0.03
	(0.10)	(0.12)	(0.11)	(0.12)	(0.12)	(0.12)	(0.11)	(0.11)
Grand coalition (opposition from left and right-wing parties)	−0.35***	−0.36***	−0.34***	−0.34**	0.43**	0.42**	0.40**	0.37**
	(0.11)	(0.14)	(0.11)	(0.13)	(0.16)	(0.16)	(0.17)	(0.16)
Grand coalition (opposition from right-wing parties)	−0.12	−0.11	−0.11	−0.10	−0.32	−0.33	−0.34	−0.35
	(0.10)	(0.10)	(0.10)	(0.10)	(0.28)	(0.26)	(0.29)	(0.28)
Grand coalition (opposition from left-wing parties)	−0.36***	−0.35***	−0.36***	−0.35***	0.19	0.19	0.21	0.20
	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.17)	(0.16)	(0.18)	(0.17)
Challenger camp × optional referendum		−0.02		−0.01		0.13		0.17
		(0.15)		(0.14)		(0.21)		(0.27)
Challenger camp × initiative		0.24		0.27		0.13		0.13
		(0.16)		(0.17)		(0.24)		(0.23)
Challenger camp × center-right coalition			−0.05	−0.10			−0.20	−0.18
			(0.16)	(0.15)			(0.29)	(0.25)
Challenger camp × center-left coalition							0.46	0.47
							(0.38)	(0.38)
Fixed-effects								
Vote date Actor	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes Yes	Yes Yes	Yes Yes	Yes Yes
Observations	6,607	6,607	6,607	6,607	18,255	18,255	18,255	18,255
Squared Correlation	0.05580	0.05805	0.05594	0.05848	0.20003	0.20033	0.20256	0.20283

Note: Significance codes—*** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.

do not depend on the type of direct democratic vote (columns 2 and 6), nor the coalitional configuration of the government camp (columns 3 and 7). The coefficients of the interaction terms are not statistically significant. Therefore, the results do not support hypotheses 3 and 4 for the number of posts and the overall engagement. However, if we analyze the engagement dimensions separately, we find that the challenger camp is more likely to outperform the government camp in terms of the expected number of shares generated by their posts in optional referenda than in initiatives. This finding supports our third hypothesis (column 8, Table A in the Supplementary File). In terms of shares, the challenger camp is more likely to outperform the government camp if the latter forms a center-left coalition rather than a center-right coalition. This result is contrary to hypothesis 4. Third, columns 4 and 8 show that the results do not change if we include all interaction terms

in the same model. Finally, in all models, the number of posts is higher for initiatives than for optional referenda campaigns, whereas engagement is higher for optional referenda than for initiatives, and for center-left coalitions compared to center-right coalitions.

4.2. Relative Equalization vs. Normalization

Finally, we compare campaign activities on different channels to get a more nuanced picture of the effects of digital technologies on power distribution in direct-democratic campaigns. As Swiss law prohibits campaigning on electronic media such as radio and TV, newspaper advertisements seem a suitable means to map the offline campaign environment and the power structure in each campaign. Figure 3(c) shows the number of campaigns in which the government camp and the challenger camp prevailed in terms of offline campaign activity. Compared to the online environment, the government camp prevails in considerably more initiative campaigns (+10%). In 71.4% of all initiatives, the government camp published more newspaper ads than the challenger camp. However, the government camp prevails in fewer campaigns preceding a mandatory referendum (6 of 14) which might be explained by the fact that in four cases, neither the government camp nor the challenger camp published any newspaper ads. Finally, for optional referenda, the differences are marginal, with the government camp prevailing in 14 of 28 cases. These findings suggest that digital technologies are, to some extent, enabling challengers in initiative campaigns to compete with the traditionally more powerful government camp.

The cross-channel relative approach to the equalization–normalization debate focuses on the extent of differences between the challengers and the government camp on different channels. For the equalization hypothesis to be verified, the gap between both camps in terms of campaign activity must be smaller on Facebook than in newspapers, and vice versa for normalization. Figure 4 shows the campaign direction on Facebook and in newspapers for all campaigns from 2010–2020. The difference between the challengers and the government camp in terms of their Facebook campaign activity is closer to 0 than the difference between both camps in terms of newspaper advertisements. Facebook campaigns are thus, on average, more balanced than campaigns that use traditional communication channels, particularly since 2014 (as seen in Figure 5).

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This study has investigated whether digital technologies like Facebook are rebalancing the power distribution among political actors or whether existing power imbalances are simply transferred from the offline to the online sphere. We have examined the relative approach to equalization and normalization from a comparative perspective by considering both online and offline campaign activities, which, as we argue, adds to the assessment of the effects of digital technologies. In contrast to previous research on the equalization–normalization debate, we focused on direct democratic campaigns in a longitudinal perspective, and we empirically tested contextual explanations for the status quo maintaining or altering effects of online communication. Thereby, we have taken a step towards addressing an important gap in the literature as most studies focus on singular (election) campaigns, thus precluding the possibility of studying context-specific factors.

