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Reaching the Voters: Parties' Use of Google Ads in the 2021 German Federal Election

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Abstract

Election campaigns during the pandemic showcased the increased use of costly digital campaigning by parties. While many studies focus on the use of Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), and other social networking sites during elections, parties' use of Google Ads remains widely unstudied. This is surprising given that parties spend a substantial proportion of their budget on Google Ads and Google reports on this spending and other details of the ads in its *Transparency Report*. Based on the equalisation vs. normalisation thesis, we identify party factors (size, age, government/opposition status, and electoral strongholds) that affect parties' use of this instrument to a different degree in their campaigns. We aim to highlight parties' use of Google Ads during the campaigns for the 2021 German Bundestag election, relying on the official data provided via Google's Ad Library. We discuss both empirical work on the factors that determine the use of Google Ads and conceptual work on the merit and perils of such ads in democratic elections, and we present descriptive and exploratory findings of our deep dive into the archive of Google Ads.

Keywords

e-campaigning; elections; Germany; Google Ads; political communication; political parties; transparency

1. Introduction

Digitalisation is expensive for parties. The recent debate on raising the overall cap of public party financing in Germany neatly displayed this dilemma (Dorfer, 2023). Election campaigns during the pandemic showcased the increased costs of digital campaigning. While many studies focus on the use of Facebook, X (formerly Twitter),

and other social networking sites during elections, parties' use of Google Ads remains less studied (the exception being Medina Serrano et al., 2020). This is surprising given that parties spend a substantial proportion of their budgets on Google Ads and Google reports on this spending in its *Transparency Report* (Fitzpatrick, 2023). Based on the equalisation vs. normalisation thesis, it can be expected that parties will use this instrument to a different degree in their campaigns. We identify various party factors, such as size, age, government/opposition status, and electoral strongholds, which potentially affect the degree of its use. However, recent studies also indicate the possibility of the digital convergence of party digitalisation, whereby larger and smaller parties become more similar in their potential to employ digital tools (Lupato & Meloni, 2023).

Our contribution is part of a project to highlight parties' use of Google Ads during national and European elections. We analyse the party campaigns for the 2021 German Bundestag election, relying on the public data provided via Google's Ads Library. Our study establishes some fundamentals by providing certain descriptive information via the following questions: Which parties employ Google Ads? To what degree do they do so in terms of targeting and sophistication? Can we identify different phases in the roll-out of Google Ads? What content is displayed (videos, images, text, mixed)? We begin with (a) a general view on parties' digital campaign strategies, then (b) we discuss, based on the existing literature on e-campaigning, the party factors that potentially determine the different use of Google Ads in elections, and (c) we present the findings of our explorative analysis of Google Ads. We contribute to the existing research on data-driven campaigning (DDC; Dommett et al., 2024) and microtargeting (Votta et al., 2024) in the following ways: First, we expand the knowledge about parties' activities beyond Meta or X by focusing on Google, which belongs to Alphabet Inc., another large competitor on the digital campaign market. Second, we contribute to the understanding of the political campaign around the 2021 Bundestag election, which was unique in several aspects: (a) It was the first time in almost 50 years that the incumbent German chancellor was not the Spitzenkandidat of one party; (b) the German Greens had a realistic chance of leading the government; and (c) three candidates were in the race to become the next chancellor, and the fourth strongest competitor was the Alternative for Germany (AfD), Germany's radical-right populist party. These incidences shaped an uncertain campaign with a close outcome. And third, we provide insight on political campaign practices in a national context where new regulation such as the Digital Services Act (DSA) proposed in 2019 was discussed but not yet fully implemented. Although the DSA does not directly regulate parties, it nonetheless regulates the online platforms they principally use during election campaigns. The DSA aims to provide a secure online communication environment. Intermediaries are now liable for illegal content and must moderate, restrict, and remove such content. However, it contains little regulation on disinformation and fake news. For this, the DSA introduces transparency measures such as the public archiving of all ads and independent audits to assess compliance (Berberich & Seip, 2021; European Parliament and the Council of the European Union Regulation, 2022, Art. 37 DSA). This aims to increase transparency in personalised advertising, especially for election campaigns (Borucki & Kettemann, 2024). Therefore, our analysis provides an important explorative stocktaking of the setting before major changes in regulation occurred.

2. E-Campaigning: Aims, Types, and Practices of Political Parties

Campaigns are intended to influence the thinking and/or the actions of the group of people addressed. Fitzpatrick (2023) and others (for an overview see Baringhorst, 2009) identify distinct but overlapping forms of campaigns which address different dimensions: the cognitive, the evaluative/affective, and the behavioural. Throughout the election campaign season, political parties mainly target the latter two

dimensions in their (digital) campaign communication. With persuasion campaigns consisting of evaluative/ affective communication elements, parties aim to move the target group's attitude in a certain direction (in their favour). Mobilisation campaigns go one step further, aiming to influence the behaviour of citizens to go vote (or not) for a certain party. Although the aim of political campaigns remains the same over time, the techniques available and used by parties (Roemmele & Gibson, 2020, p. 599) and the expertise needed to use them effectively have changed substantially (Negrine & Lilleker, 2002, p. 312). Roemmele and Gibson (2020, p. 599), for instance, discuss three historical eras and the current era: (a) the period between the world wars (personal contact on the ground); (b) the post-war phase (the influence of mass media, especially television); and (c) the period from about 1990 onwards (the increased use of campaign specialists; commercialisation). Finally, there is the fourth and current era that has produced two types of (electoral) campaigns: scientific and subversive. Both types of campaigns are characterised by the enormous importance of data, which is why they are frequently described as DDC (Kefford et al., 2023). DDC is defined as campaigning strategies that rely on "accessing and analyzing voter and/or campaign data to generate insights into the campaign's target audience(s) and/or to optimize campaign interventions" (Dommett et al., 2024). As a result of this development, Roemmele and Gibson (2020) see two types of (election) campaigns: The first makes use of scientific logic by "measuring" the electorate and thus tailoring election advertising as much as possible to the target group, or even the target person. In essence, it is about informing and mobilising one's own camp. In contrast, subversive campaigns aim to spread misinformation and demobilise the opposing camp (Roemmele & Gibson, 2020, p. 606). One can, thus, literally speak of a democracy-destroying character. For both types, however, the digital sphere is a crucial space for action, which is why e-campaigning is a central building block. In short, e-campaigning can be understood as a series of coordinated communication acts that aim to inform, convince, and/or mobilise a certain group of users online within a certain time. However, e-campaigning can differ across parties due to a variety of factors.

3. Party Factors Explain Online Ads Use

Which measures are used by political actors, such as political parties (or civil society organisations), depends on several factors primarily based on the resource endowment, which includes financial resources (Fitzpatrick, 2023) but also competence in dealing with web-based technologies. Here we can speak of a digital repertoire (Nitschke & Donges, 2018) or digital capital (Fitzpatrick, 2020; Ignatow & Robinson, 2017). Examining e-campaigning measures, various criteria thus emerge, including the type of measures and the means used by parties. Building on the equalisation vs. normalisation thesis and Kruschinski et al. (2022), we argue that the use and content strategies by parties can vary depending on a variety of factors.

The first aspect affecting both e-campaigning use and content strategies by parties is resources in terms of the funds needed to pay for ads and hire campaign staff. Depending on the size of a party's campaign budget, it can buy more or fewer ads. However, parties with more members might need to spend less on ads as their members and supporters will produce more organic content on their behalf while smaller parties cannot rely on this strategy (Gibson, 2015). In many cases, larger parties also have more money and so they can spend more on their campaign. In contrast, for parties with fewer financial resources, e-campaigning allows them to "direct their resources towards the 'right' segment of voters, thereby avoiding 'inefficient' expenditure on individuals deemed unlikely to be persuadable by the party or candidate" (Votta et al., 2024, p. 5). Nevertheless, we expect parties with many members and high campaign budgets to post more ads and parties with fewer human and financial resources to post less.

Apart from resources, party age might also play a role with newer parties having to get by with fewer members and thus fewer volunteers on the ground and therefore having a greater need to buy more ads during the campaign. However, this need for new parties to compensate for the lack of other resources with ads might differ across regions, leading to a nuanced use of geotargeted ads where they have fewer other campaign resources. Returning to the equalisation vs. normalisation thesis, Gibson and Römmele (2001) argue that the transition to new campaign practices requires strong leadership and financial rescues, hence established parties might be more likely to adopt new communication. In contrast, newer parties might be more "digital-native" and, as outlined, might depend more on new communication tools, such as Google Ads.

Next, parties can also differ regarding content strategies by buying ads consisting of images, videos, and/or text. Parties who post more photos "place the focus on the individual politician rather than the political party, thereby expanding the political arena for increased personalized campaigning" (Enli & Skogerbø, 2013, p. 758). This also aligns with certain campaign functions outlined by Magin et al. (2017), such as increasing parties' branding and making voters aware of their candidates. In contrast, parties posting more text stress issue priorities perceived as popular or "wedge" issues by voters during the campaign (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1994; Hillygus & Shields, 2009). Overall, online tools can be used by policy-seeking parties (Römmele, 2003) to spread text and videos on topics for which they possess policy expertise in general and target a specific group. Parties with more vote- and office-maximising strategies can use ads based on videos and images of candidates and their encounters with voters, and little to no policy info. The latter reinforces the trend towards the personalisation of politics and thus political communication.

In addition, parties are not unitary actors. Different organisational sub-units or regional sub-branches might act differently or require more or less support through online ads. The possibility of geotargeting leads to differences in use and specifications of digital campaigning and ads in specific regions. For example, parties can target main battlegrounds, strongholds, urban vs. rural, and, in national or regional border regions, parties can exclude the other side of the border (Stuckelberger & Koedam, 2022). The extent of this regional targeting strategy depends on election system factors with the German system requiring such a strategy. Beyond this, different party organisation units can create targeted ads based on individual characteristics of voters, such as gender and age (Ohme, 2019), to appeal to specific socio-demographic groups (Stuckelberger & Tresch, 2022), with the latter, for example, paid by the party youth organisation. In line with the existing literature, we expect that, due to their intuitive nature, location-based and socio-demographic criteria are frequently used by parties (Votta et al., 2024). Furthermore, Votta (2021) shows that approximately half of the political ads seen during the 2021 German federal election on Facebook used at least three different criteria. We also expect the use of multiple targeting (inclusive or exclusive) in parties' use of Google Ads, although Google allows only three categories for targeting: age, gender, and geographical area (see Section 4.2).

Furthermore, parties' ad strategies and use might differ depending on their role in government or opposition. In government, parties are likely to use ads to mobilise their former voters and increase the chances of re-election. Opposition parties need to inform and interact with the electorate to gain as much support as possible (Bawn & Somer-Topcu, 2012). This might lead opposition parties to post more ads with new content, to generate public and media attention and stay in the mind of the new electorate. This strategy can also be used by parties that are both in opposition and (relatively) new. Party newness, therefore, might accelerate the adoption of this strategy.