This article shows that the effects of Facebook campaigning in Swiss direct-democratic campaigns depend on the dimensions under study and the
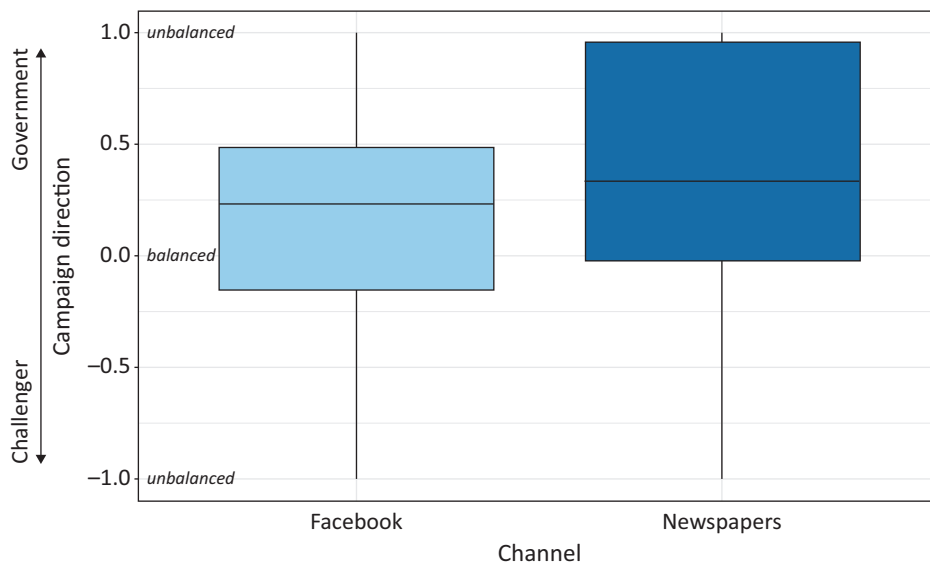
Figure 4. Difference between the government camp and the challenger camp (campaign direction) in terms of Facebook posts and newspaper advertisements from 2010–2020.
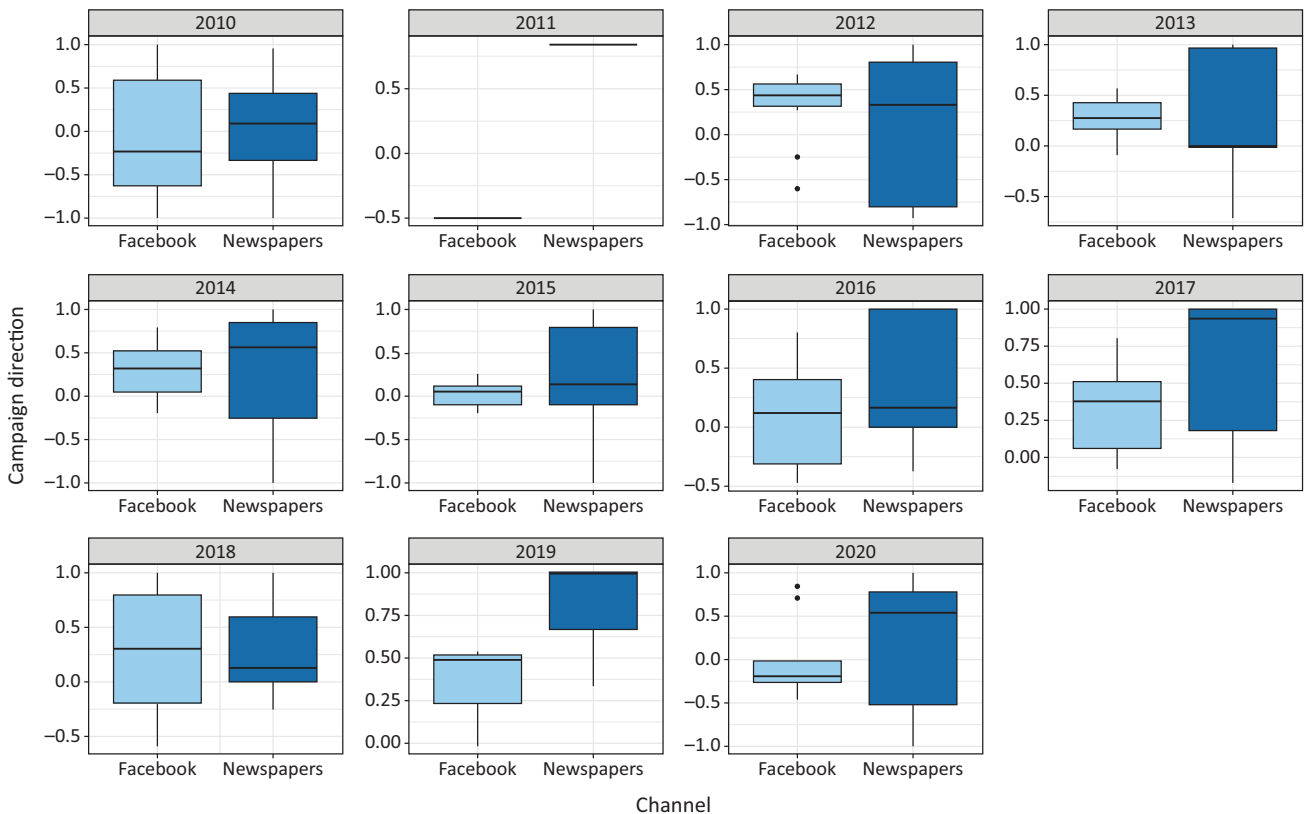
Figure 5. Development of the difference between the government camp and the challenger camp (= campaign direction) in terms of Facebook posts and newspaper advertisements from 2010 to 2020.