The literature also highlights that the timing of ads is a key component of political marketing and plays a crucial role in gaining electoral benefits (Fowler et al., 2021; Sides et al., 2018). Early in the campaign, ad campaigns can be created to test which audiences are most receptive at specific campaigning times and to specific themes. This for example could be done to test reactions through ads in relation to other campaign events, such as upcoming TV debates. This might overlap with the government or opposition status of parties as most TV debates are limited to the potential winner or coalition partners. For them, ads can pave the way to success in TV debates, while opposition parties might buy more ads right after the debates and challenge what has been posed by the frontrunner. Further, the timing of ads by established parties might be concentrated towards the end of the campaign period to mobilise existing voters in a final mobilisation and get-out-the-vote drive. At the same time, for new parties to gain attention and attract new voters, they need not only (a) more ads spread out along the entire period but also (b) an intensification towards the end as ads closer to election day are the most effective (Panagopoulos, 2011). This strategy of gaining prominence first and convincing voters eventually appears especially promising in close races with many undecided voters.

Last, we consider party ideology. For some parties, the use of paid online ads can be a method of bypassing low or negative coverage by mainstream media. For other parties, their ideological positions are diametrically opposed to the business models of the large web corporations. In this respect, the use of these platforms is critically discussed among them. On the other hand, the renunciation of the use of social media in political competition is hardly justifiable, considering that potential voters can be addressed there. A solution to the dilemma may be seen in allowing presence on the platforms but restricting the paid advertising that occurs on them (Fitzpatrick et al., 2023). Thus, following the literature we expect right-wing parties to use Google Ads more (Gibson & Römmele, 2001) and left-leaning parties to use it less due to the latter's more critical view on tech giants and stronger support for data protection legislation (Kruschinski & Haller, 2017). Indeed, Vliegenthart et al. (2024) find that right-wing political self-placement increases general levels of the acceptability of targeted ads further, thus increasing the use of such communication techniques by right-wing parties. Furthermore, we expect the use of different targeting and/or exclusion criteria to correspond with parties' voter bases (Stuckelberger & Koedam, 2022): Right-wing parties tend to target older and rural populations, while left-leaning parties focus on younger and urban populations.

In summary, the central research question of this article is what factors explain parties' use of Google Ads during their national election campaigns. We examine how e-campaigning use and content strategies in the form of Google Ads vary by parties' resources, ideology, size, and age but also their government/opposition status, and across the campaign period. Therefore, after outlining the data and method applied, we address in the findings section the following key aspects of our main research question: Which parties employ Google Ads? To what degree do they do so in terms of targeting and sophistication? Can we identify different phases in the roll-out of Google Ads? What content is displayed (videos, images, text, mixed)?

4. Research Design

4.1. Case Justification and Description: The 2021 German Federal Election

In this article, we focus on e-campaigning embedded in the political campaigns of parties during the German 2021 federal election campaign (first-order election) as the influence of these election campaigns has potentially the greatest impact on democratic decision-making processes and the legitimacy of their results in

the political system of the Federal Republic of Germany. Although online campaigns in the US are important reference points (Hindman, 2005; Kreiss, 2012), German parties also took their initial steps in the digital sphere at an early stage. Regarding visible measures, the adoption of websites was observable as early as 1996 by German parties. During the 2021 election campaign, parties used various visible possibilities of web-based technologies: Spotify podcasts, YouTube videos, and digital party conferences are just a few examples (cf. also Fitzpatrick & Jöst, 2021). Google (including YouTube), studied here, is a key player, with over five million euros spent on political advertising in Germany. Of the German parties, the former chancellor Angela Merkel's Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and Bündnis '90/Die Grünen (the Greens) spend the largest amounts on advertisements according to Google's *Transparency Report*. Considering these figures, e-campaigning in the 2021 federal election campaign took on an important role for all parties. Regarding the regulation of political online advertising, a recent adjustment, i.e., the Medienstaatsvertrag (Media State Treaty), was implemented and has been effective since November 2020 in regulating political online advertising, similarly to political advertising via broadcasting, which had been previously regulated through the Rundfundstaatsvertrag. Apart from campaigns before the elections for the German Bundestag or the EU Parliament (Staatsvertrag der Bundesländer, 2020, § 68 (2)), the Media State Treaty does not allow political, ideological, or religious advertising via broadcast media (Staatsvertrag der Bundesländer, 2020, § 8 (9)), which includes broadcast-like media such as media libraries, YouTube channels, or podcasts (Staatsvertrag der Bundesländer, 2020, § 74). In addition, the responsible source of the ad needs to be identifiable (Borucki & Kettemann, 2024, pp. 6–7). However, the main concern of this regulation is transparency and the avoidance of discrimination (Klausa & Meyer, 2021). The legal character is also worth noting as it is a contract by the German Länder with so-called media intermediaries; it is not federal law passed by parliament.

4.2. Data and Method

Invisible measures (Fitzpatrick, 2023), the main focus of this article, were also used in the online campaign for the 2021 German federal election. These include, for example, DarkAds in social media, search-engine-optimised content design on the website (SEO), or search-engine advertising (SEA). These forms of campaigns are often based on covertly collected information about users, which then enables advertisers to specifically address narrowly defined target groups (microtargeting). These possibilities have emerged as a result of platformisation, as Facebook, Google, and others are not only to be understood as websites but also as entities behind whose user interface lies a complex architecture that documents user behaviour and makes it commercially usable (for more details, see Eisenegger, 2021). The legal requirement to introduce so-called ad libraries and provide access to them via developer interfaces (APIs), sheds some light on the opaque ad industry.

The Google Ad Library refers to a transparency initiative by Google that provides a publicly accessible database of political ads that run on its platforms (Google Search, YouTube). The purpose of the Google Ad Library is to increase transparency around political advertising: Who is running political ads? How much are they spending? Which demographics are they targeting? Google introduced the Ad Library and the *Transparency Report* in 2021, later than other platforms. The data set provided is, however, easy to access and quite comprehensive including the exact advertisement element linked in the data set (video, image, or text), information about the advertiser, geotargeting (areas to be included and excluded for specific ads), display periods, and other demographic markers for microtargeting (age, gender). Google provides a comprehensive Ads policy (Google, 2024) for political ads. Ads must comply with the regulations and laws of

the respective country and Google's own policy. Advertisers also need Election Ads verification for the respective region, and a "Paid for by" disclosure ensures additional transparency.

For this study, we built a subset including all ads displayed during the last eight weeks before the 2021 Bundestag election (main campaign period) and including only political ads issued by political parties and their chapters (for complete documentation, please see the Supplementary Material). This left us with 5,131 observations covering the period from 27 July 2021 to 26 September 2021. We grouped the advertisers on the party level (15 advertising parties in the sample) and additionally created a variable capturing the party level (federal, state, local party organisation; youth organisations). We used RStudio 2024.04.2 (R version 4.4.1) and the packages readr (2.1.5), openxlsx (4.2.5.2), dplyr (1.1.4), ggplot2 (3.5.1), reshape2 (1.4.4), labelled (2.13.0), expss (0.11.6), maditr (0.8.4), and tidyr (1.3.1); for full documentation, please see the HTML file or the Quarto Markdown-file in the Supplementary Material.

5. Google Ads in the 2021 German Election Campaign

A first indicator of interest is which parties are in the sample, ergo advertised via Google services during the campaign season. Figure 1 provides an overview. While the observation that all parties in the federal parliament appear in the sample is intuitive (they are the major players), it is surprising to what degree the first-time contender Volt was active. Volt is among the five parties with the most advertising elements in the sample. The party with the most advertising elements is the AfD. This is in line with findings of previous studies indicating that populist radical right parties campaign extensively via the web (Engesser et al., 2017; Ernst et al., 2017). For further analysis, we mainly focus on the parties in parliament (Social Democratic Party [SPD], CDU, Christian Social Party [CSU], Greens, Liberal Democratic Party [FDP], Left, AfD) and Volt.
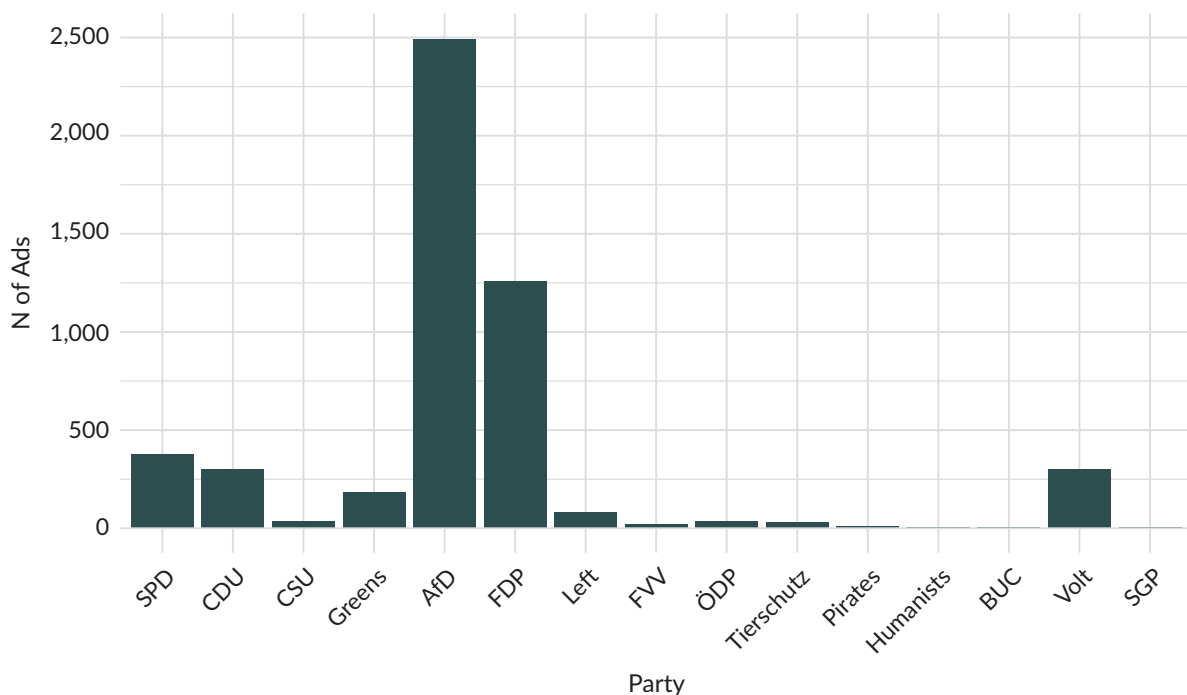

Figure 1. Parties advertising via Google services. Notes: FW = Free Voters, ÖDP = Ecological Democratic Party, BUC = Alliance C—Christians for Germany; SGP = Social Equality Party.

Although this information is already quite revealing, it does not allow for conclusions on the particular fashion in which parties employed Google services regarding the reach, the origin, or the period during which the advertising element was displayed. The main origin of ads was the federal party organisation (84.8%). Parliamentary groups (federal, state, and local) did not use Google services to campaign. This is fairly unsurprising considering German campaign regulation, where parliamentary groups are not allowed to use their funds for election campaigning (Bundesministerium der Justiz, 2021, § 58 Abs. 4 AbgG). However, it is nonetheless surprising that parties at the local level were much more involved in campaigning online via Google (10.1%), while youth organisations appeared to opt for other modes of addressing their target group (only 0.2% of ads in the sample by party youth organisations; for more detail see the HTML file in the Supplementary Material).