conceptualization of equalization and normalization, confirming previous findings in the literature (e.g., Bene, 2021). In a majority of direct democratic votes from 2010–2020, the traditionally more powerful government camp succeeds in outperforming the challenger camp in terms of the number of Facebook posts published in the four weeks preceding a vote and, to a lesser degree, the engagement generated by their posts, thus indicating a tendency towards "politics as usual." However, we find a tendency toward equalization at the disaggregated level of actors and posts as the challenger camp slightly outperforms the government camp both in terms of activity and user engagement. From a comparative perspective, we find that the challenger camp is more likely to keep pace with the government camp in the online sphere, as Facebook campaigns are, on average, more balanced than newspaper campaigns, particularly since 2014. However, this finding is limited to the activity level of both camps as there is no equivalent to engagement data in the offline sphere; hence, no meaningful comparison can be drawn. Overall, this article highlights the necessity to study equalization and normalization from a comparative perspective by considering different communication channels, as today's campaigns increasingly take place in a hypermedia environment (Lilleker et al., 2015).

This study is not without limitations. First, we have focused exclusively on Facebook and have not con-

sidered other online communication channels such as Twitter or Instagram. Our findings thus only apply to Facebook and are not generalizable to social media as a whole or other platforms as they have their particular audiences and affordances—something that might affect the strategies and effects of online campaigning (e.g., Kreiss et al., 2018). Yet the variance in affordances applies not only across but also within communication platforms, as the case of Facebook illustrates. Besides publicly available and cost-free campaign activities such as Facebook posting, the platform also allows political actors to target paid Facebook ads to specific audiences (e.g., Dobber et al., 2019). Following heated controversies and transparency concerns, Facebook ads and information on the publishers and the resources spent are now publicly available on the Facebook Ad Library. In Switzerland, however, the collection of Facebook ads is expected to be incomplete due to the disclosure of online advertising activities being voluntary (Fichter, 2019). Therefore, we had to limit our analysis to publicly available Facebook posts. For a more comprehensive assessment of the equalization–normalization thesis, however, studies should ideally keep up-to-date with the fast-paced development of technological innovations, including social media's particular and ever-expanding affordances as recent research has done by including digital advertising in their analyses (e.g., Fowler et al., 2021; Vanden Eynde & Maddens, 2022). Finally,

our conceptualization of more and less powerful political actors in the Swiss direct democratic context may be arguably too rough and not easily transferable to direct democratic campaigns beyond Switzerland. It is true that the government camp, and particularly the challenger camp, is composed of varying actors depending on the issue-specific context. At the disaggregated level, our study reveals little about exactly which actors are most active and successful in terms of online campaigning.

Nevertheless, the distinction between the challenger and the government camp seems useful and, indeed, necessary to study a great variety of direct democratic campaigns over time. A more fine-grained analysis of the actors composing each camp should be subject to further research, as should the question of whether a more level playing field in the online sphere is reflected in the outcomes of direct democratic votes. Gibson and McAllister (2015) put it this way: Even if minor political actors are keeping pace with their major counterparts in the digital sphere, if they are "not gaining any inroads into popular support, then it becomes difficult to see how this is leading to a rebalancing of power within the system" (p. 530). Hence, our exploratory study provides some preliminary evidence for changing patterns and dynamics in Swiss direct democratic campaigns and should be regarded as a starting point for more in-depth analyses of these shifts' underlying causes and consequences.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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