In more detail, it is of interest what type of advertising was used. The Ad Library distinguishes between images, text, and videos. Regarding production costs, videos are more expensive, yet—and especially regarding YouTube as part of the Google family—videos are an important element of the campaigns, as displayed in Figure 2. While the AfD relied heavily on images, they still had the second-highest number of video ads; only the FDP used more videos in absolute numbers. The FDP also employed the most text-based ads (in absolute numbers; Table 1).
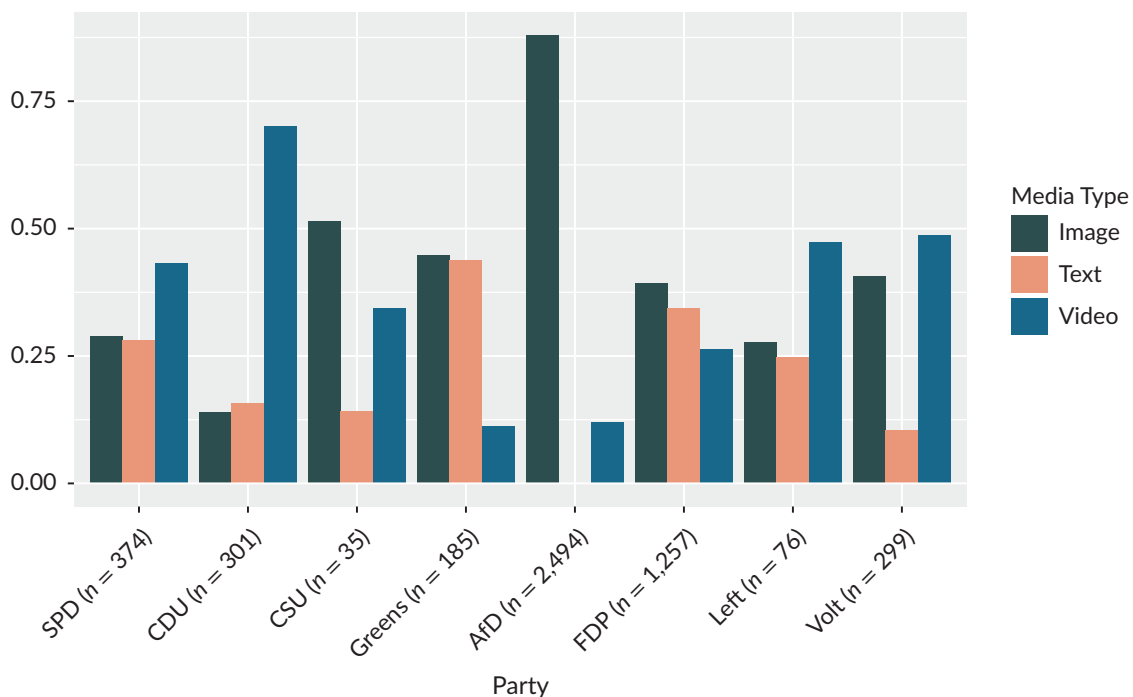

Figure 2. Share of ad types by party.

Table 1. Ad types by party (absolute numbers).

	SPD	CDU	CSU	Greens	AFD	FDP	Left	Volt	other
Image	108	42	18	83	2,191	493	21	122	6
Text	105	48	5	81	4	433	19	31	22
Video	161	211	12	21	299	331	36	146	82

Based on this information, we are unable however to tell whether the same image, video, or text element was displayed more than once, for example in different ZIP-code areas or at different points of time during the campaign period. The data set contains additional information on the length (in days) an ad element was displayed online (Figure 3). We can observe the different strategies employed by different parties: Whereas the AfD preferred ads displayed for only a few days, the SPD, the Greens, and the CDU opted mainly for ads displayed almost throughout the entire observation period. The FDP employed a mix of short-, medium-, and long-term ads, similar to Volt and, to a lesser degree, the Left party.

Leaving the distinction by party aside and focusing on the time ads were displayed, Figure 4 enables the identification of different periods over time. We can see modest online ad activity throughout the first half of August. The peak of new online ads being rolled out is 1 September 2021. Reasons for this might be the co-occurrence of different events, such as the first TV debate on 29 August 2021, the end of the summer vacation in several Länder, with citizens returning to their homes, or simply the symbolic start of the election month and the last three weeks ahead. We also found that new ads were mostly rolled out during the week, not on weekends. If we bear in mind that the three TV debates with the three most promising candidates (Scholz for the SPD, Baerbock for the Greens, and Laschet for the CDU) always took place on Sundays, i.e., 29 August, 12 September, and 19 September 2021, this is plausible when we assume that the online campaign was preparing the ground for these campaign highlights. When we included information on the parties (Figure 5), we noted that before the first two debates, it was mainly the contestants' parties that rolled out ads via Google services. Before the first and the second debate, the Green party rolled out ads during the week leading up to the debate and to a lesser degree before the third debate. For the SPD, the TV debates were accompanied by online ads during the week leading up to the debate and, for the first and third debates, heavily on debate day itself. Similarly for the CDU, we find ads leading up to the debates.
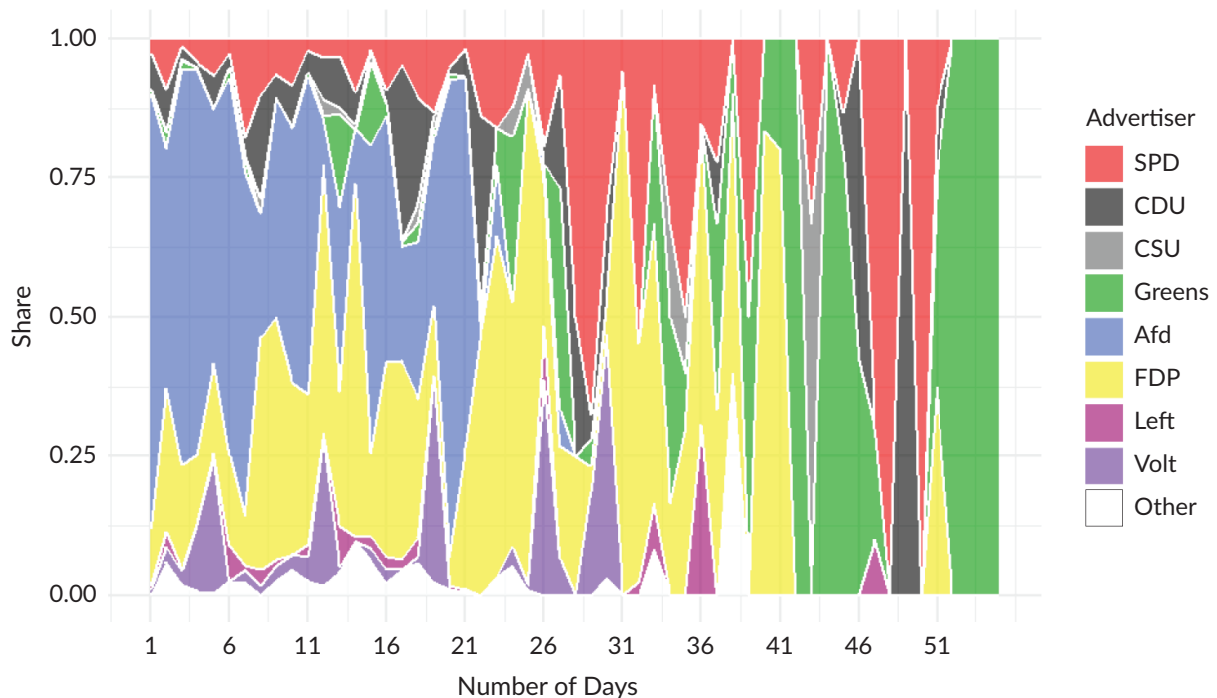

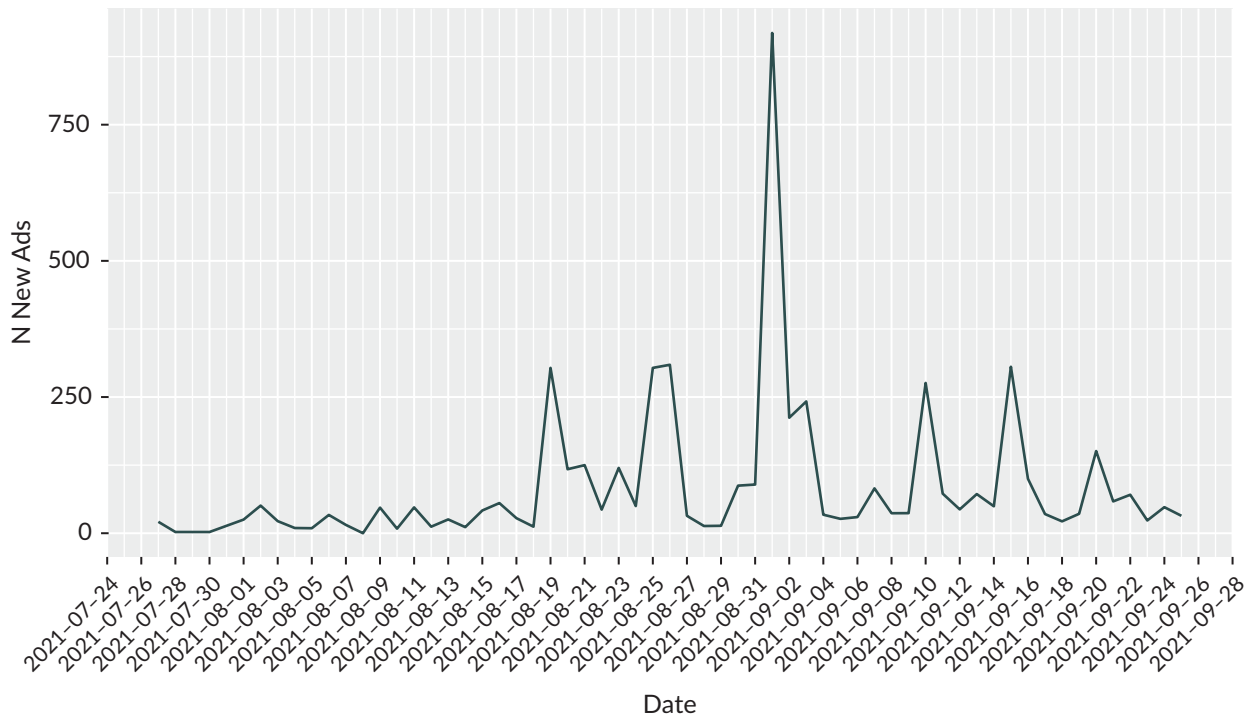
Figure 3. Number of days the ads were displayed per party.

Figure 4. Ads rolled out throughout the observation period (all parties; cf. Figure 1).
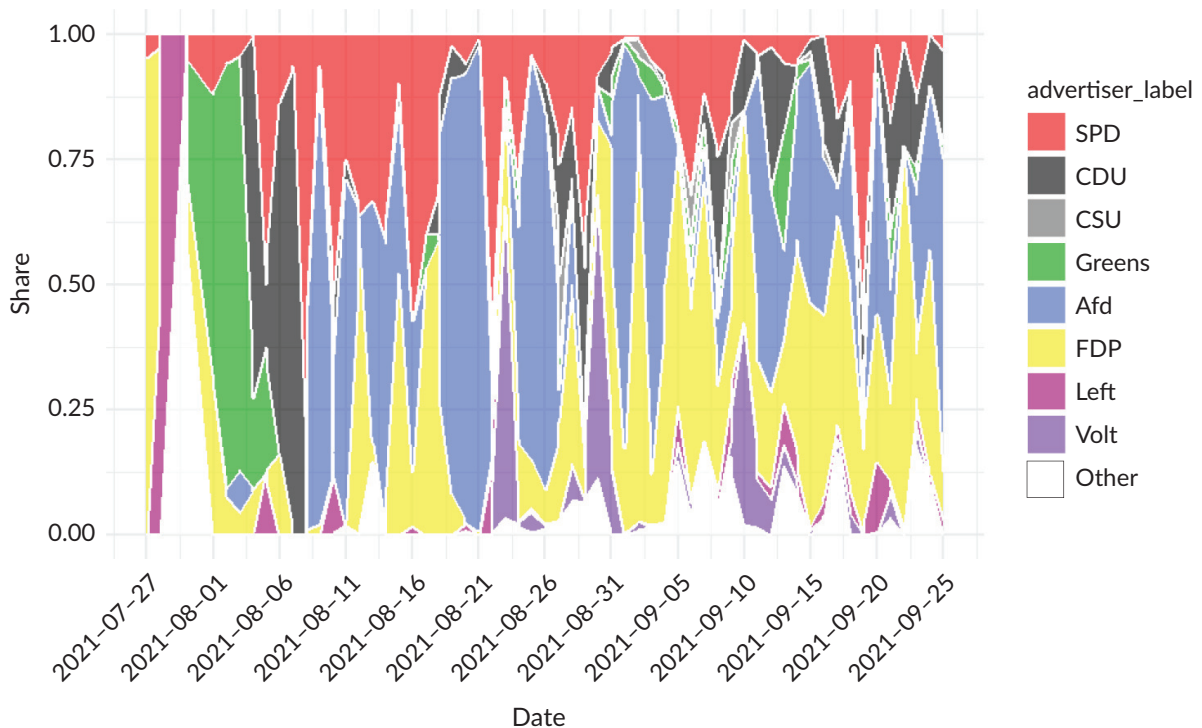

Figure 5. Share of party ads during the observation period.

Regarding online campaigning, microtargeting is a large concern of scholars, regulators, and the public (Kefford et al., 2023; Kruschinski & Haller, 2017; Zuiderveen Borgesius et al., 2018). The Google Ads Library contains information as to what extent parties targeted specific demographics and, therefore, allows for remarks on the

relevance of microtargeting via Google services in the 2021 Bundestag campaign. The parties considered in this study did not target individuals in terms of their gender (see HTML file in the Supplementary Material for details) and only to a very limited degree in terms of their age (only FDP with 21 out of 1,257 ads). The main parameter for targeting was different geographical areas according to the data shared by Google. We grouped the 206 codes for different geographical areas for inclusive targeting by Länder, also including a code for Germany as a whole and unspecific areas. We find that most ads aimed for the inclusive targeting of Germany as a whole. More competitive battlegrounds for online advertising via Google services were Hamburg, Lower Saxony (Niedersachsen), and Northrhine-Westphalia (Nordrhein-Westfalen). We also find that the AfD and the SPD were aiming for different districts of Hamburg. The FDP and the SPD also had a focus on Lower Saxony and on Northrhine-Westphalia where the Greens were the third strongest contester. Volt strongly targeted specific cities that were grouped here as unspecific in the state-centred category, and so did the FDP. These two parties appeared to follow the most fine-grained campaign via Google services regarding geotargeting. Considering areas excluded from advertising as the counter-dimension of geotargeting, we find that this option is only considered in rare cases. The CDU systematically excluded Bavaria from its ads, which is in line with the agreement between the CDU and the CSU to not compete in the same states and then form a parliamentary group in the Bundestag. In addition, some parties explicitly excluded neighbouring German-speaking countries (especially CSU, excluding Austria and Switzerland). The AfD excluded certain areas in Berlin, which is in line with their expected voter potential in these areas (for more details, see the HTML file in the Supplementary Material). Volt also employed a specific strategy in this dimension, by excluding certain cities from certain content (unspecific city/unspecific state). Overall, however, excluding areas from content was less common than including areas (for more details see the Supplementary Material).

6. Discussion of Findings in Connection to the DSA

The findings above show that e-campaigning is widespread in Germany. The use of Google Ads fits the definition by Dommett et al. (2024) for DDC in so far as it uses data to effectively target audiences and optimize campaign interventions. This manifests in the use of targeting but also in the timing and display time of ads in line with specific campaign events such as TV debates, but also along the entire length of the campaign (Panagopoulos, 2011). Such data-driven strategic decisions allow parties to optimise campaign interventions for voter mobilisation and persuasion through (micro)targeting.

While we find all German political parties studied used Google Ads, it was most frequently used by the AfD. This is mainly in line with the findings of other studies: Right-wing parties use DDC more frequently than left-leaning parties (Gibson & Römmele, 2001; Kruschinski & Haller, 2017). It supports findings of previous studies indicating that populist radical right parties campaign extensively via the web (Engesser et al., 2017; Ernst et al., 2017). We additionally find support for the impression that "digital-native" parties (here: Volt and the AfD) show higher online activity. However, the SPD used Google Ads more than the CDU, who then used it much more than the remaining parties. These results appear to support the normalisation thesis (Gibson & Römmele, 2001) suggesting that established, powerful, and resource-rich political actors outperform their weaker competitors in DDC and thus reproduce existing power imbalances. Nevertheless, the high use of Google Ads by newer parties such as the AfD and Volt offers some support for the equalisation thesis, arguing that digital affordances help to overcome structural disadvantages inherent to the political landscape by more efficient resource allocation to target the "'right' segment of voters" (Votta et al., 2024), at least for "digital native parties."

Regarding targeting (inclusive or exclusive) criteria used by parties in Google Ads, our findings partly match the expectation of Votta et al. (2024): While for Google Ads location-based criteria are most frequently used, we find little use of socio-demographic criteria with no targeting regarding gender and only a very limited degree in terms of age. Thus, individuals were mainly targeted based on different geographical areas such as main battlegrounds and electoral strongholds (Stuckelberger & Koedam, 2022). This can partly be explained by the specific advertiser (paying client): In cases where local chapters of a party paid for the ad, geotargeting can be explained by the specific local interest of the advertiser. Some findings concern the special features of electoral campaigns in Germany: The clearest example of this is the CSU limiting its ads to Bavaria while the CDU excluded this state systematically from its ads. This does not come as a surprise. In contrast to Votta et al. (2024), we find that most ads have no targeting criteria.

Stuckelberger and Koedam (2022) suggest that ideology affects who is targeted and/or excluded by parties. Indeed, we find that the left-leaning parties such as Volt focused on urban populations. In contrast, the AfD excluded certain areas in Berlin, which is in line with their expected voter potential in these areas, but then targeted specific districts of Hamburg. Overall, however, we find that even when considering ideology, most targeting by parties was based on location rather than socio-demographic criteria via Google Ads.

However, e-campaigning and DDC are by no means uncontroversial. While online political advertising does come with benefits, unregulated political advertising is widely seen as creating dangers for democratic elections (e.g., Margetts, 2019; Persily, 2017). Especially after the 2018 Cambridge Analytica scandal—which exposed that the company had used the data of 87 million Facebook profiles, collected through a third-party app without users' consent, to influence voting intentions during the 2016 US presidential campaign in favour of Republican candidates—the importance of transparency regarding political advertising on online platforms has received considerable attention. At the core of the debate is microtargeting which "has the potential to fracture political discourse, reinforce echo chambers and increase political polarization" (Zuiderveen Borgesius et al., 2018). This raises the question of standards and regulations and their effectiveness in raising awareness and protecting citizens (Vliegenthart et al., 2024). For political actors, such as political parties or government bodies, the ethical standards for online advertising should be set higher. If we also consider the monopoly position of a few internet corporations, which control the political exchange and advertising of online political content (against payment) and thus have amassed unprecedented power in political competition (Zuiderveen Borgesius et al., 2018), it becomes clear that regulation must not only encompass the political advertisers but also the platforms themselves. The DSA aims to address some of these issues without limiting freedom of expression.

Google, under study here, aims to further expand its Ads Transparency Centre including expanding data access to researchers to provide more information about "how Google Search, YouTube, Google Maps, GooglePlay and Shopping work in practice" (Richardson & O'Connor, 2023). It will also improve its transparency reporting as required by article 39 DSA (European Parliament and Council Regulation of 19 October 2022, 2022) and analyse potential "risks of illegal content dissemination, or risks to fundamental rights, public health or civic discourse" (Richardson & O'Connor, 2023). In line with the DSA requirement that hosting services and online platforms must explain why illegal content was removed and give users the ability to appeal, Google already provides the option for YouTube creators to appeal video removals and restrictions (European Parliament and Council Regulation of 19 October 2022, 2022, Art. 50 DSA). Therefore, overall, the DSA has the potential to address some if not most of the challenges of the use of

e-campaigning by the parties outlined above. The first real large-scale practice test was the 2024 European parliamentary elections. For the German case, the developments surrounding the next federal elections in 2025 and several important elections in the German Länder Thuringia, Saxony, and Brandenburg in autumn 2024 provide significant observation points. Future comparative work should also consider further potentially relevant country and party attributes such as levels of democracy, overall party/national financial resources, size of party staff, level of regulations for campaigns, and data protection legislation.

7. Conclusion

In this article, we set out to (a) provide a general view on parties' digital campaign strategies, (b) discuss, based on the existing literature on e-campaigning, the party factors that potentially determine the different uses of Google Ads in elections, and (c) present the findings of our mainly descriptive analysis of Google Ads. Based on the theoretical discussion and analyses, we find that all German political parties represented in the federal parliament (and Volt) used Google Ads. The Ad Library documented the most frequent use by the AfD, followed by the FDP. The main client was the federal party organisation, with local chapters coming in second. Surprisingly, Google Ads were not used by the youth organisations of the parties even though it might appear more effective given that young voters are supposedly more online (Boulianne & Theocharis, 2020; Ohme, 2019). However, party youth organisations and their voters might simply have preferred other social media platforms to Google and YouTube, or relied on organic content. Whereas text-based ads were least used by most parties, it was notable that both the AfD and FDP heavily relied on images and videos. This might indicate the stronger personalisation of party politics in these two parties, with a greater focus on the lead candidates. Regarding length of ad display, we find that whereas the AfD preferred ads displayed for only a few days, the SPD, Greens, and the CDU opted mainly for ads displayed almost throughout the entire observation period. The FDP employed a mix of short-, medium-, and long-term ads, similar to Volt and, to a lesser degree, the Left party. Regarding timing, our analysis shows that the peak of new online ads being rolled out was 1 September 2021, mainly during the week and in connection with the televised lead candidate debates. Here the main potential government parties posted more before the debate and the main opposition parties just after. Lastly, we find that the parties considered in this study did not target individuals in terms of their gender and only to a very limited degree in terms of their age. Individuals were mainly targeted based on different geographical areas, such as main battlegrounds, concentration of key voters, and, unsurprisingly, the CSU limited its ads to Bavaria while the CDU excluded this state systematically from its ads.

It will be interesting to see how digital campaigning via Google changes for the upcoming European, sub-national, and national elections after the new regulations of the DSA become effective in 2024. Beyond the effects of new regulations on political online campaigning, three broader and recent developments require consideration in future research. First, how will the perceived decline in the quality of Google search results and issues with ad ranking impact its usage by parties and the effectiveness of microtargeting? Second, how will the increased use of generative AI, notably since the launch of ChatGPT in late 2022, impact search practices across all major platforms and consequently affect Google Ads and microtargeting? Finally, how will the uptake of new platforms, such as TikTok, disrupt established campaign strategies and their relevance? This field of research continues to develop/change at a rapid speed, just like its research objects.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

Original public Google data: https://adstransparency.google.com/political?topic=political&region=DE. Working files available via Gutenberg Open Science: https://doi.org/10.25358/openscience-10680

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